Re-scripting Colonial Heritage

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Abstract. This paper explores alternative meanings and appropriations of the category colonial heritage. How do different categories of people practice and appropriate spaces that have been labelled as colonial heritage? How are these formely colonial spaces (re-) appropriated, contested, commodifed, in contemporary societies? My interest here is strongly influenced by Ann Stoler's work on Imperial Debris, ruins and ruination (Stoler, 2008). Building upon her argument, I argue for a critical ethnography of how colonial spaces are practiced, experienced, inhabited, re-scripted, by multiple agencies and agents, in contemporary times. Based in ethnographic research, this text explores processes of labelling and circulating through spaces in Melaka (West Malaysia), explores linkages between nostalgia and alternative notions of heritage, and questions the local meanings ascribed to heritage (translatable as *warisan*, in *bahasa melayu*). Building upon Rosaldo's (1989) notion of imperialist nostalgia and Hertzfeld's (2005) concept of structural nostalgia, I end by discussing the production and consumption of colonial nostalgia in contemporary times.
Keywords: circulation, heritagization, nostalgia, space, tourism, Eurasians, Malaysia

MELAKA'S GLORIOUS PAST: OFFICIAL HERITAGE TRAILS[1]

Historical references trace back the city's origins to around 1403 A.C. Its growing importance in the network of trading activities in the Malay Archipelago made it fall under colonial rule of European powers (Portuguese, Dutch and British). Melaka's contemporary urban cartography still reveals the historic thickness of successive colonial occupations. In contemporary Malaysian society, this colonial legacy has been at times, reformatted and re-imagined and contested, through heritage (and tourism) process. Since 2008, the city has also been listed as World Heritage town: together with the city of Georgetown, UNESCO has recognized the value of these locations as Historic cities of the Straits of Malacca, a process of heritagization that has been studied by Bideau and Kilani (2012). Who regulates what heritage is has become more problematic and a site of symbolic contestation.

Even before the UNESCO listing, Melaka was already considered to be Malaysia's Historical City (*Bandaraya Bersejarah*). A recent official booklet, published in September 2008 by the Ministry of Tourism, summarizes the current quest for tourism and emphasises a narrative of the past in which readers are taught that:

Melaka's history began in 1403 with the arrival of Parameswara, an exiled Hindu Prince from the Kingdom of *Sri Vijaya* in Sumatra. He assumed the title of *Raja Iskandar* when he embraced Islam and became the first ruler of this new kingdom which marked the beginnings of the Sultanate of Melaka.

In time, Melaka gained prominence as a vibrant maritime trading centre and was coveted by several foreign powers. The Portuguese […] conquered Melaka in 1511 and colonized it for 130 years. The Dutch then came in 1641 and ruled for 154 years. They were followed by the British in 1824 who ruled until the country gained its independence. Melaka also experienced Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. After World War Two, nationalistic sentiments began to spread culminating in the proclamation of independence on the 31st of August 1957.

Modern Melaka set on a course of industrial development about two decades after independence and forges ahead in its vision to be a fully industrialized state. (*Tourism Malaysia*, 2008, s/p)

Under the category Historical Heritage, National Government highlights "Ancient relics that abound in the historical city," namely, *A'Famosa*, labelled as a "prominent landmark" built by the Portuguese in 1511. Description notes that "it was badly damaged during the Dutch invasion in 1641. Timely intervention by Sir Stanford Raffles, a British official, in 1808 saved what remains of the *A'Famosa* today"; secondly, the publication invites visitors to "Discover Melaka's Past at the Stadthuys": another "major landmark" in Malacca, "built in 1650 as the official residence of Dutch governors and their offices." Presently, "it houses the Museum of History and Ethnography. Originally white, it was given a striking salmon-red colour to match the nearby Christ Church." Other spaces pointed out under the label Historical Heritage are Churches, Cemeteries (Dutch and British), Mausoleums (of Malay warriors), a Fort, a Hill and a well, named after a Chinese Princess, Hang Li Poh. The way of dealing with the colonial legacy is visible in some of the descriptions of the spaces mentioned above. For instance, on Hang Li Po's Well it is said that it "was the only source of water during great droughts. The Dutch enclosed it with stout walls to reserve it for their exclusive use" (*Tourism Malaysia*, 2008, s/p).

