
Cultural Mapping: Connecting Youth with Heritage

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The starting point for this paper is a comment by Kwok Kian Woon in relation to the preservation of heritage, a theme all too common in Malaysian discussions of cultural heritage. Kwok points out that generally, only dead things need to be preserved (17). And yet this idea of ‘preservation’ is often referred to in conversations about cultural heritage in Malaysia. There is perhaps some relevance to the idea of preservation in relation to tangible heritage such as buildings. However, preservation should not just be about restoration of the building, but also about that building then becoming a useful or popular part of the cultural life and identity of its environment, rather than just an empty monument.¹ Preservation, in this context, still requires adaptation and development. Intangible heritage, similarly, should not just be ‘preserved’ as something unchanging, as it is then in danger of losing its relevance in a developing society. In this paper, I examine how both tangible and intangible heritage can work together: a deep engagement with aspects of tangible heritage has the potential to also connect people with their intangible cultural heritage, so that they see it as part of a continuum of past, present and future. I will approach the idea through an analysis of some cultural mapping projects carried out by young people in Malaysia.

UNESCO’s definition of intangible cultural heritage emphasises that it is “Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time” (4), as well as being inclusive, representative and community-based. But if cultural heritage continues to be “living”, how can it at the same time be “preserved”? The idea of preservation of cultures comes from the Malaysian practice, long carried out by the state, of dividing its populace into specific and separate ‘racial’ categories, which are in turn tied to specific languages, cultural practices, and sometimes religions. In order to be able to maintain these politically-motivated categories, it is necessary to also maintain the associated definitions, and this mitigates strongly against there being any changes or developments in the culture. Thus there is also little chance of developing an officially-acknowledged, hybrid

1. At a recent forum held at the University of Malaya, Ho Kong Chong of the National University of Singapore spoke of ‘mosquito buildings’ – buildings which had been extensively restored, but had failed to become a part of the everyday life of the area, leaving them to be inhabited almost exclusively by mosquitos. (Malaysia-Singapore Forum, 20-21 September 2018).

Malaysian culture that transcends these categories of race, language, religion, etc. Lim Teck Ghee and Alberto Gomes state that the National Cultural Policy of 1973 “is based on the premise that national unity can only be achieved through cultural homogenisation and that cultural pluralism is a source of instability” (232). Ethnic politics here go against UNESCO’s notions of inclusiveness and representation (there is little official space for cultural hybridity or for national community that transcends ethnicity). Where, we have to wonder, is the space for culture which lives and changes? Where is the acknowledgment that new forms of culture are emerging, which will in turn form the basis of the cultural heritage of future generations?

In this regard, we should take note of Ooi Kee Beng’s contention that our understanding of the dynamism of identity “involves a prescriptive understanding of where one came from, an aesthetic notion of where one is at and a pragmatic feel for the spaces that exist between where one is at and where others seem to be” (449). In other words, the individual needs some awareness of his or her past (where they came from) and present (where one is at); equally important is to understand the in-between spaces, which I would say encompass not just the experiences of other individuals, but also an understanding of how these various experiences accede to, negotiate with or challenge authoritatively-imposed notions of where they came from and where they are at.

Lowenthal has said that “most heritage comes already packaged by precursors. But to secure the past to our present lives, we must feel that its legacies have become our very own” (23). In Malaysia, heritage has been “packaged” by the state, for political reasons – as Cartier notes, “some of the debate [in Malaysia] over how to handle historic conservation has been about the word heritage itself, and the role of heritage in building nationalism” (46). The notion of securing the past to our present lives has not been adequately explored. This is because the past has to some extent been fixed into a specific narrative which supports the racial/cultural divide, focusing very strongly on the immigrant past of certain segments of the Malaysian populace (vs the indigenous status of the dominant Malay race), without also acknowledging their ‘present-ness’ within Malaysian society. This discourse could be countered by increasing the individual’s awareness of how they fit not only into that mythologised past, but also into the developing present.

