

## Chinese Clan Jetties of Penang: How Margins are Becoming Part of a World Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract:** This article begins with the celebration of George Town's enrolment (along with Melaka, both in the Strait of Malacca) on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It then sketches the process by which the Chinese clan jetties, built on stilts over the sea and, until now, at the margins of urban development, have been integrated into the core zone of the preserved perimeter of George Town, in Penang, Malaysia. The article assesses this change in relation to issues of the recent heritage policy enshrined in a multicultural context and examines the various actors' strategies to achieve their aims in a competitive context

### The Clan Jetties: A Place with Marginal Beginnings

While conducting field research during our first visit to George Town in August 2006, we were struck by the outraged reactions of many of our interlocutors—intellectuals and other representatives of civil society—when facing the destruction of the Koay jetty, a settlement they considered a “site of memory,” a place that crystallized the historic presence of part of the Chinese immigrant community within the town.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, let us recall that George Town was founded in 1786 by Francis Light of the East India Company, who took possession of Penang Island (Palau Pinang), once part of the Kedah kingdom. This initial British presence in the Straits of Malacca would inaugurate development throughout the nineteenth century that attracted a large immigrant workforce from both the nascent British Empire and southern China.



Figure 1. A recent view (2008) of part of the jetties (authors' image)

Late in the century, increased activity at the port led to a new wave of immigration, especially among Chinese workers, mostly single men or lone husbands. The majority were coolies employed to unload goods in the port; others oversaw the production and sale of coal; and still others ferried people and goods, particularly between the island and mainland. By necessity more than convenience, they settled in collective housing (coolie-houses) that lacked privacy built on stilts in the sea next to their work sites. This environment would gradually be incorporated into the construction of individual family

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homes as marriages occurred or wives joined husbands in Penang. Within this context, several jetties were constructed along the Weld Quay,<sup>3</sup> the quay that runs along the port and separates it from George Town city. Persons belonging to the same clan and bearing the same patronymic occupied each jetty. Toward the end of the 1960s, there were eight of them: Lim, Tan, Chew, Lee, Mixed, Yeoh, Peng Aun and Koay.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2. Koay jetty before its destruction ([www.asiaexplorers.com](http://www.asiaexplorers.com))

The Koay Jetty was the last one built, in 1960, yet it was the first destroyed in 2006. This event instigated the strong emotions that we witnessed. From the viewpoint of our interlocutors, this was not about the disappearance of just any place, but of a place inhabited by Muslim Chinese, descendants of the Huis,<sup>5</sup> an “ethnic” group originating in Fujian Province in southern China. For this reason, the Koay jetty was invested with high symbolic value. In the particular context of Penang, the only Malaysian state that is predominantly Chinese,<sup>6</sup> it embodies several specificities for its defenders. First and foremost, it represents a Chinese minority among the Chinese: the Koays are descendants of a Hui minority. Furthermore, they are a minority among Muslims: they have their own rituals and restrictions (particularly concerning food and funerals), their own beliefs (such as the divinity Datuk Awang, see Figure 3, over page) and their own social practices. Finally, the Koay jetty retained the original features shared with other clan jetties, namely houses on stilts over water. In addition to these commonalities, these clans also possess a social structure founded on the shared ancestry of its members. Moreover, each clan maintained a symbolic link with its native village in southern China. The temple constructed at the entrance to each jetty, sometimes with an extension at the other end, was intended to solidify this link.

<sup>3</sup> This quay is named after Frederick Weld, governor of the Straits Settlements between 1880 and 1887.

<sup>4</sup> For a historical and sociological presentation of the jetties, see Chan Lean Heng, “Rediscovering historic communal sites and commemorating their histories—the case of the clan jetties,” *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography*, vol. 33, no 1 & 2 (2002): 11-20.

<sup>5</sup> On the ties between the Koays of Penang and the Huis, see Ong Seng Huat, “Koay Jetty: The Social Evolution of the Hui People in Penang,” Colloquium on “Penang Historical Minorities,” organized by Penang Heritage Trust and Penang Eurasian Association, 2 February 2002, George Town, online at: <http://penangstory.net.com>. See also Ong Seng Huat, “The Story of Koay Jetty in Penang—English & Chinese versions” (<http://koayjetty.tripod.com/koayjetty.html>). For more general information on the Koay [Guo in Mandarin] in Malaysia, see Ma Rose Wang, “The Lost Identity: Chinese Muslims in Malaysia,” International Conference on “Ethnicity in Multicultural Asia: Theory and Findings”, City University, Hong Kong, November 2003. Substantial general literature exists concerning the Huis. See, for example, Élisabeth Allès, *Musulmans de Chine. Une anthropologie des Hui du Henan* (Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 2000) and Gladney Dru C., *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Note that the current population of George Town is approximately 220,000 inhabitants, breaking down into 60% Chinese, 30% Malay and 10% Indian.



Figure 3. Datuk Awang, Koay Temple (courtesy of Christian Giordano)

Until recently, another characteristic common to all the clan jetties was their double marginality relative to the rest of the city. The first was due to their location on the water near the port, which isolated them and gave them the reputation of a dangerous place. The opacity of their social organization, in addition to the many illicit activities that supposedly happened there (alcohol and drug smuggling, clandestine immigration, gambling), underlay this general bias.<sup>7</sup> The other marginality was their relationship to the urban Chinese community, particularly to the Five Clans that dominated—and still dominate—economic, political, cultural, and social life in George Town and Penang.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 4. Chew Temple (authors' image)

So what had happened to cause our interlocutors to feel so outraged by the destruction of the Koay jetty? What did it represent in the eyes of its defenders,

<sup>7</sup> Today, this reputation brings up an anecdote. The jetties' former marginality has been depicted in rough terms to better emphasize the new quietude of these places. One has the impression that those residents of George Town who visit the jetties today, often with their families, are afraid when they look back and remember the place's former seedy ambiance.

