

RESEARCH NOTE

INITIATING AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT IN A MULTICULTURAL UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE OF GEORGE TOWN, PENANG, MALAYSIA: CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

The recognition accorded to George Town as UNESCO World Heritage Site on 7 July 2008 has opened a new challenge for the state government in terms of heritage management and town planning. As the listing was conducted on the basis of a "living" cultural site, the government has since initiated several moves to safeguard the city's intangible cultural heritage. One such initiative comes from the George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) which initiated a pilot oral history documentation project in 2013. Using the project as a case study, this paper seeks to illustrate the role of an oral history project in creating public awareness and appreciation for heritage as well as in encouraging community engagement in the heritage discourse.

Keywords: Penang, world heritage site, intangible cultural heritage, oral history, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of George Town as Penang's World Heritage Site by UNESCO on 7 July 2008 brought a new responsibility and challenge to the government and the people of Penang. In order to ensure the recognition's sustainability a few organisations were formed by the state to manage, monitor and promote George Town as World Heritage Site. These include the formation of the George Town

World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) in April 2010. In close cooperation with the federal and state government, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) GTWHI promotes activities related to heritage. GTWHI also co-operates with various individuals such as conservation experts, historians and cultural experts to ensure the participation of every community in maintaining George Town as a World Heritage Site.

On July 2011 the state government formed the Department of Heritage Conservation which is responsible in drawing up a plan to manage the outstanding universal values of George Town World Heritage Site. The department's objectives and functions are closely related to the tangible heritage aspect, in particular, the management and conservation or development of buildings within the heritage site (<http://www.mbpp.gov.my/web/guest/jabatan-warisan>). This tangible heritage is well maintained through regular monitoring and improvement. However, the same cannot be said for the intangible heritage that involves humans in and around structures, buildings, and spaces within the heritage enclave. This is where the GTWHI comes in. Since 2013, GTWHI has started an oral history project to fill the research gap on living heritage at the heritage site. This project provides the much-needed balance as the focus is no longer on buildings and building conservation per se but it also centralises many histories and unspoken narratives behind these physical edifices in line with the selection of George Town as a World Heritage Site based on its importance as a cultural heritage site.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GEORGE TOWN AS A MULTICULTURAL COLONIAL PORT-TOWN

George Town's successful listing as UNESCO World Heritage was based on three of the six criteria relating to world cultural heritage:

1. Exhibiting the importance of interchange of human values worldwide over a span of time or within a cultural space, be it architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design. Historical George Town foregrounds exceptional examples from various cultures in a trading town in East and South East Asia where through trade Malay, Chinese, Indian and European civilisations met.
2. Presenting a unique or exceptional testimony to brilliant cultural tradition or civilisation which is still alive or has disappeared. Historical George Town is testimony to a variety of cultural heritage and Asian traditions where religion and great cultures once met. The common existence of different beliefs seen in places of worship, is testimony to religious variety in Asia.

3. Examples of outstanding buildings, architecture and technology ensemble or landscape which illustrate significant stages in human history (A. Ghafar, 2010: 11–12).

Penang's history as a trading port in the Straits of Malacca paved the way for it to fulfill the aforementioned criteria. Its strategic position in the middle of the trade route between India and China enabled Penang to dominate regional and inter-regional trade. Penang developed as a trading port, dominated by migrants and administered by Europeans after the arrival of Francis Light in 1786. Indeed, the arrival of people from a variety of ethnic groups in Asia provided the basis for the creation and subsequent growth of ethnic enclaves in the new town. Most retained their culture, language and religion but cooperated in business dealings and daily life (Nordin, 2007: 316). Light did not put in place any form of town planning when he took over the area from the Kedah Sultanate. However, he marked the area between Light Street, Beach Street, Malabar or Chulia Street and Pitt Street for development as a commercial centre. Owing to an increase in population, this area was extended to Farquhar Street, Love Lane, Penang Road and Battery Lane. In 1800 the town area was less than five miles in radius (Nordin, 2002: 89).

