

CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN MALACCA

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Many places in the developing world turn to tourism as a source of income and economic development. The city of Malacca, Malaysia, is blessed with a colorful history and many attractions that make it destined to be a major tourist destination in Southeast Asia. Yet a focus on short-term projects instead of long-term conservation efforts leave this potential unexploited. Consequently, many tourists pass the city by completely or leave after a short stay. This case study explores some of the shortfalls of Malacca's planning and heritage management efforts, which can be applied to many similarly situated sites throughout the developing world.

INTRODUCTION

Malacca, a small town on peninsular Malaysia's west coast, is blessed with a rich history and an abundance of cultural tourist assets. It markets itself as the birthplace of Malaysia, filled with vestiges from the past. Yet the few international visitors it receives usually leave disappointed within one day. Where did tourism planning in Malacca go wrong? In the following pages, I will demonstrate how a focus on short-term investments rather than a long-term planning approach is responsible for missed opportunities in tourist and economic development and destruction of heritage.

The idea for this project derived from my first visit to Malacca in July 2004. After consulting my *Lonely Planet* guide, as well as several tourist websites, I wondered why Malacca was not on the top of each Southeast Asian travel list. As a former spice trading port that boasts Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonial architecture blended into a Malay city with Islamic influences, the city seemed to offer everything a tourist could ask for. Upon my arrival, however, the reasons for its obscurity quickly became clear. When I could find any described attraction at all, it was either in poor condition or had been replaced with a tacky-looking replica. I was bitterly disappointed. During the rest of my stay, I conducted some ad-hoc interviews with other travelers and soon realized that I was not alone in my opinions. I collected additional information during several field trips from August to November 2004.

After discussing the current situation and problems of several Malacca attractions, I will assess in detail the example of the Stadhuys Museum, followed by a brief overview of marketing measures. The paper will conclude with suggestions on how to improve the situation.

OVERVIEW

While conducting the previously mentioned interviews, two distinguishable groups of visitors emerged. The first consisted of Malay and Singaporean tourists who enjoyed coming to Malacca because of its history and good food; a visit to Malacca was a trip to the cities of their youth. The second group was comprised of international tourists who all shared a similar reaction—disappointment. The main reasons behind this discontent were lack of infrastructure and a feeling of “cheapness” of most sights. This pattern is reflected in statistics about visitors to Malacca. In

the year 1999, Malacca welcomed 555,028 local guests and 617,937 foreign guests, including 237,647 Singaporeans (UNESCO 1999, 106). This represents a serious problem for the tourism industry since the vast majority of visitors from Malaysia and Singapore still have close ties to the local population and commonly spend the night at the house of a relative or friend. Thus, they do not generate any hotel revenue. On average, a visitor spends only 1.5 nights in Malacca (Hin 1999, 108). A key to greater economic success would be to raise this number to an average of two nights per visit. Instead of leaving in the late afternoon, visitors should be encouraged to stay an additional night and depart the next morning.

Many foreign tourists complain about the virtually nonexistent public transportation infrastructure in the city. It seems close to impossible to get to outlying sights of Malacca. A bus system that runs on the basis of yelling at the driver to signal one's desire to get off might be convenient in everyday life, but it is extremely intimidating and confusing to foreign tourists. Although young backpackers might consider these kinds of adventures pivotal to their experience, the target group in a higher spending bracket might not share this view. Hence, creating a public transportation system that connects the cities' main attractions is an essential step to improving the tourist experience.

In 1982, the State Government recognized that Malacca's biggest tourist attraction was its own past, and the government created an ambitious plan to commoditize its heritage (Moore 1986, 68). Unfortunately, the government had a different perception of the word "authenticity" than is generally recognized by the cultural heritage community; this resulted in a careless treatment of Malacca's heritage. One of the major tourist draws is the old Portuguese Fort "A Famosa," known as the most photographed structure in Malaysia. The Fortress was constructed in 1511 using stones from dismantled Mosques and Malay graves (Hayes 1993, 35), a delicate fact ignored by official information material. One might consider this a minute detail; yet, the otherwise in-depth description suggests that this fact was left out deliberately to foster an untainted national self-image. This practice, we will see, is quite common throughout Malacca and highly questionable.

Another example of misrepresented past is the replica of the Sultanate Palace. According to tourism publications, the palace was "built from information and data obtained from the Malay Annals" (Melaka Virtual Museum 2004a). However, comparisons of the original 14th century drawings with today's replica show significant differences in the structure, once more implying deliberate policies to shape a national image through cultural heritage.