<sup>8</sup> For the history of the Five Clans of Penang that largely controlled the tin, coal, coolie and opium market, see the study by historian Yeetuan Wong, "The Big Five Hokkien Families in Penang, 1830s-1930s," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, vol. 1 (2007): 106-15 (<http://csds.anu.edu.au>).

particularly in those of the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT)?<sup>9</sup> This association of intellectuals, journalists, architects and members of liberal professions was devoted to defending Penang's heritage and was at the forefront of these efforts. What was it about this place that motivated these actors to set up a committee for its protection and to campaign very actively in its defence?

What we would like to describe is how the representations of a place that was once considered marginal were transformed into a "site of memory," that supposedly celebrated the multicultural diversity of Penang.<sup>10</sup> In other words, we wanted to trace the construction, beginning with Koay jetty and then extending to all the jetties, of the image of a socio-historic community worthy of being elevated as living tradition and, ultimately, of being placed at the heart of the site proposed for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.



Figure 5. Koay jetty's ruins ([www.koayjetty.tripod.com](http://www.koayjetty.tripod.com))

The scenario to defend the Koay jetty unfolded as follows. There we stood, before an original Chinese Muslim community (of Hui ancestry), characterized by a particular lifestyle, a unique locality and an equally unique environment, composed of an urban mangrove forest that doubled as an ornithological site, all of which was threatened by antagonistic forces. Who would not be seduced by the sight of a small, coherent and singular "community" confronted by a vast urban redevelopment project and greedy real estate speculation? As anthropologists, we could only share this feeling, accustomed as we were to observing from the margins before fixing our attention on the overall structures. Our spontaneous interest in the situation surrounding the Koay jetty explains our hasty visit there, just after its destruction. We wanted to observe the terrain in ruins, with only leftover stilts emerging from the water in what had become a wasteland and was now being filled in and surrounded by impressive new buildings under construction. These were the very buildings that would house the displaced residents of the jetty who wanted to live in them, in compliance with the government housing project.<sup>11</sup> The urban development project for the district has several objectives: to facilitate access to the city by extending the highway to the port and to create more dense housing for a population with a high growth rate, while simultaneously

<sup>9</sup> See their internet site at: <http://www.pht.org.my/>

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed presentation of the multiculturalism in Penang, see Christian Giordano, "Governing ethnic diversity in rainbow nations: The politics of citizenship and multiculturalism in Peninsular Malaya—the case of Penang", *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology*, 44 (2004), 89-102.

<sup>11</sup> The project is called "The Koay Jetty, Peng Aun Jetty and Prangin Estate in Weld Quay".





Penang state. The walk, which was organized by heritage advocates for government officers, was led by the recently-elected chief minister, Lim Guan Eng. A cohort of journalists and members of Penang's intelligentsia also followed it, not to mention the ordinary residents who mixed in among the tourists. The afternoon was dedicated to a series of musical and dance performances around the places of worship or at the various community association sites. The second day was especially devoted to open-door visits to various symbolic sites in the city, notably the temples and museums, while the adjacent jetties also received numerous visitors. Quite curiously, this was the only district that was visited in the city of George Town. Consequently it held a privileged place in the celebrations. The third day saw more outdoor artistic performances<sup>13</sup> mixed with artisan activities on Penang Road, also named "Little Penang Street Market" because, for several years, a monthly arts and crafts market was held that displayed Penang's multicultural identity.

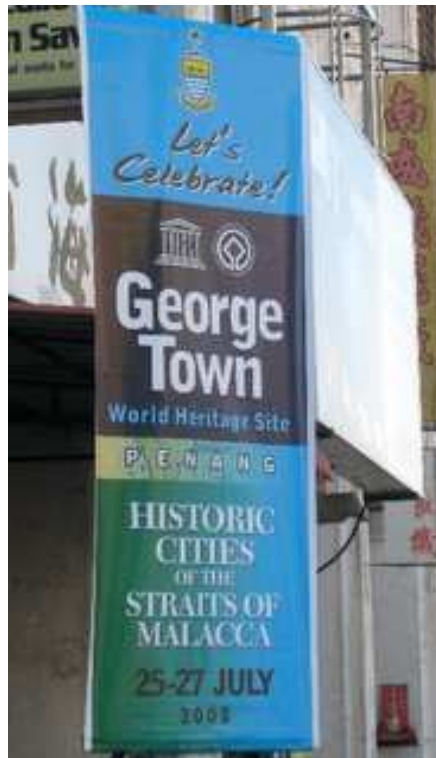


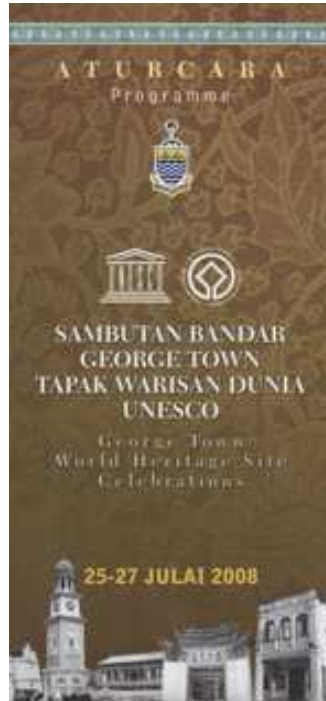
Figure 7. Banner for George Town World Heritage Site celebrations (authors' image)