Under the category Cultural Heritage, Tourism Authorities include groups of citizens themselves: Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Portuguese-Eurasians. Secondly, some of Malacca's Museums are pointed out as cultural resources: namely the Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum, Chitty Museum, The People's Museum, Malaysian Youth Museum (located in a "British colonial building [that] was formerly a post office," the Maritime Museum (located inside the replica of a "Portuguese vessel that sunk near off the Melaka coast"). The Melaka Sultanate Palace, which is "the wooden replica of a 15th century Malay palace," turned into a Cultural Museum, stands in relevance among all other museums. Inside it, a "huge diorama depicts a sultan's court while the main exhibits relate to Melaka culture" of pre-colonial times. Another museum space highlighted by tourism authorities is the Proclamation of Independence Memorial, "housed in a 1912 British villa" that "was once the Malacca Club, a bastion of colonialism". Lastly, Malaysian Tourism's booklet includes "The Light and Sound Show," located near a shopping mall, in the Cultural Heritage resources; according to tourism propaganda, that is the "best way to learn about the history of Melaka," as historic moments of Melaka are "re-enacted by means of lights, narration, dialogue, music and sound effects" (*Tourism Malaysia*, 2008: s/p).

The example above illustrates the alternative meaning of replica and authenticity in the local context (as when compared to European discussions on the concepts) and brings forward into discussion the relations between culture, politics and economics. By the repainting of squares with gay colours, or putting light's and sound shows on ruins, National Tourism Authorities are re-appropriating, with their own agendas and values, the built form of colonial past.

JALAN-JALAN IN TOWN: ALTERNATIVE TRAILS

From a methodological point of view, ethnography enables us to grasp various scales in the social fabric of cultural processes related to heritage. From local citizens' practices to the multiple agencies of organizations (local, national and transnational), there are multiple voices that regulate, reclaim and appropriate rights to urban space and to inscribe «heritage» in the towns' local map. Malaccans themselves have a say in how they value space and heritage process. Their views on heritage (*warisan*), were at times clearly integrated into their shopping and their going around

(*jalan-jalan*) itineraries. During fieldwork, my first insights into alternative meanings ascribed to heritage occurred during a walk with my host family, in an august Sunday afternoon in 2006. My host was a member of a local heritage trust. Occasionally, he also volunteered as tourist guide to groups of university students, and scholars. He and his wife took the lead in showing me around. In that first promenade with them, I learnt about Melaka by participating in this unwritten heritage walk; the trail was mapped by their local knowledge, and by discursive tourist narratives directed to what they assumed were my interests and curiosity, (as European and Portuguese student). Some of these spaces were not listed in the official *warisan* cartography of the town by Malaysian authorities; but they were valued as such by my hosts and by their Eurasian fellow citizens.

According to Lee, the term "Eurasian" generally stands for "someone of mixed European and Asiatic parentage and/or ancestry" (Lee, 2004: 2). This author notes that in Asian territories under European colonial administration:

Eurasians had often been perceived as the living embodiment of colonial encounters. They belonged to a marginalized and isolated colonial category that straddled racial, ethnic, and sometimes national boundaries. (Lee, 2004: 8)

Among the spaces highlighted by my Eurasian hosts were some ruins of old, decrepit buildings, in various parts of town. They were presented to me, wrapped up in discourses of nostalgia, longing for a time when Melaka's Eurasians were more visible in town as a social group. That time of reference overlapped with the colonial rule of the country.

Students' Heritage Trails
A second example of alternative mappings of heritage assets is found among students living in town. In order to do this, we carried out some collaborative work with the Canossian School of Ujong Pasir (in the outskirts of Melaka) between February and April 2009. Students were aged 13 to 17 years old. The sample was made of 80 students, 70 of which were Eurasians. I asked the students to (1) imagine that a friend from outstation would be visiting them soon; (2) he/she has never been to Melaka before; so each student would (3) choose four places where she would like to take her/him and (4) write each of these names in one of the circles provided in the sheet I had previously gave them. These places were chosen individually by each of the students. After doing that,

they (5) briefly described the places and also wrote down (6) why they chose them. After that, I collected all the paper sheets. We discussed further, in two group interviews, their views about the townscape layout, and related issues.