Positioning within a physical space must inevitably have an influence on how culture emerges, on how it is practiced. Olsson, for example, notes that “the urban environment has the potential to function as a carrier of meaning and identity” (373), suggesting strongly that identity cannot be divorced from the individual’s surroundings. He goes on to quote Tunbridge and Ashworth:

Each individual assembles his own heritage from his own life experiences, within a unique life space containing reference points of memory, and providing anchors of personal values and stability, which are not identical to those of anyone else. (373).

In Malaysia, the advantage of such thinking is that it situates the individual very strongly in his or her current environment, as well as in memories, environments experienced in the past,

etc. It does not solely foreground the sense of belonging to a past homeland, although this is also not necessarily completely discarded. In other words, the understanding that heritage arises from physical location as well as other experiences and influences, situates the Malaysian individual as belonging within Malaysia, rather than to the past homeland suggested by adherence to 'traditional' cultures. It also highlights culture and heritage as living and changing, rather than 'preserved', as the urban environment also inevitably lives and changes.

In relation to this idea of linking past and present in the effort to allow a cultural heritage to develop that is less mediated by the state, I wish to examine some of the cultural mapping work done with young people by arts groups in Malaysia. Cultural mapping allows those involved in the project to connect with both tangible heritage (the streets, buildings, etc.) and intangible heritage (the arts and crafts practiced there) in an experiential, immersive way.

Cultural mapping, according to Freitas, "is an instrument for collecting, locating and systematising information concerning the distribution of cultural expressions within a certain territory" (9). It is "a systematic approach to recording and presenting information that provides an integrated picture of the cultural character, significance, and workings of a place" (Pillai, *Cultural Mapping* 1.). Strang states that "Cultural mapping explores people's history and contemporary relationships with local environments" (132). Another definition states that cultural mapping does not stop at locating sites, but rather involves mapping the Culture of who or what you are, be it a tribe, organization, community, group, school, association, business or an individual – to find your unique assets and strengths. Culture can, in this case, be defined as your intellectual property, your special way of being or doing, the purpose of your existence, the business you are in (or would like to be in) or the special story that you have to tell, such as your reason for doing what you do. (Pillai, *Cultural Mapping* 17).

Cultural mapping, then, probes the relationship between the individual and his or her environment, taking a broad approach that "may also make the invisible (knowledge, people, history and heritage) become visible" (Pillai, *Cultural Mapping* 17). Because it is tied to individual experience and personal stories, this approach to heritage refuses the homogenization and museumization of culture and heritage. As Strang points out, "The map's objective is to gain an in-depth, holistic view of people's engagements with the places that they inhabit, and to illuminate particular cultural and ethnohistorical landscapes" (133).

My focus in this paper will be on a few cultural mapping projects run by volunteers: in George Town in Penang (2001), in Balik Pulau in the South-West corner of Penang Island (begun in 2005), and in Chow Kit, a quite notorious area of Kuala Lumpur normally thought of as a red-light district, the haunt of gangsters and drug addicts (2013). I will briefly mention the two Penang projects, before focusing on the Chow Kit project.

The projects were run specifically to engage with young people living there, to help them to look at the area differently and to reconnect them with a sense of pride in the area. The children were, in other words, being encouraged to reclaim these spaces as a part of their heritage.

The Balik Pulau project, known as MyBalikPulau, was helmed by artist Kungyu Liew. It was run by an arts collective called Arts-Ed, which is led by Janet Pillai. The project engaged young people in collecting and documenting oral histories from the residents of Balik Pulau, and then producing maps and newsletters based on their work with the residents. The purpose was to find a way of rooting the young people within the heritage of the area, in a lively and interactive way, opening them up to history, heritage, crafts, skills, etc. The project used primarily visual media such as photography and map-making in order to produce a multi-lingual newsletter which could connect with a broad range of Malaysians.

These kinds of projects allow the participants to engage with history and culture as living things. Active engagement with the minutiae of the daily life of the area meant that the children who participated were better able “to relate to history, geography and environmental studies as a part of their lives” (Pillai, “myBALIKpulau”), rather than looking at history and heritage as parts of some grand narrative as presented in history textbooks. Further, seeing these elements “as a part of their lives” means that they are not ‘fixed’, but are open to adaptation as they relate to the lives of these youth.