When the officials made the quick decision to celebrate the event, the program needed to be launched within a few weeks. Its coordination was entrusted to Arts-Ed,<sup>14</sup> the Little Penang Street Market, and some who were particularly involved in preserving Penang heritage. The stated objective was to showcase the cultural and religious diversity of George Town by bringing together all the communities involved, and so the work was carried out with urgency and enthusiasm. As we had the chance to attend some of the preparatory meetings, we could assess the effectiveness and skills of all those involved who were, simultaneously, trying to mobilize the best troupes of actors

<sup>13</sup> Prominent among the many performances was a homage to Cikgu Bahroodin (Mohd. Bahroodin Ahmad) – a well-known performance artist in Penang and Malaysian theatre who recently disappeared and was winner of the "Living Heritage Treasures of Penang Awards" – and a presentation of "Kuda Kepang", a possession piece inspired by a traditional style from Java and deeply embedded in Johor state in southern Malaysia.

<sup>14</sup> Arts-Ed (Arts Education Programs for Young People) "offers arts programs for young people aged 10-20 through short courses and workshops in music, dance, and visual arts. It also involves young people in research and publication in the field of heritage arts." See its website at <http://www.art-ed-penang.org/images/about/about.htm>

while reconciling divergent viewpoints and overcoming the reluctance of some, especially certain religious leaders, to appear in such a festive context.<sup>15</sup> However, they took the chance, since all communities wanted to celebrate this exceptional event.



**Figure 8. Programme of George Town World Heritage Site celebrations (authors' image)**

As described above, these three days unfolded with performances that mixed secular and sacred elements. They were also punctuated with visits to various places of worship located along “Street of Harmony”: on the first day the visit started with the Church of the Assumption and St. George’s Church, followed by the Sri Maha Mariamman Hindu temple and numerous Chinese places of worship like the Goddess of Mercy Temple, the Khoo Kongsi, the Yap Kongsi, the Teochew Temple, the Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple, and finally the Kapitan Keling and Melayu Lebuah Acheh mosques. A more strictly civil dimension involved the ceremony of planting *Penaga Laut* trees, the symbol of Penang Island. This took place on the Fort Cornwallis esplanade, a site emblematic of the English presence on the island since 1786. We were invited to participate as foreign guests. The official launch of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site<sup>16</sup> occurred on the evening of the second day, on the same esplanade, with speeches, fireworks and a huge performance. This show mixed genres: its initial theatrical performance by two reference troupes in the Penangite multicultural scene, Anak Anak Kota and Ombak Ombak ARTstudio,<sup>17</sup> depicted past conflicts between the communities and used music with mixed languages and rhythms; the second, longer performance was devoted to 1960s music, the golden age of Malaysian music which has since become a national symbol.

<sup>15</sup> It was particularly true for some Muslim groups, who did not support student participation in this “ecumenical” walk, thus underscoring the limits of the multiculturalism generally ascribed to Penang and the continual negotiation between the various parties on the definition of Penang’s heritage in general and on what it represents for each religious community in particular.

<sup>16</sup> Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng greeted the inscription announcement as follows: “This is great news for George Town. We have to maintain our heritage and history and the state government intends to [do] just that.” (FL Sam, “George Town and Melaka just became world heritage sites,” 9 July 2008. See <http://malaysia-guide.blogspot.com/>)

<sup>17</sup> See the brief presentation of the two troupes below (p. 153).



Figure 9. The chief minister visiting the Teochew Temple (authors' image)

Unlike the demonstrations that usually take place around Merdeka (or national independence day) that mobilize all sectors of society and are widely attended by the community, the exceptional nature of these festivities did not generate general rejoicing among the populace. On the contrary, attendance was rather sparse. The only case where one entire neighbourhood directly participated in the event was, as already mentioned, the clan jetties. The open doors featured a visit from the chief minister himself, accompanied by officials and journalists then followed by ordinary citizens and tourists. Since it was organized at the last minute, the visit was limited to two clan jetties, the Lims and the Chews.

Despite limited available time—three hours—the program proceeded according to a well-defined plan: a welcoming ceremony in front of the clan temple by members of the Chew Association Committee dressed in blue shirts and black pants for the occasion was followed by a lion-dance accompanied by firecrackers, a visit to the recently built (in 2007) community hall that houses a historical museum devoted to the clan jetties at Weld Quay and then refreshments followed by a photo exhibit open to all. The ceremony also included a visit to the jetty, with stops at some of the houses and stalls where greetings were exchanged between the chief minister and the community.



Figure 10. The chief minister with the Community Board Association before the Chew Temple (authors' image)



The high point was the chief minister's press conference, where he recalled the historic importance of the clan jetties in the city's economic development and their uniqueness relative to the wider Chinese community. He also underscored the place they occupied in realizing the UNESCO project that was so important for the whole city, the island and even the entire country. In the name of the government he promised not to forget them. When we crowded around him with the other journalists and officials, he acknowledged our presence and highlighted the international importance of Penang that this recognition had confirmed. Our presence on this day among the curious crowd signified interest from abroad about their city. Our "European-tourists-visiting-Penang" hats could emphasize the importance henceforth attached to the heritage, in a political economy of tourism, for an island that also revolved around cultural aspects.<sup>18</sup> As for our "anthropologist" hats, they could support the policy of multicultural diversity maintained for a long time by the island's successive officials. In short, our presence may have reinforced the validity of a vision, simultaneously cosmopolitan and multicultural, that officials and elites had created for their city and for the relevance of Penang's inscription on the UNESCO list.



