Synergy among Stakeholders is Key to the Sustainability of Cultural Tourism in Penang

By **Pan Yi Chieh** (Analyst, History & Heritage Programme)

Executive Summary

- Tourism has been a vital sector in Penang's economy for decades, and throughout that time, publicised and debated ideas about George Town's heritage have naturally reflected the different stages in the city's tourism development

- The year 2008 saw an unprecedented explosion of interpretations of George Town's history, culture and heritage. These were most notably classified in the form of tangible and intangible heritage

- Underlying this intellectual dynamism concerning cultural tourism and the benefits and threats this holds for George Town is the issue of sustainability

- George Town's designation as a World Heritage Site presented myriad opportunities and challenges for understanding "heritage", but apart from interpretation efforts, policymakers are compelled to consider how a mechanism geared towards making cultural tourism sustainable can be best developed. Measures to be considered include the strengthening of cross-departmental collaboration, enhancing the role of public libraries and museums, and establishing support systems specific to that purpose

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Introduction

Penang's cultural tourism landscape witnessed rapid change with the emergence of various newly-developed small industries, the result of economic activities following George Town's inscription as a World Heritage Site in 2008.

Cultural tourism involves wide-ranging fields and detailed processes. This brief examines Penang's development as a tourist destination by exploring interpretations of what cultural tourism is, and seeing them as representations of the core element of Penang's cultural tourism.

In a global context, the origins of cultural tourism can be traced back to the surge of leisure travel after the Second World War, and grew with the rise of income and consumption ability in the 1960s and 1970s.[1] The trend peaked during the "heritage boom" in the 1980s and 1990s, when cultural tourism was viewed as an important way to revive economies and preserve existing cultures.[2]

Tourism involves dynamic processes in connecting tourists with tourist destinations. It also marks the point where different ways of lives and social relations interact with one another; hence, tourism also engages imaginations and intertwines elements newly introduced to each other.

The concept of the "tourist gaze" by sociologist John Urry, for example, captures the complicated power relations found in the interactions between tourists and local populations across various sectors such as tour operators, popular media and governments.[3] Studies have shown that local culture and social relations are inevitably altered and influenced by tourist activities, e.g. certain rituals and cultural performances are enhanced with new elements to cater to tourists' preferences.

Cultural tourism also functions as an important place-making element where businesses bring local communities together and remake social boundaries. This is often accompanied by the revival of traditional rituals which may have been in danger of disappearing. Thus, given its complexity, the idea of tourism requires constant long-term examination of various practices in the cultural sphere.

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[1] Greg Richards, 2018, Cultural Tourism: A Review of Recent Research and Trends, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management 36: 12-21, P.12.

[2] Greg Richard, 2001, Cultural Attractions and European Tourism. Wallingford: CABI.

[3] John Urry, 1990, The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies. London: Sage Publications.

For a tourist site, preserving the interests of various local groups is a major concern. The issue of sustainability is especially important where cultural phenomena form the most fundamental facet of the tourism industry. For cultural tourism to be sustainable, extra effort is needed to determine the dynamics of tourist activities and their impact on the cultural site in question.[4]

The Move towards Cultural Tourism in Penang

Tourism products are defined as "a combination of tangible and intangible elements which represents the core of the destination marketing mix and creates an overall visitor experience including emotional aspects for the potential customers."[5]

Over the decades, various sites in Penang have been marketed as products in different stages of the city's tourism development. When the national agenda for tourism development began in the 1960s,[6] Penang had an advantage for being a unique tourist destination even right up to the final stage of its free port status, when wide-ranging products were available at a relatively cheap price. This was backed up by the island's attractive beaches. In the 1980s and 1990s, handicraft shops, art galleries and hotels appeared at selected choice locations.

The 1980s also witnessed the rise of Penang's newly-developed industrial zone in Bayan Lepas into an important economic powerhouse. This created vibrant residential and industrial sites on the east coast of the island, and through contrast, made George Town itself appear a small and old decaying city of dilapidated buildings.

Efforts by the government and members of the community soon brought about a wave of preservation to restore Penang's many heritage buildings, including the Syed Alatas mansion,[7] which cemented Penang's identity as a hub for heritage and culture. This era also witnessed the formation of several associations such as the Penang Heritage Trust, Arts-ED and the Nanyang Folk Culture, each of them functioning as platforms for the highlighting of Penang's rich history and heritage.