This is visible in the newsletters produced after the Georgetown project, which document the discoveries made by the children. Produced in multiple languages, these newsletters are colourful and informative, and work at connecting past and present to show heritage as living and growing.

Each of the articles in the newsletter highlights the origins of the craftsmen or business owners working in the area, specifying where they came from, how long a history they have had in Malaysia, and so on. In this way, the roots of these traditions become visible, linking Malaysia and its people with longer histories, with origins elsewhere, but with a firm grounding within Malaysia. This undermines the tendency to treat heritage as something fixed, by which racial groups are defined, and instead shows it to be part of a still living tradition. However, on the whole the Penang projects did work within fairly traditional definitions of heritage as something inherited from the past.

The Chow Kit Kita project took a step away from this by focusing on those aspects of the area which had immediate relevance to the young participants:

This is how we came up with the concept of Chow Kit Kita – a map not to map out heritage sites, but a map to map out useful information for children living there.

On a paper, we drew a mind-map of the type of information that could be included in the map: SAFETY (safe walking routes, dangerous zones, pedestrian crossings, bicycle routes, etc), FOOD (halal food, food under RM5, etc), ENTERTAINMENT (internet cafes, gigs, best and safest places to play games/sports etc), PUBLIC FACILITIES (pay phones, public toilets etc), TRANSPORTATION (bus routes, bus stops, etc). (“‘Chow Kit Kita’ Inception”)

Although the focus here is not on heritage in the same way as in the Penang projects, the aim is still “to show how the teenagers think and feel about their community (“Krashpad Proposal), and to try to connect teenagers to their community and make sense of their surroundings. Thus here, too, there is a strong sense of needing to connect young people with their environment in a meaningful

way, to ground them within their community, and thus ultimately to keep them in touch with their heritage, represented by that community.

The project was initiated by Lew Pik Svonn and Fahmi Reza, who have both worked with community education and community arts projects. They acknowledge that Chow Kit is a problematic area; Melissa Lin calls it “one of the most colorful as well as one of the most criminal districts in KL. Lew notes that “Children from the community are often teased by their classmates in school. Even some adults have narrow and negative perceptions of Chow Kit. There is a large number of children from the lower-income bracket who live and go to school here. We want these children to be proud of their neighbourhood and tell their friends all the positive aspects of this place (Sheila Sri Priya, “Empowering the Children). Negative perceptions of Chow Kit based on its more recent history mean that its position as one of the older and more lively areas within Kuala Lumpur is forgotten.² In that sense, part of the heritage of these children as residents of Chow Kit is also in danger of being lost. The cultural mapping project, which focuses on how they live their lives within Chow Kit, while also in a sense inviting others in to visit, pushes a different view of the area, which could allow for a recovery of an older heritage, which might then merge with and ameliorate the current view of Chow Kit.

It is worth noting that the Chow Kit project collaborated with KL Krash Pad, a centre based in Chow Kit which seeks to protect the rights of all at-risk children and teens; provide them with safe havens, and expose them to as many positive and holistic opportunities as possible to enable them to reach their full potential (“Yayasan Chow Kit: About). The proposal for the project specifies a desire to work with high-risk teens between the ages of 14 and 16. A project like this would impart skills to the participants (photography, digital media, performing arts, etc.), but more importantly would highlight their voices, thus serving to bring them in from the margins somewhat, and grounding them as a central part of this old section of KL.