Figure 11. Chief minister at the press conference at Chew jetty community hall  
(authors' image)

### **The Multicultural Concept of the "Street of Harmony" and the Process of Inscribing Penang on the UNESCO World Heritage List**

Rather than give a detailed history of the inscription project, we will only point out several salient elements of the process. First, George Town's uniqueness should be emphasized: it is one of three Straits Settlements (with Melaka and Singapore) that the British had colonized since the late eighteenth century. British control of the Straits of Malacca attracted several waves of immigrants to Penang Island, notably the Chinese (but also Tamils and Bengalis) who established themselves mainly as a port workforce. The port rapidly expanded and successfully competed with other trading centres, particularly Dutch ones, becoming for a time the premier economic centre of the Straits.<sup>19</sup> Penang was an important meeting point between East and West,<sup>20</sup> as its

<sup>18</sup> See "Penang has it all," Declaration of the Chief Minister, Lim Guan Eng, during the MATTA Fair Penang, August 2008: "Tourism without doubt is a very important economic driver and income generator to Penang.... The Penang State Government tourism effort will be driven by eight unique key thrusts as -Medical Tourism, *Heritage and Historical Tourism*, Education, Regional Head Quarters and Business Centre, MICE (Meeting, Incentive, Conventions, Exhibition), Eco & Horticulture, *Culinary Centre & Film, Cultural and Arts Centre*" (authors' emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> For more details, see Giordano, "Governing ethnic diversity in rainbow nations".

<sup>20</sup> Joel S. Kahn seeks to demonstrate how the process of "culturalization" in Malaysia historically raises aspects that are local and global, particular and universal, Eastern and Western in "Culturalizing Malaysia: Globalism, Tourism, Heritage, and the City of George Town," in *Tourism, Ethnicity, and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, ed. Michel Picard and Robert Wood E. (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 101.

architecture shows. It reveals multiple borrowings: there are Chinese shop-houses in which commercial and artisan activities closely overlap living spaces; public buildings of pure colonial British style; and also the Malay vernacular style (*kampung*<sup>21</sup>).



Figure 12. A shop-house, George Town (authors' image)

Fully aware of this distinctive heritage, a group of motivated people—including architects, intellectuals, scientists, academics, and entrepreneurs—have worked since the 1980s to inventory examples of architectural heritage, with an eye to their preservation. Most notable were the shop-houses,<sup>22</sup> with the progressive addition of elements of intangible heritage such as religious practices, culinary specialties, craft production, festivals, and ceremonies.<sup>23</sup> Their observations and inventories took several forms: writing articles in newspapers and cultural magazines<sup>24</sup> to inform and raise awareness and books on local art and history;<sup>25</sup> producing historic and urban

<sup>21</sup> On this see, for example, Peter Zabielski's communication "At the Crossroads of History and Development: 'Unseen' Heritage and the Built Environment in an Urban Kampung in Penang," *The Penang Story* (<http://penangstory.net.com>) and Goh Beng Lan, "Modern Dreams: An Enquiry into Power, Cityscape Transformations and Cultural Differences in Contemporary Malaysia," in *Southeast Asian Identities. Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (Singapore; London: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 1998), pp. 168-202.

<sup>22</sup> Renovations took place especially on Muntri Street and Armenian Street. For the owners of these shop-houses, it was important that "we do not pickle George Town in aspic. We must maintain the façade and the roof-scape. But inside, owners must have a free hand to adapt the building to modern needs," according to Christopher Ong, one of the first local architects to renovate these buildings. See Khor Jin Keong Neil, "The long journey to world heritage status", 13 July 2008, *the star.com*, on-line at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/7/13/focus/21784825&sec=foc>.

<sup>23</sup> The move from tangible to intangible culture is confirmed by Khor Jin Keong, social historian of Penang and author of *Glimpses of Old Penang* (The Star Publications, 2002): "Led by Datuk Lim Chong Keat, the PHT was originally concerned with the conservation of buildings. According to member Datuk Nazir Ariff, it was George Town's collection of pre-World War II buildings, the largest in South-East Asia, that attracted most concern. 'Penang was developing at a massive rate and we worried that our built heritage was going to be threatened,' he said. In 1988, Khoo Salma Nasution edited and published the *Pulau Pinang Magazine*, which drew attention to the living heritage of George Town. This approach highlighted the culture associated with the inner city." Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Newspapers such as *The Star*, *The Sun* or *New Straits Times*. Cultural magazines such as *Pulau Penang Magazine*, *Heritage Asia*, or *The Penang Heritage Trust Newsletter*.

<sup>25</sup> For example, Julia de Bierre (photography by James Bain Smith), *Penang: Through Gilded Doors* (Penang: Areca Books, 2006); Lin Lee Loh-Lim, *The Blue Mansion: The Story of Mandarin Splendour Reborn* (Penang: L'Plan Sdn Bhd, 2002); Khoo Salma Nasution and Malcom Wade, *Penang Postcards*

guides for the city, especially a street directory;<sup>26</sup> organizing scientific conferences and colloquia on the island's history and heritage;<sup>27</sup> launching campaigns to preserve buildings and periodically intervene with concerned authorities;<sup>28</sup> staging performances by troupes like Anak Anak Kota (or Children of the City) and Ombak Ombak ARTstudio,<sup>29</sup> which are primarily aimed at children and whose pedagogical goal is to record, stage and reconstruct Penang's multicultural heritage motifs like oral memory, trades, objects and artifacts, music and theatre, etc; and finally an arts and crafts competition with a prize for the "Living Heritage Treasures of Penang".<sup>30</sup>