Penang developed rapidly and attracted diverse groups of people from all over the world. In the mid-19th century, the percentage of people of Chinese descent had increased substantially at the expense of the Malays and other ethnic communities. Eventually, the Chinese had also dominated the business and commercial sectors in George Town. Braddell (1861: 2) had noted that in 1860 there were 18,887 Malays and 28,018 Chinese in Penang. By 1938, the Chinese had increased to 156,271 as opposed to 40,785 Malays (Straits Settlement Annual Report, 1900–1938). One reason for the increase was the growing number of Chinese females arriving in Penang. By 1881, females accounted for a third of the total population of George Town but by the early 20th century there was an influx of female Chinese due to the change in colonial policy (Tjoa-Bonatz, 2000: 56). With the stabilisation of the community in Malaya, Chinese sojourners became permanent settlers by bringing in family members to Malaya.

With the growth of the economy and population, shop houses, residential areas and places of worship were built to meet the needs of the different communities. By 1818, there was a total of 1,053 shop houses, buildings and homes. These were concentrated in Beach Street which had a total of 337 buildings, followed by Chulia Street with 199, Penang Street with 103 and Penang Road with 102 buildings (Nordin, 2002: 89). As each ethnic community or clan had concentrated in a particular area, road names came to reflect this ethnicity. China Street and King Street were the commercial and social areas of the Chinese. Penang Street became a Cantonese area; it was also known as "Chinamen's Street" while the Hokkiens called it "Macao Street". The Malays and the Tamils concentrated along Market Street. Subsequent addition of these

ethnic groups resulted in the expansion of residential areas to accommodate family members and to perpetuate their monopoly in particular economic activities (Tjoa-Bonatz, 2000: 55; 57).

Pre-war terrace houses and shop houses were the standard architecture in George Town, then and now. Based on the inventory of heritage buildings in Malaysia prepared in the early 1990s, there were 30,000 pre-war buildings located in 162 towns. Out of this 20,876 were shop houses and free standing buildings. Penang state had 5,057 pre-war buildings with 4,336 of them located in the George Town area (Mohammad and Mohd Bashir, 2006: 112).

Most of the heritage buildings were shop houses, semi-detached houses, detached houses and houses that stand on their own. With the arrival of more migrants in the 20th century, it was quite common to find 10–45 people living in a shop house that could accommodate 15 occupants (Tjoa-Bonatz, 2000: 58–59; 1998: 123–136). Today these shop houses served as shops on the ground floor while the living quarters are on the upper level. The system of extended family is still in place although their number is very much reduced.

"CHERITA: LIVING ON CHULIA STREET, 1945–1970": THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

As emphasised by the oral historian Jan Vansina, "without oral tradition we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside" (Vansina, 1985: 198). The need to explore stories from the inside formed the basis of the oral history documentation project titled "Cherita: Living on Chulia Street, 1945–1970" (henceforth "Cherita") in 2013. Realising the unique nature of George Town's multicultural heritage, the GTHWI is convinced that stories of residents of shophouses located on major streets are worth documenting so as to benefit the public. The main objectives of the pilot project were: (1) to develop professional resource persons who can contribute to oral history documentation as part of a capacity building plan; (2) to explore baseline standard for oral history as a valid reference for future work in Penang; (3) to create a knowledge enrichment culture and to develop a strong sense of identity for all project participants including interviewers and interviewees; and (4) to forge a working relationship with professional institutions for future collaborations and the sharing of research.



Figure 1: George Town World Heritage Zone.
Source: GTWHI Diary (2013).

Located within the heritage site, Chulia Street was chosen for this documentation project because it was the first of four streets which was opened by Francis Light (refer to Figure 1). Initially, it was known as Malabar Street but in 1798 it became known as Chulia Street. The names Malabar and Chulia implied that the area was dominated by South Indians (Khoo, 2014). Besides being one of the first roads to be opened in George Town, Chulia Street along with Beach Street was also a busy street since colonial times. According to Nordin Hussin, 18% of shop houses in George Town in the 19th century were located in Chulia Street. Most of them were owned by the Chulias or traders who came from the Coromandel Coast and Bengal although there were also Malay shop owners (Nordin, 2002: 90). In the early 20th century, many old buildings in the area were transformed into budget hotels (Khoo, 1993: 68–70). Today, Chulia Street is no longer a residential area although there are still a few families living in these shop houses. The period from 1945 to 1970 was chosen for the pilot project because of its significance to the lives of residents and traders. In 1969,

Penang lost its free port status which it had enjoyed since 1957 when Malaya gained independence. Penang also experienced the hartal of 1967 and racial riots of May 1969 which had affected other parts of the country. These events left a big impact on the socioeconomic life of the inhabitants of Penang.