Based upon the student's imagined itinerary around Melaka, we draw a chart of heritage spaces most valued by them. Preliminary results show that the spaces most chosen by students for a city itinerary around town are: the ruins of an old Portuguese Fortress (named A Famosa), and Shopping malls [each with 44 responses], followed by Jonker walk/street [40] and Stadthyus [37].

On the ruins of *A Famosa*, all students mention the historic characteristics of the ruin. Among Eurasian students' descriptions of the place, a connection to the past often comes to surface. Lucia de Costa says: "that fort was built by my ancestors when they invaded Malacca in 1511" (Lucia de Costa, 17). Alina de Cruz adds that inside it there are "statues, graves and paintings" to remind "the people about the sufferings of the past ancestors" (Alina de Cruz, 17). An emphatic mode is to be found in some of these descriptions. Among other students, the place is described with realism: According to Student Joyce Lim, "A Famosa is in Banda Hillir. During weekends, there will be many people climbing up the (hill near)". And, she adds that "the view from the top of the hill is very beautiful» (Joyce Lim, 17). Sometimes, the choice is also related to its location – "behind the Melaka Mall. It is near the schools. […] it is left by the Portuguese" (Kelly Conzago, 17); "It is opposite Datharan Palawan which is a shopping center. It is an old building which was built by the Portuguese." (Veronica Farnell, 17). Finally, another reason is "because many tourists like to go (there) and take picture[s]" (Christin de Souza, 16).

Similar representations occur on integrating the *Stadhyus*, also named Red Building, into their trails. Among the reasons to go to one finds consumption – «there [are] so many *souvenirs* and history places to visit» (Christin de Souza, 16). About the square around the building, it is said to have "historic value because when the British came and colonised us, they built it, the clock tower. It has a beautiful fountain with a […] museum where many valuable artefacts are kept" (Abbigail Swee May, 15). Scenic and memory aspects are also highlighted: "The red building is a place full with memories of the past" (Alisson Lazaroo, 17) and a "nice photo spot […] to take some pictures as memory" (Alina de Cruz, 17).

The Malls, and especially the newest shopping mall in town, built near the ruins of *A'Famosa*, are also clearly integrated into students' choices. *Datharan Palawan* "is a big shopping complex" and "we can also relax and walk around" (Robyn Lopez, 15). Younger students view the mall as a leisure space where they go to "play games" (Wendy de Costa, 13), "bowling and karaoke" (Sheena Lazaroo, 13). Andrea Chin writes about using *Padang Palawan* – an open field occupying the ceiling of the shopping mall – to "teach the old games" to her friend. (Andrea Chin, 13). Students present other reasons to choose the Mall: "going shopping together" (Andrea Chin, 13), "to have fun" (Andrea Gomes, 13), "to find cheap stuff" (Kimberly Lynn, 17), to "buy souvenirs" (Abigail Gomes, 15; Malvinder Kaur, 13), and "to eat" (Wendy de Costa, 13). Or, simply because the mall is located around the history places (Valentina Monteiro, 13).

Students' trails also include Chinatown's World Heritage Area. According to the students, *Jonker* street offers an open market where we can see "many old games, traditional clothes" (Andrea Chin, 13), "buy lots of handicrafts and handmade items" (Michele Wong, 13), and "old times' stuff" (Alina de Cruz, 17). Another student specifies that "there's even a shop selling beaded shoes," which is a "traditional footwear wore by the *Peranakan* people" and "on Sunday morning, there's a flee market where people sell some antique things" (Nicole Sta. Maria, 16). Besides, at Jonker "they also sell things such as teddy bears, chains, earrings and more" (Angie Francis, 13). Food is another element connected to the definition of the space by students: *Jonker* is defined as "a long street with many stalls selling local food" (Kimberly Lynn, 17) "such as *rempah udang, cendol, laksa* and many others" (Annestta Theseira, 13). Student Joyce Lim summarizes her view about the street with emphasis on how the space is appropriated by the people:

