Power and place, nodes and networks: Reflections on the status of postcolonial Malacca

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Abstract: This paper discusses Malacca (Melaka) as a certain kind of place (or node) located within a certain type of global and national power network. Malacca’s identity and status within the current global cultural economy as a tourist attraction in Malaysia is analysed critically. In particular, a number of specific examples will be discussed, all of which relate to the city’s self-identification as a heritage site of global touristic significance. As heritage symbols, artefacts, and even experiences, merge with what is termed in this paper as “heritage effects”, the value of heritage as such is problematised, and the potential competition from other nodes or sites (such as Singapore) is increased. These conclusions are reached in the context of perspectives derived from theorists such as David Harvey on globalisation’s impact on heritage tourism and the commodification of events and sites, and Arjun Appadurai’s account of disjunctions and differences in global cultural flows.

Whatever else it is, may have been, may have been imagined to be, or may become, Melaka is still a place, a Malaysian city situated on the west coast of the Malay peninsula, and close to the much-traversed and strategically important Straits of Malacca. As a place, it is an ethnic and architectural palimpsest of international power relations stretching back six centuries, and the site of three successive phases of Western colonisation: Portuguese in the early 15th century; the Dutch in the 16th century; and finally the British until the mid-20th century.

Melaka is most definitely a place, but a certain kind of place. Synthesising the conceptual framework of Castells (1996) within the framework of Greimas’ semiotic square (Greimas, 1983), the following homology is offered as a starting point for analysis and commentary: power is to place as networks are to nodes. Thus, power is juxtaposed to network as place is to node, but power is not the exact equivalent of network, and nor is place the exact equivalent of node. Melaka is both a node in postcolonial Malaysia and, as Malacca (its pre-
independence name), a certain type of node in the network of disjunctions and differences in the global cultural economy, as elucidated in Appadurai’s much referenced writing on this subject (Appadurai, 1996).

Flows of power (and the power of flows) are captured in the metaphor of the network; and nodes are points (or places) on the network where power, at least for a time, flows into or from, with concrete effects and affects. In this typology, places may be relatively static, but what happens in and to them is fluid and constantly morphing. What the concept of the node enables us to see more clearly is the way that power flows in, over and through certain places at certain times. Places may endure, but their role as nodes may not, because nodes are functions of broader systems or networks. As Castells (1996) describes the relationship between nodes and networks:

…this networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power. Presence or absence in the network…are critical sources of domination and change in our society: a society that, therefore, we may properly call the network society, characterised by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action. (p. 469)

Castells is stressing here the relative power of the network in relation to any particular node in the network. While place puts an emphasis on ineradicable historicity and rootedness, even a kind of definitional uniqueness and non-exchangeability, a place conceived of as node is a place inflected through context, and through its relationship with other nodes in the network, all of which are individually expendable, albeit collectively indispensable. It is this sense that not all places are equivalent that is analysed in detail by De Certeau (1988). De Certeau concludes that a “space is a practiced place”, with the term “space” in this context close in meaning to the use of node in this paper (De Certeau, 1988, p. 117).

It is stating the obvious to note that the former Western colonial powers can be conceived of as networks. While the indisputable fact of centripetal power cannot be denied (no other place on the network had the same importance or function as the metropolitan centres and capitals of these ‘empires’ (Rome, Lisbon, Amsterdam, London), the dispersed ‘outposts’ where these empires exercised power could be considered nodes: individually expendable, while collectively to a greater or lesser extent indispensable to the logic of the networked powers. Melaka was just such a node, in three successive Eurocentric networks, and a
particularly interesting instance, not just of the historical sedimentation which this colonisation produced, but as a place of hybridising contact with two non-Western networks of power and influence that have both manifestly outlasted European hegemony in that location: Malay history and religious tradition on the one hand; and Chinese contact and development on the other. (Further speculation on how places function as nodes, particularly under the influence of the forces of globalisation, can be found in Murray, 2006, pp. 48–52).