This pilot project took place between March 2013 and February 2014 using curatorial framework. Janet Pillai, one of the project's advisors, stressed the project coordinator's myriad roles:

to move to and fro between creative exhibition the traditional roles of oral history curator, as a custodian of information, to an exhibition curator, organizing a creative exhibition of the oral and visual materials based on concepts and themes of memory and recollections.

(Pillai, 2015: 164)

The project began with a discussion of its theme and content with the top management of GTWHI and advisors consisting of a project consultant, cultural mapping consultant and historian. The site for the project was identified through geographical and physical mapping. This was followed by profile studies to prepare inventories on traders and residents of Chulia Street. With this profile, the coordinator and her team proceeded with preliminary interviews looking for potential respondents who were the area's longtime residents or had lived or worked in Chulia Street. From the preliminary interviews, the coordinator and the team selected suitable respondents.

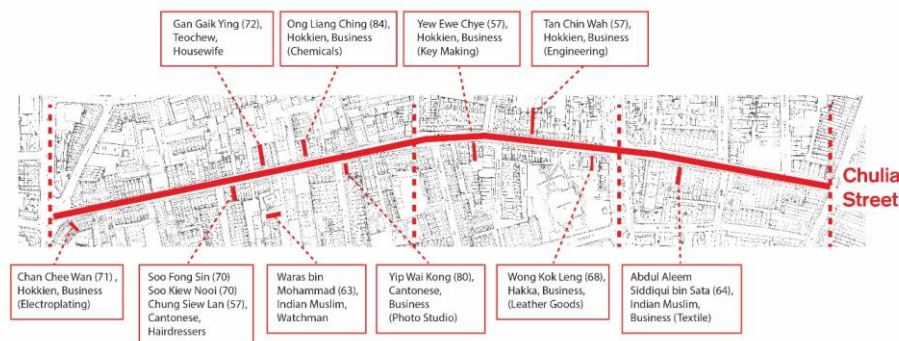


Figure 2: List of interviewees.
Source: GTWHI (2013).

The actual interview was carried out with 12 selected respondents who had close relationship with Chulia Street (refer to Figure 2). They were from various backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, age, gender and occupations. The interview covered economic activities, living situation, food, transportation,

sanitation system, social and cultural activities in Chulia Street as well as important events that had taken place in the locality (refer to Figure 3). Other than using oral history method to map data from individuals, the coordinator also documented the history of the area with visual material such as old photographs, postcards, documents and old books (refer to Figure 4).



Figure 3: An interview session with a resident of Chulia Street.
Source: GTWHI (2013).



Figure 4: One of the documenters at work re-shooting some framed old photographs.
Source: GTWHI (2013).

THE CHALLENGE

George Town has potential in the oral history and memory project because there are local residents who still have good memories of their locality and who were willing to share their memories of old Penang. The most challenging part was getting a sustainable team of trained documenters. As the project had to handle different ethnic groups, it was necessary to have a multiracial team for the interview process. The group of documenters were trained by Dr. Lye Soo Choon from the Singapore Oral History Centre who is a well-known oral history expert in the method and practicality of conducting oral history. As these documenters worked on a part-time basis, the project faced problems in keeping them for future interviews. After one or two interviews, the documenters would leave the project to find permanent jobs. This necessitated the training of new ones which affected the quality of interviews. This problem will continue until GTWHI comes up with a viable structure of recruiting permanent staff for its oral history project. With the conclusion of the pilot project, the challenge is to develop a feasible plan for a longer term oral history project that takes into consideration sustainability and continuous development of the existing talent pool. A final challenge would be to align the future oral history project with the larger mission and vision of GTWHI in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