The "Sound and Light Show" attempts to recreate Malacca's history as a multimedia spectacle. Instead of an accurate portrayal, the audience witnesses a kitschy show that demonstrates little regard for historic accuracy. Some of the show's lighting equipment is directly installed onto original structures, causing irreversible damage. In addition, the imposing concrete spectator stand negatively impacts the visitors' experience during the daytime; the view is obstructed and the scenery ruined. Even if those points of criticism were improved, it is still doubtful how big of a tourist draw the show would actually be, especially considering its dominant nationalistic message that might leave foreign visitors rather uneasy.

One more example can be found in the Maritime Museum which, according to the tourism guide, features authentic archeological artifacts from Malacca's past as a sea trading port. Upon visiting, those artifacts turn out to consist mainly of cardboard cutouts and paintings. Once again, many visitors expressed a feeling of being cheated.

THE STADHUY'S MUSEUM

Situated in the centre of town, the Dutch quarter, with its ensemble of dark red buildings, is often recognized as Malacca's hallmark and drop-off point for most day tourists. When the main structure of the square, the Stadhuis, was under restoration in 1989, a task force of the Pacific Asia Travel Association issued a report, recommending that the restoration "needs to be handled with the greatest sensitivity, especially with regards to the original designs and material" (PATA 1989). Good advice, since the square is marketed with and famed for its original 18th century Dutch architecture. A look back in time reveals that today's dark red color differs greatly from the building's original 400-year-old facade. The original structure was faced with brick, which could not endure the tropical humidity. To solve this dilemma, it was sealed with plaster and whitewashed. Later, the British painted it salmon pink, and not until restoration was completed in 1989 did Malacca's tourism authority change the color to its current dark red (Hoyt 1993, 54).

Inside, the Stadhuis hosts an exhibition portraying Malacca's colorful history. In a series of rooms on the second story, paintings and historical town models explain Malacca's history and development step by step. However, a local historian revealed that the portrayed history was not based on actual facts nor were experts in the field consulted during its compilation. Instead, the past had been created in accordance with the national agenda. Most notably, there is a gap between 1942 and 1945, the Japanese occupation during which many Malays lost their lives. If one were to base one's knowledge on the Museum's version of the past, one would think that the Japanese had never ruled Malacca. Again, it seems as if Malacca denies its own history. However, history is an all-encompassing whole that inevitably includes dark chapters, not a pool of information from which one can pick and choose.

This denial has implications for all involved. For example, school children visit the Museum on a daily basis to learn about their own history. The exhibitions, however, present a fabricated version of this past. The forces working in this scenario resemble the mechanisms described by Michel Picard in his article *Cultural Resource Management in Bali* (Picard 1977). Through constant reinforcement of a newly created history, it will eventually become internalized and accepted as a given. From this moment on, even the local population will no longer be aware of its actual background; history will be re-written and heritage lost. Even traumatic experiences like the Japanese occupation are parts of one's heritage that must not be forgotten.

MARKETING

The Tourist Information Center provides several brochures with slogans circling around the buzzwords "heritage," "historical," and "authentic." While the brochure titled *Malaysia's Historic City* from Tourism Malaysia points to attractions like "Peacock Paradise" or "A Famosa Water World," it does not mention any exemplary conservation work by the NGO Badan Warisan Malaysia, which has painstakingly restored such sites as the House 8 Heeren Street or the Malaqa House (Tourism Malaysia 2003). Furthermore, none of the brochures mention directions on how to reach the described attractions.

Internet resources are abundant, though it is almost impossible to determine who is responsible for which site. Extended searches for an official tourism authority site were unsuccessful. At some point, I reached the homepage of the governmental Melaka Museums Corporation (PERZIM 2002), which gives information only in Malay and provides a link to the "Virtual Museum Melaka." This site claimed to be "a world class expert in digital conservation and digital reconstruction of historical and

cultural assets” that provides “invaluable assistance to historians and students involved in research on Melaka” (Melaka Virtual Museum 2004b). Curious about such bold claims, I tried to contact the creator of this site to inquire as to whether any professional conservation specialists were involved. The site posted no background information, nor were my emails regarding the issue answered. However, several links refer to a hotel directory. I can only assume that it is more a commercial marketing tool than a serious research attempt.

CONCLUSION

Malacca has enormous potential to develop into a major tourist destination. Before achieving these goals, however, the town must reconsider several of its approaches towards tourism development and its own history. An important first step would be the creation of an integrated, all-encompassing image of Malacca as an historic site that goes beyond mere slogans. Upon arrival, the visitor faces attractions and semi-attractions that do not seem to have any connection with one another. Even more important, a changed approach towards cultural heritage management is needed, one that is more sensitive to careful restoration of historic structures. Whereas projects like those of Badan Warisan Malaysia show the right direction, ideas like the Sound and Light Show promise only short-term revenues. Indeed, long-term success depends on careful investment to restore and highlight the uniqueness of Malacca and its past.

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