In this respect, Melaka’s history and current status stands in marked contrast to the significance of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s major city, and an emergent global hub. Kuala Lumpur has developed from a modest tin mining settlement to Malaysia’s leading city in a century and a half, with much of this growth occurring in the fifty years since decolonisation. It is a major node in the global systems of manufacturing, consumption, and image generation. An instance of this latter form of identification is the ubiquity of images of the Petronas Towers in Malaysia’s promotional culture.

However, an indication of Kuala Lumpur’s relatively insignificant status compared with Malacca at the end of the 19th Century can be gauged from the books of the most famous Western chronicler of that period, Joseph Conrad. While an online search reveals multiple references to both Singapore and Melaka (then called Malacca) in his “Eastern” novels, there is not a single reference to Kuala Lumpur to be found in these books (The Literature Network, 2007).

Melaka is not Kuala Lumpur. As stated above, unlike Kuala Lumpur, Melaka has a multi-layered history, and that historical heritage is a major contributor to the type of node Melaka now is in the global cultural economy. Insofar as its economy now depends heavily on tourism, Melaka is a node in a network which depends on many other binary oppositions, and thus choices. Thus, the relevant series of binary choices confronting an international tourist might be: (a) a choice between South America or Asia; and then if Asia, (b) a choice between Thailand or Malaysia; and then if Malaysia, (c) a choice between Penang or Malacca, and so on.

Globalisation has made Kuala Lumpur the hub that it is today, an assertion supported by the fact that Malaysia as a whole is used as the major case study on the Yale Global Online web site to explain and historicise the meaning of contemporary globalisation (Yale Centre for the Study of Globalisation, 2008). However, globalisation, as Harvey (2000) expresses its
complex cultural effects, boosts tradition at the same time as it appears to destabilise and efface it. Globalisation most certainly puts a premium on the new and the modern, but also opens up the possibility of the reassertion (and commodification) of alternative or residual values, such as tradition and familiarity:

The assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition… The irony is that tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche (imitation communities constructed to evoke images of some folksy past…). At best, historical tradition is reorganised as a museum culture… Through the presentation of a partially illusory past it becomes possible to signify something of local identity and perhaps to do it profitably. (Harvey, 2000, pp. 25–26)

Applying Harvey’s comments to a comparison between Kuala Lumpur and Melaka, this paper offers the following proposition: Melaka is emerging as an instance of Harvey’s ‘museum culture’, in contrast to the contemporary and non-historical alternative status of Kuala Lumpur. It is this type of response to globalisation in the case of Melaka that is the main point of the rest of this paper. Understandably, differences between places are capitalised on in the strategies used by agencies, such as the Malaysian Tourism Board, to promote Melaka as a tourist destination. Each location or attraction within Malaysia is seen to have its own “unique selling points” (or USPs), and Melaka’s USP is seen as history and heritage by the relevant authorities.¹

Tourism, by definition, involves the management of the experiences of producers and consumers alike in complex ways. It is an exemplary instance of the emerging significance of experience production and consumption, as economies move from a reliance on commodities to goods, then services, and increasingly experiences, as discussed in the influential book on this topic, Pine and Gilmore’s *The experience economy* (1999).

When the primary touristic experience is ‘cultural heritage’, as it is in Melaka, then this interplay between expectation and possible satisfaction on the tourist’s part finds its counterpart in the desire of the producer to imagine and anticipate what heritage experience the tourist will be most satisfied with, and then to meet or satisfy that expectation. At one

¹ Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (personal communication, April 27, 2007). Mr Mohd Akbal Setia, Assistant Director, Planning and Research Division, and Mr Jamil Darus, Assistant Director, Advertising Division, interviewed by the author.
extreme, this can become an exchange of cultural clichés or stereotypes, with both parties feeling either dissatisfied or satisfied with the experience, depending on their prior expectations or desire for an ‘authentic’ cultural experience.