COMMUNICATING THE DATA, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PROJECT OUTCOMES

The final stage of "Cherita" involved the interpretation of data collected either through oral history, secondary sources or visual materials. The interview materials were transcribed and kept at the GTHWI head office in Acheen Street as oral history archive material. The team also worked diligently to bring the project to the public so as to create public awareness on the importance of local history and heritage. One of the mediums used is a homepage which was administered by the project coordinator (<http://penangoralhistory.wordpress.com>). This website documents ongoing processes, thoughts and reflections during the oral history documentation project. The "Cherita" website was created to provide information on this project and to promote it to the public. It provides various information such as community engagement, workshop for documenters, interviews which included conversations with reluctant interviewees, and production and dissemination through video making of "Cherita Lebuh Chulia" (Story of Chulia Street).

Based on stories collected from respondents, the process mapping of "Cherita" was carried out smoothly which enabled the mapping of socioeconomic activities along Chulia Street as noted by the project coordinator (refer to Figure 5):

Last night, the interviewer team ..., came together to celebrate the completion of the interview phase. It was a great opportunity to share our interview experiences and stories that each of us have collected. An A0 size map was put up on the wall where we marked locations of significant places, events, businesses and activities mentioned by our interviewees. It was interesting to make connections between stories and memories, and we were able to imagine fragmented pictures of how life was in Chulia Street from 1945–1970. Based on recurring stories and memories, we identified some popular topics for further interpretation and dissemination:

1. Secret societies
2. Popular businesses on the street
3. Games and pastimes
4. Night life
5. Festival and procession
6. Housing
7. Transportation
8. Food

Lesson learnt: This mapping method is useful because it helps to visualise underlying trends and values, which in turn, contributes to an understanding of the sense of place in Chulia Street during the selected period (1945–1970). (<https://penangorallhistory.wordpress.com/category/interpretation>).



Figure 5: A partial view of the "Cherita" map (draft) marking locations of significant places, events, businesses, activities mentioned by the interviewees.

Source: GTWHI (2013).

As "Cherita" was a community project, the team brought the project to the public in due course. Through the merger of creativity and conventional method, the project was successful in producing the following products to be shared with the community and the public during a programme and exhibition in conjunction with the 5th anniversary of George Town as World Heritage Site from 29 June to 7 July 2013 (refer to Figures 6 and 7):

1. A comic size book titled *Cherita Lebu Chulia* illustrating collective memories on Chulia Street between 1945 and 1970.
2. "Cherita TV", a video documentary screened at coffee shops, where the residents shared their memories and experiences about the street.
3. "Cherita Living Room" held at no. 167, Chulia Street, an instructive exhibition featuring 3D map, video and panel printed.
4. "Cherita moments" where the visitors learn about 10 "moments" of event which happened in Chulia Street between 1945 and 1970.
5. "Cherita Walk and Talk", a specially designed guided walk that brings people up close and personal with Chulia Street and its residents (refer to Figure 8).