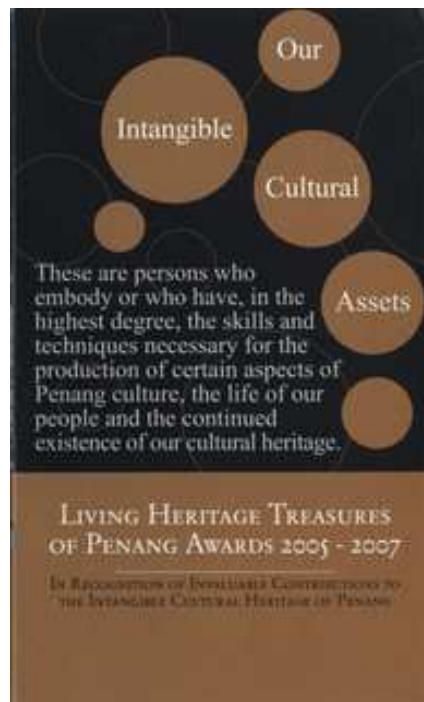


Figure 13. Living Heritage Treasures of Penang Awards (courtesy of the PHT)

The group of heritage defenders also took the initiative to create the Penang Heritage Trust in 1986, a non-government organization (NGO) open to all and dependant on subscriptions and private donations. Its objective is to revitalize the

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*Collection, 1889-1930*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Penang: Areca Books, 2006); Khoo Salma Nasution, *More than Merchants: A History of the German-Speaking Community, 1800s-1940s* (Penang: Areca Books, 2008) and Tin Kim Hong, *The Chinese in Penang: A Pictorial History* (Penang: Areca Books, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> In this respect the work by Khoo Su Nin and Khoo Salma Nasution, *Streets of George Town Penang*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Penang: Areca Books, 2003), is remarkable. First published in 1993, it presents an inventory of the historic architecture of the city's various communities.

<sup>27</sup> Four colloquia were organized by the PHT within the framework of "The Penang Story: A Celebration of Cultural Diversity." They were: "Pengkisahan Melayu Pulau Pinang," 25 August 2001; "Indians in Penang—A Historical Perspective," 22 September 2001; "Chinese in Penang—A Historical Perspective," 5-6 January 2002; and "Penang's Historical Minorities", 2 February 2002. An international conference on "The Penang Story" (18-21 April 2002) ended the series (<http://penangstory.net.com>). These events, sponsored by a Japanese foundation and *The Star* newspaper, fitted into the project for Penang's inscription on the UNESCO list, as they were designed to "inculcate heritage and cultural awareness amongst Malaysia's academicians of history and Penang's interested population". See Gwynn Jenkins, *Contested Space. Cultural Heritage and Identity Reconstructions. Conservation Strategies within a Developing Asian City* (Berlin, Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2008), p. 144.

<sup>28</sup> See the information published in *The Penang Heritage Trust Newsletter*.

<sup>29</sup> The two troupes work with the PHT and Arts-Ed (for Arts-Ed, see fn. 14). They are on-line at: <http://anak-anak-kota.blogspot.com/> and <http://storminabox.blogspot.com/2007/12/about-ombak-ombak.html>

<sup>30</sup> "These are persons who embody or who have, in the highest degree, the skills and techniques necessary for the production of certain aspects of Penang culture, the life of our people and the continued existence of our cultural heritage" (*Living Heritage Treasures of Penang Awards 2005-2007*, In Recognition of Invaluable Contributions to the Intangible Heritage of Penang, PHT).

social fabric with help from the government, involved communities, and groups with economic interests, as well as national and international agencies. One of its most noted achievements was the “Street of Harmony” concept, which began in 2002 with themed walks in the city’s historic centre. These “Trails” include a “World Religions Walk”, in close connection with *The Penang Global Ethic Project* whose philosophy promotes harmonious and ecumenical coexistence between the various religions represented locally: “the great faiths of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Chinese religion, which combines Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism”. There are also “Historic George Town Trails,” whose tours describe the city’s civil and military settlements and underscore its two hundred years of “multicultural history”, and the “Traditional Trades & Food Trails of George Town,” which emphasize the city’s diverse origins of artisan activities and culinary traditions (southern China, different parts of India, Aceh, etc).

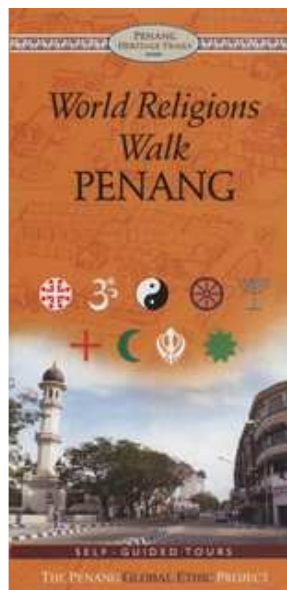


Figure 14. World Religious Walk self-guided tour (courtesy of the PHT)

These initiatives comply with the recent discourse from UNESCO on intangible cultural heritage<sup>31</sup> in regard to raising awareness in communities about the intangible values they possess. In the case of Penang, the initiatives also ensure that responsible authorities will guarantee their freedom to practice.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, these initiatives have mostly been taken up and strengthened after the first attempt to have George Town included on the UNESCO list in 2002. This failure was mainly due to dissension between the local and federal governments, and their lack of a strong commitment. However, failure did not diminish the heritage activists’ determination to nominate George Town once again. They highlighted especially three of the six decisive criteria, according to the 2005 Convention, for inscription on the UNESCO list:<sup>33</sup> “Interchange of

<sup>31</sup> The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted 17 October 2003 (Paris: UNESCO, 2007) (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/1543913e.pdf>) and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted 20 October 2005 (Paris: UNESCO, 2005) (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/142919e.pdf>).