The concept of cultural tourism gradually emerged in the early 1990s. Discussions were held on the development of cultural tourism and the benefits it would bring, including the promotion of heritage awareness and sustaining heritage conservation to generate economic gain.[8] While beach tourism remained important, Penang's image gradually embraced the

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[4] Noel B. Salazar, 2012, Community-based Cultural Tourism: Issues, Threats and Opportunities. Journal of Sustainable Tourism 20 (1): 10; Wearing, S., & McDonald, M., 2002, The Development of Community-based Tourism: Re-thinking the Relationship between Tour Operators and Development Agents as Intermediaries in Rural and Isolated Area Communities. Journal of Sustainable Tourism 10 (3): 191-206.

[5] Definition from UNWTO, http://marketintelligence.unwto.org/content/tourism-products.

[6] Aissa Mosbah, 2014, A Review of Tourism Development in Malaysia. European Journal of Business and Management 6 (5): 2.

[7] Joel S. Kahn, "Culturalizing Malaysia: Globalism, Tourism, Heritage, and the City in George Town," in Michel Picard & Robert E. Wood (ed.), 1997, Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies. University of Hawai'i Press.

[8] Preservation & Restoration of Historical Places & Artefacts - Subcommittee Report for the State Tourism Product Planning & Development Action Plan, December 1992, P.4-5.

cultural dimension, a process that occurred smoothly, given the city's rich heritage of grand buildings and old shophouses.[9]

In the early 2000s, a series of private efforts were made to restore important heritage buildings, such as eclectic shophouses and Chinese clan houses.[10] In 2006 the Little Penang Street Market was launched as an embryonic designer's market. Located along Upper Penang Road, the market was first supported via foreign funding and later by the government. It became a place for artists and cultural practitioners to hold performances and to sell handmade products.

The Diversification of Heritage Interpretations

The year 2008 marked a turning point in Penang's cultural tourism. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, George Town, like all such sites, attracted a steady stream of global tourists. Furthermore, it kickstarted multiple interpretations of the term "heritage", generally classified into tangible and intangible forms.

The George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) was established in 2010 to manage the city's heritage assets. Articulating and identifying various heritage meanings and different levels of local identity ranging from individual to family, ethnicity and even place-identity, were explored and pursued as well. A number of festivals were started, and these provided platforms for the further exploration of what the city stood for, and could stand for.

Among them, mural arts have been one of the more famous examples used to creatively present the daily elements of George Town. In 2010, during the George Town Festival, the "Kids on Bicycle" mural by Ernest Zacharevic, was deemed a huge success. This soon pushed George Town into the global tourist map as a destination famous for mural arts;[11] soon after, a variety of mural arts were translated into tourism products on T-shirts, magnets and postcards.

Throughout the years, and even before the UNESCO listing, organisations and individual persons have held various programmes relevant to the development of tourism and to the appreciation of Penang's heritage. For example, numerous educational programmes by Arts-ED were dedicated to the exploration of George Town. The young were encouraged to understand the past and contemporary meanings of "heritage". In 2013 GTWHI initiated the Oral History Documentation Project to record the various daily experiences and practices of the locals; this is a core component of George Town's intangible heritage.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] 陳耀威，2017，NGO與世遺保存—以檳城喬治市為例，2017年新北市「世界遺產保存與居民對話」國際研討會，2017 年10月22日至23日。
[11] James H. Springer, 2019, Malaysia's Canvas: The Blistering Saga of a Flash in the Pan Art Resolution. Gerakbudaya Enterprise.

In 2012 the George Town Heritage Interpretation Masterplan was organised by Think City and relevant stakeholders to stimulate thoughts about heritage among various actors.[12] Furthermore, since 2010, private museums such as the Penang Wonderfood Museum and Penang Ghost Museum, appeared and became important tourist attractions. In many traditional coffeeshops, photos and stories are displayed on walls to depict the common scenes and spirit of the city. These efforts, regardless of scale, are facets of the important interpretation mechanisms that bridge the past and the present.

It is in the nature of cultural interpretations to be intangible and fluid, and shifts in understanding continues without end, especially when strong external factors such as tourists come into play. For example, the matter could involve something as simple as the telling of a childhood story, or be as complex as the starting of a museum where various levels and abilities of interpretation processes are required.