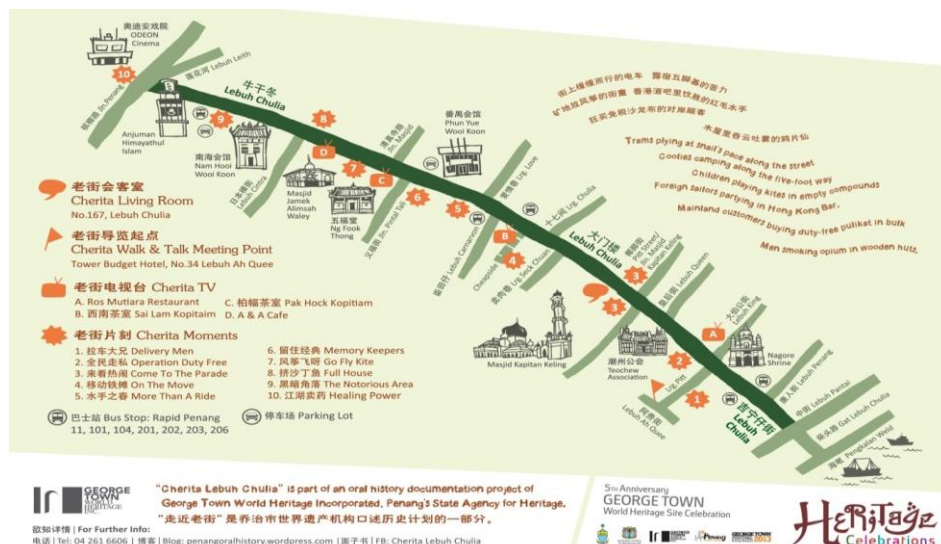


Figure 6: A partial view of the "Cherita" map (draft) marking locations of significant places, events, businesses, activities mentioned by the interviewees.

Source: GTWHI (2013).



Figure 7: Centerpiece of the exhibition is this 5-feet long "Cherita Memory Map".
Source: GTWHI (2013).



Figure 8: A guided walk on Chulia Street.
Source: GTWHI (2013).

Based on the crowd at the exhibition which was held from 29 June to 7 July, the project not only succeeded in collecting "stories from inside" from selected residents but also in recalling past memories for the community through the products that were created. The project has also shifted from the private homes of the local residents to occupy public space when it became a public event. The sharing of information would be continued when artifacts loaned by local residents were displayed in exhibitions held in Chulia Street. Old photos would often trigger visitor memories that led to story-telling sessions. These memories were written on post-it notes and pasted as extra captions. Local residents and the public will not only be instilled with the awareness to know and share personal, family and community history for the purpose of documenting hidden heritage but also a project that could be educational for the younger generation in terms of history and local heritage. As for the outcome, the project has succeeded in producing individual groups with basic skills to conduct interviews as well as to form preliminary database of oral history at the GTWHI Resource Centre.

STORIES FROM THE INSIDE

One of the significance of "Cherita" was the documenting of "stories from the inside"; the history and memories of present and past residents of Chulia Street. This chance to saunter down memory lane is important as it helps provide a form of historical record and new insights of life in George Town in the old days. Ong Liang Ching reminisced on the atmosphere in Chulia Street when he first started his business in the 1950s. He did not live in Chulia Street but rented a shop house for his business. Throughout the day he would be in Chulia Street which he felt was a suitable site for business. The following is his memory of Chulia Street in the 1950s:

When we first started, the city was not that crowded. So it was easy to cycle along. We had no motorbike and all that. So we had to manoeuvre through the trishaws. They had plenty of trishaws. And they even had rickshaws then [...] It started with rickshaws; later years only the trishaws were introduced. And there were very few cars. There were bullock carts, there were handcarts, and there were no lorries. Later on they had small lorries, not the big ones you have now. Lorries that may be about the size of maybe 10 feet long or something. Very small lorries. So it wasn't a problem to cycle at that time, or to walk. The trams that were plying between Dato Keramat and the wharves, all belonged to Eastern Smelting. They don't carry passengers. They carry only tin ore. Part of the route passed through Chulia Street,

so we had the tram lines there. And later on we had trolley buses, where they used electricity. After that they had some motor buses. That means they didn't use the trolley buses anymore. You use gasoline, like now, and they did away with the trolley buses. That [the trolleybus system] was quite a nuisance. They have lines across [the roads], and they have to draw the power from the lines. And they have the connectors, trailing along. If they don't have the connectors, the lines running across the road, they wouldn't be able to move. So when the motor buses were introduced, they did away with the trolleybuses (GTWHI Acc. No. 1309: 2–4).

On gambling in Chulia Street, Ong Liang Ching recalled the area as the centre for *mah-jong* gamblers:

Yah, mah-jong, certain coffee shops. Then they have one or two mah-jong dens along Kampung Malabar, the next street. Then later on, the law was introduced that you can't have more than three tables in your coffee shop playing mah-jong, so there were no more gambling dens. Previously, they have even 10 mah-jong tables, because they know when they played mah-jong, they can always bet. Usually, they have tables at the back end of the coffee shop. There they play mah-jong until there are bettings and all (GTWHI Acc. No.1309: 31–32).