Jonker walk starts operating in the evening. […] it is crowded with people starting from 8 o'clock, especially on Friday and Saturday. There are many food stalls, clothes and luxurious stalls and we can see joyful faces there. There will be different performances too. (Joyce Lim, 17)

Accoring to Alina de Cruz, "the street is full of people and many cultures" and "moreover, it is situated near Sungai Melaka, a place for tourism" (Alina de Cruz, 17). Apart from shopping, the street's built form is labelled as an attraction in its own right: "All the houses are very unique

and beautiful. There is also a big stage where we can hear men and women sing the song of their choice" (Michele Wong, 13).

Additionally, "the lights there at night are spectacular and amazing" (Lucy de Costa, 17). Nearly all students value positively the space of Jonker Street turned into tourism attraction (Jonker Walk). In their voices, it's a

walk of food, traditional clothes, and old houses. When you go to Jonkers, you'd notice that people in the older days were very bright in the sense that they were able to make a little alley into a street market. (Abbigail Swee May, 15)

April's Walk
Seventeenth year old Eurasian April Danker, commenting on her choices of *Jonker* Street, *Bunga Raya, the Red Building* (*Stadhuys*) and *A Famosa*, illustrates them as follows:

1. *Jonker* Street – It's only open on weekend. It's located near the Sungai Melaka. This place is always crowded with people because the thing[s] that are sold there are cheap. Every night there will be different performances such as karaoke competition, [and] culture dancing.
2. *Bunga Raya* – It is a place where old people used to do their shopping. There they sell cloths and artificial flowers of many different kinds. It has been there for many years. Many old people prefer to go shopping there than [going to] shopping complex[es] because there [one] has many food shops which sell different kind of food and also sell "mata kucing" drink.
3. *Stadhuys*. It is a red building which many tourist[s] come to visit. It was built by the Dutch. It has a big clock which people usually call 'Clock Tower'.
4. *A Famosa* – It is a historical place left by the Portuguese who once conquered Melaka. There we can see weapon[s] that have been left by the Portuguese, like the canon.

April's description is based in her local knowledge and on her experience of each space, intertwined with overall images ascribed to what tourists usually visit. A diverse meaning of this is her second choice, *Bunga Raya*, a street space valued among her group, even if it's not considered as «heritage» among transnational organizations, or national government policies. By choosing *Bunga Raya* as a place to go shopping with her visiting friend, April connects with her Eurasian grandmothers' consuming practices. And, by doing so, April re-inscribes the local practices of going around the town, into the way of constructing an itinerary for presenting

Malacca. Vernacular meanings of the street make it worth being seen by April's imaginary friend.

Voices From The Street: Heritage Salvaged And Contested
Regarding Jonker Walk, differently from April Danker, the conservationists and Architects Lim Huck Chin and Fernando Jorge, who are members of *Badan Warisan Malaysia* (Heritage Trust of Malaysia) refute Jonker street's transformation. In a detailed research published under the title *Malacca: voices from the street* the urban architectural history of the city's old quarters is depicted in a very thorough and detailed manner. According to the authors, the street was "Officially christened *Jonker Straat* (Nobleman's Street) by the Dutch" following the city's take over, among "local inhabitants, the area soon acquired the Malay name *Kampong Belanda* (Dutch Village)"; despite the prominence of Dutch residents, the road "was still home to mixed community late in the 18th century" (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 70). With the decline of the Dutch power, and "the transition to British rule in 1825 […], most of the properties were acquired by the Chinese merchant class," therefore redefining the street through "new architectural lines and forms," and through other structures, such as the "*hay kuan* (Chinese Clan Associations)," a Free School and a Temple, as well as "new businesses and residents" (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 73). During early 20th century, other groups also had their meeting points in the street, namely the Malacca Eurasian Club (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 74). Japanese occupation durind the pacific war was another driving force in the occupation of the road. Eventually,

after the war, business serving the more mundane needs of Malaccans moved in: printers, barbers, photo studios, provision shops and premises selling electrical products as well as junk were – alongside the *hay kuan* – the pulse of Jonker Street for much of the latter half of the 20th century. (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 78)

However, this urban process would be transformed through tourism, in contemporary times. In year 2000, local tourism authorities created Jonker Walk, a tourism project that consisted of closing the road on weekends to give way to a night market. According to conservationists and heritage advocates, that "project has become catalyst for the destruction of the street's heritage" (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 78), as traditional businesses "have been displaced by rising rentals since the introduction of Jonker Walk" (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 74).

