CITIES AND CULTURE: THE CASE FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN THE ERA OF SUPER-DIVERSITY

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Author's Biography

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Research Highlights

In the quest to develop cities for the long run, the debate is whether to retain elements of culture or to reinvent such spaces for new uses. Cultural heritage preservation thus becomes an issue in urban planning, particularly in developing countries including Malaysia (Mohd Shakir Tamjes et al, 2017). Scholars mention that Kuala Lumpur needs to create a distinctive city identity and image if it is to achieve its bigger goal of becoming a World-Class City by 2020 (Mohamad Asri Ibrahim et al, 2017).

A question raised by researchers is whether the policies to safeguard heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur is comparable to the practices in UNESCO heritage sites such as Malacca and Georgetown (Mohd Shakir Tamjes et al, 2017). Through participant observation, combining focus group discussions, content analysis, photography, and videography, I outline how the preservation of one particular historical building, a Chinese clan association, increases the cultural value of the city's surroundings in Kuala Lumpur, as well as being a major tourist attraction. This makes the case for the continued retention of historical buildings and practices, despite overarching social changes such as super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007).

Graphical Abstract

Research Objectives

This paper makes the case for preserving a particular heritage building, namely the Chan See Shu Yuen Clan Association Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (CSSYKL), a clan association, pre-war historical site, and tourist attraction.

Methodology

How does the preservation of CSSYKL increase the cultural value of the city's surroundings in Kuala Lumpur? This research question is answered through fieldwork by the project leader through participant observation which included photography, videography, content analysis of secondary documents, and focus group discussions with clan leaders and members. Photographic evidence is provided to argue for the case of enriching place attachment through the retention of meaning for inhabitants of Kuala Lumpur, due to the special nature it possesses. For example, Monnet (2014) conducted a photoethnography of urban space in the form of a multimedia essay, referring to the “production of data” rather than the “collection of data”.

Monnet (2014) explained that images and sounds allow for attentive observation of the smallest details of daily life, and that the ethnographer experientially chooses to interpret and define what should be recorded in their photography - hence the “production of data”. This renders photographic evidence the best form of data for the case of cultural heritage preservation within the urban. Photographs were also harvested from stills captured in Google Maps under the Street View, where the journey was screen captured using Game DVR, a software which comes enclosed with Microsoft Windows 10.

Results

The photographic evidence shows how the preservation of cultural heritage buildings add character to the presence of Kuala Lumpur Chinatown, or Petaling Street. In the case of CSSYKL, it provides the historical elements as well as familiarity given its longstanding association with Kuala Lumpur’s history, and thus evokes the symbolic aesthetic. It provides symbolic aesthetic meaning to the future of Kuala Lumpur’s development and enriches the local cultural expression in league with the Malaysian National Cultural Policy. Ultimately, it guarantees that no matter how developed or industrialised Kuala Lumpur is, what with the move into the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Internet of Things, there will still be cultural meaning and place attachment resonant within the heart and soul of Kuala Lumpur. Even in the face of super-diversity, the clan association building will still reinvent itself as a place of attachment not only to those of Chinese descent but to all who are interested to appreciate its value.

Findings

Chan See Shu Yuen Clan Association Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (CSSYKL) is one example of a historical building which functioned not only in the past as a community centre for the Chinese who migrated to Malaya in search of economic opportunity, but still retains its functions today as a gateway to maintaining links with Mainland China, especially in the economic dimension. Simultaneously, the heritage building also attracts tourists from all around the world, including those from China and local tourists themselves.

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