Waras bin Mohammad has lived on Chulia Street since migrating to Penang from India in 1947 when he was about the age of one. Waras remembers well gangsterism in Chulia Street. As one of the busiest streets with a variety of businesses, secret society activities were not alien to Chulia Street. The following is Waras' memory of secret societies in Chulia Street:

They collect protection money. All are ruffians. "You come and join my 04. Each month you pay \$1.00. Whatever happens to you we will be there". It was membership. "Ok. Ten of us will join". This was how a fight would start. There were Malays and Indian Muslims too, but mostly Chinese. Just pay protection money. "I give you money. Whatever happens you will look after me". The 04 gang used sign language to identify themselves. A finger in the pocket and four fingers out means 04. Gang 08 was different. They had a finger in each pocket to signify 08. They just used sign language. Malays didn't have any gangs. They join those gangs (GTWHI Acc. No. 1302: 30).

Tan Chin Wah who inherited his father's business in Chulia Street remembers the rhythm of business in this area in the 1960s and 1970s:

So, when we started in Chulia Street, it's due to my father's business. I was there since 1972. And the business started actually in Chulia Street itself. It's engineering. [The street has] more on engineering hardware shop, a lot of food stalls and eating place. But now, it's because of budget hotels coming in, maybe created more environment, more people that come to Chulia Street because of package or what we call backpack hotels around. Formerly, in this area, it started off with quite a very simple life in Chulia Street, where people will do more on marketing, engineering and retailing section. In business in Chulia Street in the 1960s and the 1970s, they are quite slow. Not comparing to now, the 1980s and the 1990s, coming to the 2000. A lot of changes is because of, as I say, backpack hotels, yah. It really grew and built the atmosphere, a very genuine atmosphere of life, competitive life in Penang now. See? So, whereas ... when our business started, actually it's quite a small area ... at this premise where we are holding. It was originally an old building with at least seven families inside living in the building itself ... Address is 222 Chulia Street. We started operating in 1963. That is where we first registered as a company, as Cheng Hai on Chulia Street. As for him [my father], he is actually from China. He came from China and he worked also in many places. When he came in, he was in Teluk Bahang doing this *belacan* [Malay – paste made from prawns or small fish] factory. And from there, he diverted [branched out] (GTWHI Acc. No. 1306: 1).

Tan Chin Wah remembers Cheapside or *Lorong Pencuri* (Thieves' Lane) which was well-known among the locals of George Town as a place to buy things cheaply:

That original [place] where he started how to learn business in engineering is in Cheapside, also known as *Lorong Pencuri* [Malay – Thieves' Lane]. This is actually a very interesting thing. A lot of this area where all ships and whatever they came also. This is the area that they release goods on hardware and tools. So there are often stolen properties, tools, all sold there too. That's very important. Because this actually is a fact. That's why they call it Cheapside as *Lorong Pencuri*... These are all things that come from the port, where all these materials like anchor, chain,

all those imported products coming in from Penang [port]. From there, they just smuggled a little bit out. Then they sell it to this people around there [Cheapside]. From there they distribute and they sold back to the owner, the ship owners. So that's called *Lorong Pencuri*. That's one thing very unique about it. Business really grew because of this type of ... barter trade, where they buy and sell, take back and sell back to you (GTWHI Acc. No. 1306: 1–2).

Tan Chin Wah remembers vividly the festivals celebrated in George Town including Chulia Street:

School bands were not many. Only once, twice only so far, I remember. Only twice, school bands marching along Chulia Street. It coincided with the Chingay and the Kuan Yin celebration. Coincide only, that's all ... You enjoy the atmosphere ... The entertainment and the atmosphere were there. So you really looked forward to that procession ... Oh, during the 1960s? Normally it's on a Sunday. The procession would always start on a Sunday. So, early morning, normally around 9 am, 8.30 am to 9 am, they started. Then would pass through a lot of streets and they came down. By evening, normally by three or four o'clock, would be completed. Not like now, night, more on the evening side. Last time was early morning ... We would be at the shop maybe around 9 am–8.30 pm, 9 am, we are there already waiting for them to pass through. By the time they reached Chulia Street, it will be lunch time already. Everybody would be standing outside already waiting for the procession to come. It's actually enjoyable, very enjoyable, with neighbours asking all this and that ... Admire the way they passed, the ringing of the gong and all these. Admiring the sound and all this. That time, when you're young, you don't really ask for what, you don't have the idea of what. Not like now, they ask for prosperity. That time, we just flowed with it only (GTWHI Acc. No. 1306: 43–44).