The workers in a Disneyland theme park are one such version of this form of caricaturing characterisation, when individual identities as employees are subsumed completely within the roles of Mickey, Goofy and other characters. Disney workers are not so much individual employees as cast members, conforming closely to the customers’ expectations of what they want and expect from the experience. Less overt but no less managed instances of this same genre of branded theming are workers in Delifrance fast food outlets in many Asian countries, where each staff member wears a work uniform signifying ‘Frenchness’, such as berets or a tricolour scarf. Even the ubiquitous Irish pub phenomenon, in which the bar staff wear green to denote ‘Irishness’, is common in Asia, and part of the global experience economy trading in cultural stereotypes.

This international trade in cultural tropes and stereotypes is as varied as it is prevalent. Indeed, one could ask whether any realistic alternative is feasible, if communication is to be conducted across linguistic or cultural divides. Communication between people or groups takes place when there is sufficient common ground that certain expectations can be assumed, but when there is at least the possibility of something new being learned and exchanged. On the communication continuum, what is 100% redundant is at one end of the scale, (where all possible communication is already predictable and already known by both parties), whereas what is 100% informational or entropic is at the other end of the scale (where nothing is shared that is yet known). It would seem inevitable that international cultural tourism stresses the redundancy end of this continuum, as it could be assumed that most tourists choose to visit a destination based at least on some prior knowledge of that cultural heritage.

For example, a popular excursion for tourists in Melaka is a river boat tour. When this writer took such a tour, his river boat guide was a man called Bernard, a man who made a point of explaining to his passengers that he himself was descended from Portuguese settlers. Dressed in a smart, white naval outfit reminiscent of an earlier colonial era, ‘Bernard’ was playing or performing a certain kind of role in his otherwise routine job as a tour guide, a role not so dissimilar from a worker at Disneyland or Delifrance. His Portuguese features and white
sailor’s outfit fitted the part required of him, especially given the extent to which most people taking such a boat tour would be drawn to such an excursion precisely because of their prior linking of Melaka with the hundreds of years of sea-faring activity the Straits of Malacca are famous for.² ‘Portugueseness’ was a calculated component part of Bernard’s persona, precisely because Portuguese heritage is a major contributor to the overall heritage value of Melaka as a tourist destination, a form of ethnic connotation discussed in detail by Barthes in his classic essay on ‘Italianicity’ in the advertising of spaghetti (Barthes, 1982).

Not surprisingly, ‘heritage’ is a salient and much-used word in Melaka. If terms commonly used to describe Kuala Lumpur are ‘new’, ‘modern’ or ‘cutting edge’, then their equivalents in Melaka are ‘old’, ‘antique’, and ‘traditional’. Melaka’s unique selling points depend on this binary opposition, and evidence fitting this framework can be found in many places. For example, the language used in the range of postcards available for sale at souvenir shops illustrates the binary nature of this form of identification and differentiation. Words and phrases contributing to this overall effect have been italicised, to show the way in which one side of this binary opposition is constructed explicitly in words and phrases:

“The streets of old are a living museum reflecting a way of life when people moved at a gentler pace.” (The image is of a trishaws, a food stall, and some very new bicycles).

“The tailor practices his noble trade in much the same way as did his ancestors in generations past.” (The image is of a bare-chested man using a 1950s vintage sewing machine).

“Making no concessions to modernity, the humble yet elegant trishaw continues to play an important role in Malaysian transportation.” (The image is of the back of a trishaw, prominently displaying Mercedes Benz insignia)

“Reflecting on a bygone era, barber shops such as these are an invitation to experience a good haircut the old-fashioned way.” (The image is of a barber’s chair that would still be found in most cities of the world).

The accumulated effect of these postcard images and text is to saturate everything about Melaka with the patina of age, of yesteryear, of a bygone era. As the sewing machines, bicycles, and barber’s chair attest, it is not antiquity as such that is important. Rather, it is the manifestation of an antique or heritage ‘effect’, even when the objects being described are

² The Melaka river boat tour discussed in this article took place on March 3, 2007.
neither antique nor ancient. Not only is there a tension between what is ‘really’ old and ‘really’ new; there is also the tension between what something is, and what something may be made to seem or simulate.