The project had different phases, each one concentrating on a different aspect (food, ethnic and religious diversity, fashion). The project was hands-on and immersive. The children chose the skills that they wanted to learn, and used those skills to produce maps, brochures and t-shirts which provide useful information while also expressing their own experience within the Chow Kit area. One of the t-shirt designs concentrates on the range of food available in Chow Kit (and indeed, in Malaysia at large). The names of the different foods are clustered together in the middle of the t-shirt, so that the individual names are slightly difficult to read. The design reflects the plethora of food available to Malaysians, as well as the occasional confusion arising from this abundance of choice – as reflected in a cartoon by prominent Malaysian cartoonist, Lat. Aside from reflecting these points about Malaysia, the t-shirt also highlights the typical Malaysian obsession with food. Furthermore, while each dish can be related back to a particular ‘racial’ group, the jumble of names

2. In the 1980s, while prostitution and drug addiction were rife in Chow Kit, the area was also considered KL’s city centre, a place people frequented for food and bargain shopping. It was also the venue for a 1986 concert by one of Malaysia’s most popular singers in the 1980s, Sudirman – a concert which attracted an audience of 100,000.

on the t-shirt indicates the way in which (religious restrictions aside) all Malaysians have adopted these dishes as part of a general, more hybrid Malaysian heritage. The message is underscored by the fact that the words are crammed into a graphic of an open mouth, implying that everything is going to be swallowed and (as indicated by the tongue emerging from the mouth), relished, regardless of origin.

This idea of hybridity is also reflected in the food brochures which, for e.g., highlight (among others), three rice dishes which also neatly encapsulate Malaysia's official racial mix – nasi kandar (rice and curry - of Indian origin but popular with most Malaysians); nasi ayam (chicken rice); and nasi goreng (fried rice). Both the chicken rice and fried rice are of Chinese origin. However, the dishes pictured show Malay adaptations of the Chinese dishes, thus highlighting appropriation and adaptation, towards a more hybrid culture. Neither dish has supplanted the original – the Malay version has merely been developed to cater to the halal needs of the community.

The project also highlighted the idea of heritage being a constantly developing and changing thing. The participants found out during their walks in the area that there is a strong migrant presence there, with many of the shops being run by migrants, rather than by locals:

During the walkabout, it was also observed that the shops in Chow Kit were mainly made out of immigrant-run shops. The people in Chow Kit were also made out of mostly immigrants. It was interesting to see how multicultural Chow Kit was – both in trade and social distribution.

Upon further internet research, we found interesting places in Chow Kit – (1) The oldest Chinese settlement in KL with more than 10 Chinese temples (2) The largest Sikh temple in SEA (3) A Pakistani mosque, and more. (“Theme Research #1)

The presence of migrants was not treated as any kind of dilution of Malaysia's heritage. Rather, it was seen as adding to the multicultural flavour of the place. This was highlighted in some of the brochures produced, which noted the presence of eateries which not only offer local dishes, but also authentic foreign flavours such as Thai, Indonesian, Southern Indian, Iranian and also Pakistani food. An interesting point here is that the Thai, Indonesian, Southern Indian and Pakistani cultures have all fed into Malaysian culture in the past. What they are referring to here is the presence of new migrants from these places, as well as from non-traditional origins such as Iran. At the same time, the reference to the “interesting places they found, such as “The oldest Chinese settlement in KL, importantly highlights the long history of Chinese settlement in Malaysia, refuting the rhetoric of recent migration. The participants were able, through this exercise, to understand these various cultures as part of a continuum of migration and cultural adaptation and appropriation.

A showcase called Pesta Chow Kit Kita was then held at the end of the project in order to highlight what the children had learned and produced. The point of Pesta Chow Kit Kita is its very public nature, as it helps to draw in the whole community as well as outsiders, thus spreading

awareness of what the Chow Kit area is and what it has to offer, setting it apart from the stereotyped vision of it as being full of prostitutes, gangsters and drug addicts. Rather, it highlights how people live and work in the area – again, emphasising the idea of a living, growing heritage, rooted in the past. Strang quotes Foucault, to highlight the role of stories in creating things: Foucault’s observation that words, stories, narratives, discourses and texts ‘form the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 54) is readily applied to the making of places through both narrative and graphic representations (134). Through the exploration and subsequent narration of the highly personalised journeys undertaken during this cultural mapping project, the participants are able to articulate, and perhaps “form, places and identities which counter the hegemonic discourse of otherness and marginality.

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