Abdul Aleem Siddiqui bin Sata, owner of a textile shop Medina Store, spoke about business and customers, the atmosphere at night in front of the shop and his feelings for Chulia Street as his home since 1962. Until 2013, when the interview took place, it had been 51 years of continuous residence. With regard to his textile business, Abdul Aleem remembers his customers' innovative idea to evade paying tax to the customs:

Yes, they bought a lot of things because of the free port status. They bought *pulikat*, *batik* which they bound around their waists, like this. Then they wore their clothes. The custom didn't check.

They only checked things which are hand carried. Things worn were not checked, so they just walked through (GTWHI Acc. No. 1301: 34).

Abdul Aleem recalled how the five foot way of his shop became a place where poor people, especially port labourers, slept at night:

There were many poor people before. They slept in the corridor. In the 1960s, all slept in the corridor with no disturbance. They went to work in the ships or went elsewhere. At night, they came back here to sleep. Poor people slept here too. All slept here. We didn't disturb. In the morning at 6.00 or 7.00 am, they left to bathe at Kampong Kolam where there was a [government] public toilet. Whoever came early, slept there first. They slept on newspapers for mats. No mattresses, newspapers would do. For pillows, they used their arms. There were many Hindus. There were no problems. Sometimes after drinking alcohol, they would sleep there too. We didn't disturb them. They would get angry and retaliate and it would be a problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, all were there. Sometimes about 10 or 20 people. They didn't sleep at the opposite shop because there was no protection there. At my shop there was a wall. The wall shielded them from the light so they could sleep well (GTWHI Acc. No. 1301: 55–57).

From the interview, it is found that Abdul Aleem is very emotionally attached to the shop house where he lived on Chulia Street:

In 1962, the rent was only \$115 under Rent Control Act. The rent could not be increased. But the Rent Control Act was repealed ... Then they [the owner] increased the rent slowly. Now it is RM2,500 a month. I am happy. Yes, I am used to it. Moreover, my children and family help me in the business. The mosque is nearby ... I am used to the place and I am happy. Business is slow but it is ok (GTWHI Acc. No. 1301: 13–18).

When asked if he has plans to move out because of the high rental and with business not catching up, Abdul Aleem reiterated:

I have a house in Macallum Street which I rented out. I don't want to leave although I have a house. I am happy here. Everything is easily available. It is easy here. There is no problem. The road is busy but that is alright. I can endure. No plans to move. Everything is easily available. If I want to go out,

there is the Esplanade. I can go there easily. It is special and it is in George Town (GTWHI Acc. No. 1301: 49–50).

Yip Wai Kong who has a photo studio still remembers the antics of customers who were superstitious when taking wedding pictures:

People were very superstitious back then. A girl cannot take wedding photo before the wedding day, because "that girl is married twice!" When we shoot wedding photo, it has to be frontal view, close-up view. To see if one has bad skin or not? Has mole or not? Has arms and legs or not? This is the right way to shoot a wedding photo. Then you can bring the photo to the registrar, once they approved, then this photo became the evidence of your marriage. Later on if you have any quarrel, divorce ... you can claim his property! That's why last time people developed a lot, one, two, three, four, five, six dozens. Distribute to those who came to the wedding banquet so that they could become witnesses, as a safety measure for the future (GTWHI Acc. No. 1304: 33).