In the case of Melaka, cultural heritage is an historical fact, but how this sense of heritage is conveyed to tourists and locals alike is a complex mix of experiences of varying degrees of ‘authenticity’, as summarised in Henderson’s discussion of the uses Peranakan heritage is put to in the South East Asian, specifically Singaporean and Malaysian context (Henderson, 2003). The inevitable tensions are clearly on display at the relatively new Cheng Ho Museum in Melaka.

Prominently displayed in a glass case near the entrance to the museum, which occupies several refurbished old buildings in the centre of Melaka’s historical district, is a copy of the book, *1421: The year China discovered the world*. What is interesting about this display, in addition to the prominent location of the book (which has played a controversial role in various attempts in the West to reassess China’s own global seafaring exploits, and to redress the balance away from the fame attaching to the better-known European sea explorers of the 15th century), is what has been done to this actual copy of the book. Only published in 2002, the book has been manipulated by the museum’s management to make it look old and worn, with the cover and inside pages seemingly water damaged, curled and yellowed, as if by ageing. In this case, the ancient look of the book is a manufactured, aesthetic effect, a heritage effect.

Neither the International Zheng He Society nor the Cheng Ho Museum actually endorses the views put forward in this controversial book. The book’s main purpose in this museum context is simply its title and its very existence: a sign that signifies China, rather than the West, discovering the world, and China’s links with Melaka being as historically long-standing as those of the Western colonial powers. This is an important counter-narrative to the more dominant one of Western global colonisation between the 15th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, there is no hint whatsoever that this book is not as authoritative or venerable as its display in this Museum suggests (International Zheng He Society, 2007).

In fact, even though it calls itself a “cultural museum”, the Cheng Ho Museum does not set out to be a repository of ‘authentic’ objects from the past, thereby pushing the definition of what it means to be a museum at all beyond conventional boundaries. It perhaps makes more
sense to view the museum as serving a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it is designed to make a famous man and his life and times as dramatic and entertaining as possible. On the other hand, it also serves a more current and convenient ideological purpose. In the context of the search for origins of the Straits-born Chinese (in both Malaysia and Singapore), and the resurgence of China as a world power, and what both of these factors mean for countries in South East Asia, Cheng Ho is an ideal candidate to shift the emphasis from a history of the region based on successive waves of European colonisation, each one more all-encompassing than the last, to a more Asian, more regional history based on Chinese origins and Chinese/Malay founding myths. Cheng Ho has the added advantage, in the contemporary Malaysian context, of being both a famous Chinese explorer, and a Muslim. He is an ideal alternative as a significant founding father for a place such as Melaka, and a foil to a heritage narrative that so often in the past appears to have had the main chapters written by the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British. If Cheng Ho had not existed, it might have been very tempting for a theme park entrepreneur to have invented him?

The Cheng Ho Museum (or theme park museum), then, is a bold statement, stressing Chinese foundation narratives, Chinese technological prowess, and Chinese historical links with the local Muslim people and culture. The Museum provides a striking counter-narrative to the usual heritage tale of European colonial dominance (which finds ample expression in the imposing Dutch buildings nearby), and celebrates the identity of Peranakan culture by giving it prestigious and distant ‘roots’.

Further evidence that the Cheng Ho Museum is as much theme park as museum can be found in the exhibits dealing with the life of Cheng Ho himself. The museum includes a vivid description of the painful process of being made a eunuch. While the actual knife used on Cheng Ho six centuries ago is not on display, the museum owners have provided a striking substitute. A glass case next to the printed description of the grim eunuch-making process contains a particularly sharp and dangerous-looking knife. However, a close examination of the knife shows clearly the wording “Made in Germany”. The knife’s role is as a prop in a spectacle, not an object with any museum heritage value in its own right. It is a particular kind of prop, a heritage ‘effect’.

Melaka is an exemplary instance of the museum culture to which Harvey refers. The Cheng Ho Cultural Museum is only one of many museums, art galleries, antique shops, and antique-
shops-cum-restaurant-cum-art gallery, to be found in the city. Peranakan culture is
prominently featured, both in this reassertion of historical roots, and in its incorporation into
Melaka’s appeal as a tourist destination. One such ‘museum’ is the Baba Nyonya Heritage
Museum on Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. The museum provides a fascinating glimpse into
various aspects of Peranakan culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in reality
the museum is little more than the collection of the furnishings and belongings of just one
family—the original occupiers of the house. This does not make the museum any less
interesting or worth visiting, but it does change the accepted meaning of what it is to be a
museum, and it involves a revaluation of what authenticity means, and it does show the
extent to which heritage has become the tourist ‘raw material’ of particular locations, such as
Melaka—a node in the global heritage tourism network.