<sup>32</sup> The “World Religious Walk, Penang” brochure underscores that: “the Policy of religious freedom which characterised British rule in Malaya was first formulated in Penang”. It goes on to specify that although “Islam is Malaysia’s official religion, the freedom to worship is guaranteed by the federal constitution” and that “Penang has preserved the rich legacies of its Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, Sikh and Christian communities.”

<sup>33</sup> See *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, (UNESCO, 2005: 19: para.77): “[Criteria] ii) exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or



Human Values” (criteria 2), “Uniqueness of Cultural Tradition” (criteria 3); and “Outstanding Building or Landscape” (criteria 4). After persistent lobbying of international and national officials, and an evolved understanding of the site’s new definition, now expanded to include both George Town and Melaka, the nomination won support from all concerned governments and the file was successfully resubmitted in 2008.

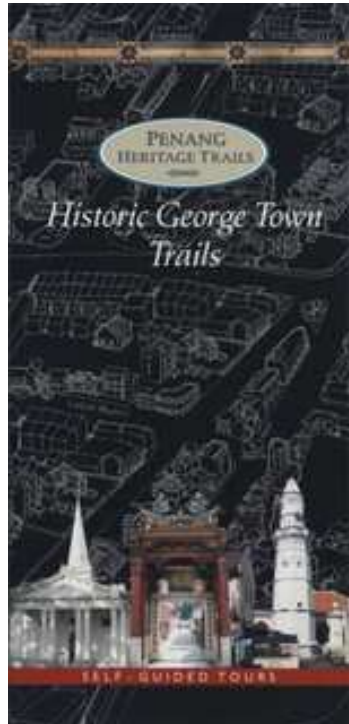


Figure 15. Historic George Town Trails (courtesy of the PHT)

In this new version, as previously mentioned, the jetties were explicitly included in the core zone.<sup>34</sup> The first reason for this inclusion stemmed from the concern of local NGOs to ensure maximum protection for this zone by widening it on the water side, where the jetties were built and which was recognized as a historical part of the city. Specifically, this aspect referred to tangible heritage (criteria 4). The second reason tied into the concern to preserve living cultural traditions (criteria 2 and 3) in George Town, which now included the jetties (along with other George Town communities) as symbolic representatives, especially after the destruction of the Koay Jetty and the polemic that ensued.

### Defending the Koay Jetty as a Heritage Object, or the Issues Surrounding Heritage Conservation in Penang

The Koay jetty was built at the beginning of the 1960s, at the end of the Weld Quay along the south-east side of the port. It was one of the last jetties built, along with the adjacent Peng Aun jetty that would be destroyed at the same time.<sup>35</sup> The site included

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landscape design; [criteria] iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared; [criteria] iv) by an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural, or technological ensemble or landscape, which illustrate (a) significant stage(s) in human history”, quoted in Jenkins, *Contested Space*. p. 145-46.

<sup>34</sup> Strictly speaking, the core zone is the protected area. The buffer zone represents a second circle that is supposed to protect the first from any possible encroachment.

<sup>35</sup> The Peng Aun jetty is a mixed jetty inhabited by residents from several clans or even completely external to them, which has no salient particularity, unlike the Koay jetty. Even if it had been included in the defence campaign, it would have only been secondary and not representative of any heritage or identity issues.

approximately thirty wooden houses with a population of about 200 residents. It was bordered by a 0.4 hectare mangrove forest that hosted about forty species of migrant birds and aquatic animals. From its construction, the site's permanence was not ensured and its defence had already sparked intervention from several civil actors including the then president of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), Ibrahim Tien Ying Ma, father of the organization's current president, Datuk Mustapha Ma, himself one of the front-line defenders of the Koay site in 2004. The decision to demolish the Koay jetty was precipitated in 2003 after a fire ravaged about fifty houses on the Noordin Street Ghaut, located right next to the jetty. This was the precise place where the government planned to construct an expressway into the city connecting to a high-performance transportation network, including a projected light monorail with vehicle parking for passengers. The government project planned to build huge multi-functional buildings for public housing, with vehicle parking and large commercial areas (a mall and covered market). Priority was given to allocating part of the public housing to residents from the two destroyed jetties and victims of the Noordin Street fire.<sup>36</sup>

In 2004 a forceful defence of the Koay jetty was mobilized. A PHT-guided protest was organized which managed to enlist several intellectuals and journalists, as well as numerous organizations from civil society.<sup>37</sup> Action took several forms: organization of press conferences to inform the public, petitions and signature campaigns; news articles and press releases; memoranda addressed to the local and federal officials;<sup>38</sup> organizing a clean-up campaign for the threatened mangroves;<sup>39</sup> and finally publication of 2000 copies of a trilingual brochure (Malay, Chinese and English) entitled *The Endangered Koay Jetty*.<sup>40</sup> This publication sought to highlight the unique social and ecological heritage that the Koay jetty represented. One of the authors, the Penangite historian Ong Seng Huat—a specialist in the local Chinese community and, most notably, in the Five Clans and clan jetties—emphasized the Hui ancestry (Chinese Muslim) of Koay jetty residents. Only in Penang would they be so visible. The brochure's subtitle, "Evidence of the Hui's Existence in Malaysia," stressed precisely this fact, making the preservation of the Koay jetty not just a local issue but a national and international one as well.