Several women were also interviewed for this project about their past lives in Chulia Street. Women are often sidelined in historical and cultural research because society is prejudiced as they believe that women's place is only in the home. This renders them invisible and their reflections and experiences insignificant. This project empowers the women as it grants them voice and agency to share their thoughts and feelings for continuously living in Chulia Street. Madam Gan Gaik Ying, for instance, was burdened with various duties being a housewife living with her in-laws' family. She was born in 1941 in Green Lane which is outside George Town and was married in 1961. After her marriage she moved to Chulia Street to live with her parents-in-law. Her sister-in-law and husband who had six children also lived there. Her husband's family were soya milk hawkers at Carnavon Street. Her mother-in-law managed the domestic part of the family including family finance. As Madam Gan was the only daughter-in-law, she had to manage the household as well as help to prepare soya milk. She had to wake up as early as 4.00 or 5.00 in the morning and only went to bed at 9.00 at night:

Have to work every day, even when not feeling well. Regardless if your head was heavy and your hands shaking, you still have to work. Unless you were bed-ridden, otherwise you have to work. Many people and neighbours knew that life in our family was very difficult. I seldom go out. Seldom see people other than family members. Outsiders only got to see me if they happened

to come into the house to look for my mother-in-law. Maybe even the other tenants in the house did not get to know me ... everybody knew I don't go out much (GTWHI Acc. No. 1303: 15).

Although she led a difficult life when she was young, Madam Gan is nostalgic about Chulia Street:

This [Chulia Street] is a good place. I got married to this place, and then successfully raised my children here. That's why I think it is good. Time flies, one generation after another. My mother-in-law, my father-in-law, my husband had passed away one by one. For me, I don't think so much, it is all good (GTWHI Acc. No.1303: 28).

Soh Fung Jie @ Soh Fung Sin spoke about working at a hair salon for men, "Vincent's Hairdressing Saloon" in the 1960s (refer to Figure 9). At that time there were many perm parlours and hairdressing salons for women. Her husband was also a barber who had a salon in Chulia Street. The staff at "Vincent's Hairdressing Saloon" were all women. Workers who were from outside Penang lived on the first floor of the shop house. Two of the longest serving workers had retired in 2014.



Figure 9: Old name card used by Vincent Hairdressing Saloon.
Source: GTWHI (2013).

Equipped with beautiful decorations, neat and modern equipments such as electric massaging chair, the shop attracted many clients. But it was not easy to erase perceptions of the local society which viewed such vocation as unbefitting for women. Women who worked at such outlets were often regarded suspiciously as women of loose morals or character. Most respondents who worked at hair salons try to challenge such a perception. Madam Soh emphasised that they were professionals in their jobs and their clients were good people:

It was happening during the opening. Many friends and clients came, it was full house ... The photo that you see on this name card was taken on the opening day. That time we wore uniform, it was a jacket over a dress. Working here, everybody was equal, no boss-staff hierarchy. Because I was also once working for the people, I know it was hard-earned money. It was not easy to stand on your own at that time, one had to work hard to earn a livelihood (GTWHI Acc. No.1305a: 6).

Excerpts of memories above display a "sense of place" which is widely prevalent among the interviewees who still live in the shop houses in Chulia Street despite the high rentals. Feelings of old residents are important to the stakeholders including the state government since they have an impact on town planning of the heritage enclave.

CONCLUSION

The oral history documentation project "Cherita" is an example of the use of oral history method to explore the living heritage within the George Town World Heritage Site. It must be stressed here that a location only becomes a place when memory is attached to it. Without memory, a building is only a lifeless tangible heritage that is devoid of any life or value. The oral history method enables the researcher to explore the lives and history of people "from the inside". Residents of Chulia Street between 1945–1970 not only shared various happy and sad memories of their lives in the same locality but they also voiced out their refusal to be relocated elsewhere despite the sharp rental increase. This admission is crucial and should be given due attention by the government, town planners and those involved in conservation efforts as not everyone embraced modernity and are willing to leave behind their significant past within a certain locality. Based on this pilot project, support must be given to enable more oral history projects to be carried out within the George Town Heritage Site. Through hard work, understanding and creativity in implementing the programme and to stage the exhibition the team managed to disseminate public views with regard to communal space that enable people to share their experiences and understanding

of place-making. This is important to ensure the unity of both tangible and intangible heritage to emerge stronger in defending George Town as a World Heritage Site.

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