Voices from the street is a counter-narrative in the battlefield against the rhetoric of heritage by Malaysian Authorities in Malacca. The authors emphasise that:

two parallel experiences thus defined the process of documenting the city's people and places: the experience of discovery – of personal stories, untold events and vanished places; and the experience of watching a city on the path to self destruction – driven by greed, ignorance and development by the irresponsible." (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 11)

Building on their argument, the authors advocate against the town's heritage dilapidation, in the face of the present governance by National and State authorities:

Malacca is a city with an irreconcilable past. In which history is hastily rewritten and packaged for mass consumption; in which the oldest buildings are condemned, their parts sold to willing buyers; in which the past is wrongly told but unquestioningly swallowed; in which traditional communities are displaced by the inexorable drive for profit; in which only the marketable is retained and the rest discarded; in which banality buries diversity; in which historical icons are ripped out of context and exploited for tourism; […] We learnt that Malacca expertly empties places of historical meaning and relevance. Place-names are randomly changed, streets repeatedly rechristened. The past is promptly traded – and always at a price. Where the hands of conservation should have lent their touch, we heard the crash of demolition. (Lim and Jorge, 2006: 12)

ON COLONIAL HERITAGE, AND PACKAGED (COUNTER) NOSTALGIA

Skimming though some of the literature on nostalgia, I find Renato Rosaldo's (1989) notion of imperialist nostalgia, Michael Herzfeld's (2005) analysis on structural nostalgia, and William Bissell's (2005) work on colonial nostalgia to be quite helpful tools in deconstructing linkages between heritage, nostalgia and counter-nostalgia in Malacca. The case of Zanzibar's *Stone Town* described by this last author draws many similarities with the Malaysian context, and, is rather comparable to Malacca's *Jonker Street*. Cunningham Bissel's (2005) approach to colonial nostalgia sheds light into heritage practices and their alternative meanings in Malacca: here, conservationists, local politics, foreign expatriates, and local residents have puzzling and non-overlapping views on mapping and val-

uing *warisan*. Work in progress shows the existence of diverse, and at times conflicting, modes: one advocates for conservationism and is held by trans-national organizations (such as UNESCO) and some Malaysian Non-Government organizations (such as *Badan Warisan).* Another one is held by local, State and National Government organizations, advocating for creative transformation.

Last, but not the least, a third, alternative, notion of *warisan* is found in the practices of citizens, and can be observed in the spatial tactics of local residents' mobility in the city. Eurasian Students' trails link historic places with consumption practices in a very close way, and show much less nostalgic discourses about the ancestors, than the ones visible in my Eurasian hosts' sightseeing trail. In appropriating the city as such, my hosts and other Malaccans use nostalgia as a tool, in relating with space in contemporary Melaka. Nostalgic discourses are resourceful modes of place making practices, and strategies for dealing with the present. And by doing so, Malaccans are using their own voices and power as citizens, to produce counter-nostalgias and connect to the past, in the face of the present; even when their voices and their choices are silenced by other more glittering attractions.

On a national level, Malaysian National Government Institutions deal with the colonial heritage through commoditisation for tourism consumption. By doing so, they act to reintegrate colonial heritage in a patchwork of broader set of storytelling rights about the past. They produce nostalgic discourses about the city's bygone eras: nostalgia for the Malay World of the Sultanate era, previous to European colonial rule. Although their agency ultimately is exposed to filtered regulation by transnational institutions, and echoes contestation by Malaysian conservationists, Malaysian Government agencies recycle, re-sript and (re)present the European colonial heritage by showcasing it, in a packaged, and counter-nostalgic, way.

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Notes