If the historian is careful to show the contradictions involved when the Koays reconstruct their own history—as is the case for any community—advocating for their preservation on the site nevertheless results in a homogenizing vision of this community. Its historical reconstruction relies on the same mythical components that are found in the various versions established by oral tradition, and are often referred to by researchers who do not maintain a sufficiently critical distance. Here is its scenario: the Koays are the direct descendents of the Huis, who were descended from an Arab general who enlisted with the Mongols in the fourteenth century. The community was first established in Baiqi, in Fujian, before spreading to nine other communities to avoid

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<sup>36</sup> There were 2300 low cost units (combined commercial and residential buildings) planned for the redeveloped site. For residents forced to abandon their former homes, the plan proposed to relocate them to three-room houses of 650 sq ft, valued at 75,000 Malaysian ringgit (worth around US\$21,450 on 7 June 2008). Those who preferred to settle elsewhere received maximum government compensation of 50,000 ringgit (about US\$14,300). *The Star*, 24 November 2004.

<sup>37</sup> See the list of associations involved in this defence below (p. 158). For fuller details, see Jenkins, "Koay Jetty—A Lost Community, a Lost Asset," in *Contested Space*, p. 196-200.

<sup>38</sup> Notably from the Malaysian Nature Society on 10 April 2004: "The need to conserve the Mangrove Habitat and the Koay Jetty" and from the President of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association, Dato Haji Mustapha Ma, on 3 February 2004 and addressed to Y.A.B. Dato' Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia and to Y.A.B. Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon, chief minister of Penang, and on 6 March 2004 to Y.M. Tunku Dato Dr. Ismail ibni Tunku Md Jewa, vice-chairman of Penang Heritage Trust.

<sup>39</sup> See the PHT archives that include documents related to the organization of this action as well as several press clippings related to the event.

<sup>40</sup> *The Endangered Koay Jetty. Evidence of the Hui's Existence in Malaysia*, published by the Baiqi Koay Cultural Revitalisation Ad-Hoc Joint Committee, supported by the PHT, and edited by Tunku Dato, Dr. Ismail bin Tunku Mohammad Jewa, Ong Seng Huat, Clement Liang, Joann Khaw and Lim Poh Im. Ong Seng Huat, its author, and Datuk Mustapha Ma, president of MACMA, jointly issued it on 9 June 2004. They also visited the Koay jetty together. The English-language (see interview of Ong Seng Huat in *The Star*, 11 June 2004) and Chinese press (see *Xingzhou Ribao* and *Guanghua Ribao*) broadly covered the event.

cultural assimilation with the Han and to better preserve its Muslim religious identity. Assured of this ancestry, the author presents the Koays of the jetty as a coherent community united around its cultural and religious uniqueness: “as a result, the Clan evolved a unique culture that is a harmonious integration of Muslim and Confucian elements in the lifestyle.”<sup>41</sup> This argument emerged from the context of protecting a site that was not only perceived as local but, more broadly, as symbolizing Penang’s—and even Malaysia’s—multicultural identity. Here we are dealing with the construction of a pure Koay identity that otherwise denies the heterogeneous sociological reality of its residents, some of whom are from outside and do not even bear the patronymic. Once a composite and marginal place, in short “ordinary”, the Koay jetty was on its way to being transformed into a homogeneous and central space, in short a “site of memory.” In other words, the jetty was purely Koay, especially in the purified representation that its defenders steadfastly intended to create. To further the cause, the defenders built up a “Chinese Muslim” identity around the Koay, even though this identity had not been ensured at all.

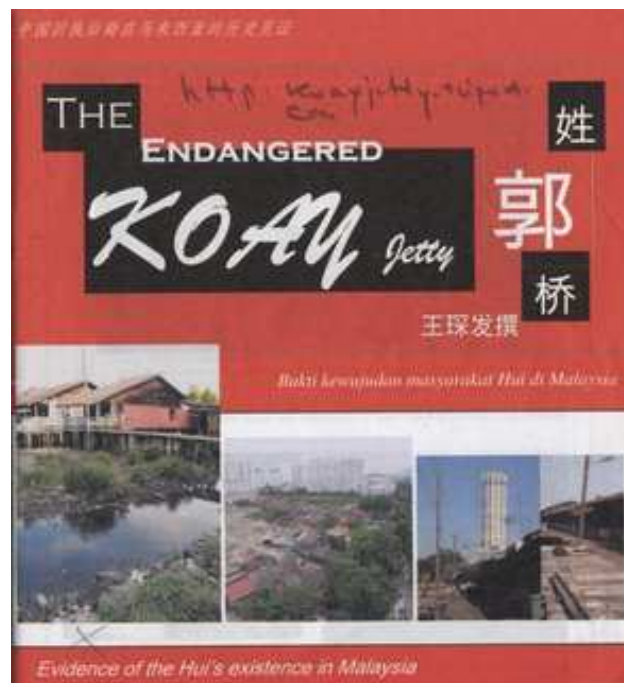


Figure 16. *The Endangered Koay Jetty*, cover

According to the PHT, “good reasons for saving the Koay Jetty” are based on its exceptional character “as well-preserved Chinese Muslim heritage” and as a “historic testament to the working class linked to port activities.”<sup>42</sup> However, another argument immediately follows this defence of a living cultural tradition: restoration of the mangrove forest that grows along the jetty would be an excellent observation point to learn about nature and a pleasant green recreation space for the city of George Town.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, in the eyes of its defenders, the Koay jetty is doubly symbolic. It

<sup>41</sup> Ong Seng Huat, quoted in *The Star*, 26 January 2004, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> See PHT archives.