Melaka has among the richest and most culturally diverse heritage resources in South East
Asia. And yet it would seem that history and heritage are not enough to prosper
economically, even in terms of a tourist industry. Even if the ‘real’ Melaka has the staged
and commodified qualities of a theme park, as this paper has suggested, it is competing in a
global marketplace, not just with other places of similarly rich cultural heritage, but also with
actual theme parks themselves. ‘Real’ theme parks, as distinct from other sites made to
accrue some of the features of theme parks, are package entertainment experiences into
managed, commodified products, providing predictable and managed leisure activities for
visitors. Davis (1996) surveys the emergence of the theme park as a global industry and
cultural form, while Sorkin (1999) applies the theme park paradigm to many other aspects of
contemporary urban life, including themed shopping centres and residential developments.

This paper has sought to analyse some of the cultural forms of Melaka in the context of the
forces of globalisation at work in Malaysia in general. The conclusion suggested is that
Melaka is problematically placed in terms of its capacity to capitalise on its heritage
resources and current positional advantages. The line between authentic and manufactured
heritage is already a blurred one, with special effects as likely to be found in ‘real’ heritage
experiences as anywhere else, and with categories of ‘age’ or ‘heritage’ being highly liquid.
The patina of age can be and is applied to anything that is not incontrovertibly contemporary.
Also, while cultural heritage may be a relatively finite commodity, a major purpose of this
paper is to suggest that heritage ‘effects’ are as integral to touristic experience as heritage as
such, and this kind of adaptation or morphing (aided by globalisation, digitisation, virtual
reality, simulation, and other aspects of the experience economy) means that heritage as such is not enough; heritage must be able to be commodified and communicated—in a word, *experienced*—in some way.

Finally, it is also worth noting that Melaka has no monopoly on either Cheng Ho or Peranakan culture. Singapore is a source of many tourists to Melaka (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2005). Yet Singapore is also capitalising on both the Cheng Ho ‘brand’ and the historical heritage of the Straits-born Chinese.

For example, “Imperial Cheng Ho” cruises are now a tourist attraction in Singapore. The Cheng Ho III vessel has even less claim to historical authenticity than the exhibits already referred to in the Cheng Ho Museum in Melaka, as the description on the web site makes clear (Singapore River Cruises and Leisure, 2007). The vessels in Cheng Ho’s fleet had masts and sails on their decks, not a pagoda. Such cruises may lack historical authenticity, but that does not mean that they still do not provide a marketable, albeit hybridised, experience of heritage.

Similarly, there are indications that Singapore plans to capitalise on the Peranakan heritage, and add it to its existing portfolio of ethnic/heritage brands (Chinatown, Little India, and so on). The Katong area a short distance from the CBD has been designated a precinct ripe for tourist development and promotion by the Singapore Tourism Board (Singapore Tourism Board, 2007). In addition, the original building of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore is currently being redeveloped as the Peranakan Museum, and is due to reopen in 2008 (Asian Civilisations Museum, 2007).

Heritage is a major feature of Melaka’s current power as a place, its status as a node in the global tourism network. However, as this paper has set out to demonstrate, focussing on heritage which is ‘unique’ or ‘authentic’ is increasingly problematic. Globalisation has provided Melaka with many opportunities to capitalise on its heritage, but these same forces of globalisation are also a threat, as the attempts in nearby Singapore to also market the Cheng Ho ‘brand’ and Peranakan heritage make clear. While Melaka indisputably has the history that Kuala Lumpur and Singapore do not, its future success as a tourist attraction is by no means assured, as what it means to be an authentic heritage experience continues to mutate, and the distinction between heritage and heritage effect is blurred.
References


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