A fast-changing cultural-tourist environment makes the situation even more fluid and complicated. For instance, the knowledge and skills possessed by traditional traders are an important intangible heritage. However, falling demand and profitability as well as the lack of potential successors threaten their existence.[13] This gradual loss also means that local historical craft knowledge risks being re-interpreted. Thus, considering the situation realistically, "authenticity" becomes a difficult notion to champion, especially when social changes are fast and broad. However, this does not mean that traditional elements should be abandoned when social conditions fail to support their existence. Instead, it could mean that new interpretations of specific items of cultural heritage need to be explored for contemporary meanings.

There has also been an influx of young people into George Town and its surrounding areas in recent years to set up businesses. Hin Bus Depot is a case in point. This private initiative serves as an important incubator for craftsmen, designers and artists to transform their ideas into products. It also provides important opportunities for local knowledge to be passed down to the younger generation through gradual interactions that can both inspire and that can pass on the spirit of George Town as a whole.

Achieving Sustainability through Dynamic Interpretative Processes

Instead of being a simple process, George Town's World Heritage Status in fact becomes a key element in its place-making strategy.[14] Furthermore, challenges emerge when "heritage" evolved over time are to be presented and connected to contemporary times. To handle these, dynamic interpretative processes are required to give meaning to our heritage and to raise its relevance in the present time. Moreover, mechanisms for capturing interpretations are essential to the sustainability of cultural tourism, where everyone has the space and the capacity to narrate their own stories.

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[12] 2012 George Town Heritage Interpretation Masterplan, Think City.
[13] Julia Tan, Can Penang Lead the Way in Sustainable Tourism? Penang Monthly April 2019, PP 24-25.
[14] Michael A. Di Giovine, 2009, The Heritage-scape: UNESCO., World Heritage, and Tourism. Lexington Books.

A few factors are considered below, and these are far from being exhaustive to the goal of making cultural tourism in George Town sustainable.

1. Strengthening Cross-departmental Collaboration

Since cultural tourism involves various actors ranging from small businesses and transportation to tour operators and hoteliers, a comprehensive set of knowledge and concerns need to be considered. Collaboration between different actors and different departments and agencies is needed for this. For example, under the concept of creative economy introduced by the State Government, the positioning of heritage elements and the possibility of their transformation need more evaluation and collaboration to be carried out between various stakeholders.

2. The Active Role of Public Libraries and Museums

For interpretations to be properly evidence-based, one should not omit the significant role that public libraries, archives and museums play in providing knowledge and in stimulating related discourses. In many tourism studies, it is suggested that people's differed ability to control the resources required for tourism development often lead to varying degrees of participation in the matter.[15] Thus, if more equal social relations are essential to the achieving of sustainable cultural tourism, opening up data and knowledge sharing should be the first step to take. Our public libraries and museums will need to play an increasingly active role in providing resources to help and inspire the general public, and in an increasingly more user-friendly manner. In the long run, these facilities should become one of the most fundamental and innovative components of the discursive development of the concept of heritage.

3. Establish Supporting Systems for a Sustainable Cultural Tourism

As previously highlighted, various kinds of interpretation processes in government circles and among private actors have appeared in recent times, aiding in the flow of information about George Town's history and heritage. The open accessibility of contents of the Oral History Documentation Project is one example of this, marking an exciting move in sharing precious individual memories with the public. In the long run, this should make local knowledge an important element to inspire residents, tourists and artists in their creative activities.

With existing efforts in place, going further will also mean providing a thorough support system where different ideas about heritage can be linked together for synergic gains. For example, if a designer is interested in applying innovative ideas to traditional skills, a support system can make his project more realisable. The knowledge and evaluative skills that the heritage authorities possess are also useful when concerns about "authenticity" are raised in preservation or innovation initiatives. In general, knowing the various notions that have appeared in the debate about heritage and understanding the business models that are aimed at sustainability in cultural tourism can be of great help to the inexperienced but interested entrepreneurial resident. Such synergy among players should in the long run lessen concerns that George Town will become overly touristic since the voices of all concerned can be heard concertedly.

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[15] Brennan, F.,& Allen, G, 2001, Community-based ecotourism, social exclusion and the changing political economy of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *In* D. Harrison (ed), Tourism and the less developed world: Issues and case studies. Wallingford: CAB International.

If the process is taken seriously, tourism products can be expected to become more diverse. More importantly, the support system would help bring different generations of George Town's diverse residents together in their appreciation of George Town's history and its fragile future as a heritage site and a living cultural hub.