<sup>43</sup> In *Mangrove Express*, n. d. Rick Atkinson, an Australian city planner and international expert, was actively involved in defending the Koay jetty. He wrote: “In fact because of its compactness and intimacy of scale, George Town offers unique opportunities for several centres of learning and exchange—urban heritage and conservation, urban rehabilitation and regeneration, and management in historic cities are just three possibilities,” in “George Town—the Koay and Peng Aun Jetties. A Proposal for an International Centre of Ecological and Cultural Heritage” (July 2004), p. 4. It is available on-line at: [http://www.rickatkinson.com.au/documents/A\\_Cultural\\_Heritage\\_Response\\_George\\_Town.pdf](http://www.rickatkinson.com.au/documents/A_Cultural_Heritage_Response_George_Town.pdf).

is “a unique social and ecological heritage site in the Historic City of George Town. The links between sea and forest, between people and nature in the City are so special that it would be a travesty to destroy it. It will be unforgivable!”<sup>44</sup> Similar promotion of the Koay site harks back to the new UNESCO criteria, which combine nature with culture, living tradition with preserved physical environment and social harmony with sustainable development.

The defenders’ strategy consisted of setting up an ad-hoc committee to defend the Koay jetty, the Support Koay and Mangrove Preservation Action Group.<sup>45</sup> The committee comprised a broad alliance of individuals and NGOs from several distinct spheres of Penang’s civil society: the Penang Heritage Trust, Malaysian Nature Society, Malaysian Travel & Trade Associations, Penang Tourist Guides Associations, Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association, Penang Inshore Fishermen’s Welfare Association, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Consumer Association of Penang, Friends of the Penang Botanic Gardens, and the Baiqi Koay Community. The Baiqi Koay Cultural Revitalization Ad-Hoc Joint Committee<sup>46</sup> joined later.

Such a diverse group of actors and interests clearly reveals the importance of the stakes involved in preserving the Koay site; but this should by no means disguise the differences that might arise within such a group of defenders. These differences enable us to better understand the complexity of the process that establishes a community as living cultural heritage, and the values that underlie such a construction. For this purpose, we present the opposing viewpoints that were raised within the PHT<sup>47</sup> which we believe representative of the issues surrounding the debate. They concerned not only the preservation of the Koay jetty but, more generally, the policy of cultural conservation in George Town.<sup>48</sup> Six main arguments and rebuttals were put forward:

Argument	Rebuttal
“We must preserve Koay jetty because of its exceptional Hui religious character.”	“Do the Hui need the Koay jetty to preserve themselves? Hui culture could exist perfectly well outside the jetty.”
“We should protect the Koay jetty from speculation by real estate developers who plan large housing strips.”	“The need to house the greatest number of people justifies this type of construction. This is part of Penang’s urban dynamics.”
“We must preserve the Koay jetty as an example of heritage conservation.”	“Despite its Hui culture, the Koay jetty is no more exceptional than the Chew or the Tan or any other clan jetty. Unless you are a specialist, the difference between the Koay and the other clans cannot be discerned. There is no difference for the average tourist.”
“We must defend the well-being of the Koay jetty residents.”	“Do the residents wish to continue living in such squalid conditions (...)? Who benefits from transforming the Koay jetty into a cultural village: the residents or the visitors? Wouldn’t such a policy result in putting Hui culture on stage, at the risk of mimicking it and disrupting its identity?”

<sup>44</sup> See “Koay Jetty. The Lost Heritage of Penang”, <http://koayjetty.tripod.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> The committee was formed on 23 June 2004 and launched that day at a press conference.

<sup>46</sup> The committee chairman, Koay Teng Hai, believed the campaign to save the jetty (for which he hoped to find 6000 signatures) would raise public awareness about the importance of preserving the history of the Chinese Muslims’ jetty (Declaration in *The Star*, 30 July 2004).

<sup>47</sup> This exchange occurred through a correspondence archived in the PHT.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Nik Khusairi Ibrahim “Review projects in heritage enclaves,” *The Star*, 17 July 2008 or more recently, Khoo Kay Peng, “Move to Safeguard Penang’s World Heritage Status,” 27 November 2008. See <http://khookaypeng.blogspot.com/>.



“If we do not preserve the Koay jetty, our inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List will be in jeopardy.”	“Instead, let’s ask whether we are capable of preserving it while taking into account the criteria imposed by an institution like this.”
“We must preserve the mangrove forest as a bird sanctuary.”	“Although concern for the mangrove forest in an urban environment would be commendable, this sort of restoration would cost us much effort and money.”

The first argument could qualify as doctrinaire, even idealistic, and the rebuttal as pragmatic and better thought-out. This is especially so if taking into account the particular context of the Koay jetty, marked by unhealthy conditions and inadequate safety and comfort for the residents. However, the first argument makes sense and becomes coherent relative to the new criteria for heritage conservation as defined by UNESCO’s revised international discourse: “Living Tradition,” “Sustainable Development,” Diversity of Cultures”, and “Mixed Site between Nature/Culture.” This discourse is founded on universal and cosmopolitan values shared by elites from the world’s great metropolises, whether they live in Adelaide in Australia, Penang in Asia, Paris in Europe, or Tunis in North Africa, so that any local activism is simultaneously fed by this discourse and supported by it in return. Such a discourse draws legitimacy from the criticism aimed at the poorly-controlled development of abandoned urban spaces due to real estate speculation and at a form of Western-style modernization that contradicts the new criteria for sustainable ecology, democratic governance and community responsibility.<sup>49</sup>

Rick Atkinson, the Australian expert who actively participated, as previously noted, in defending the Koay jetty and George Town heritage generally, thinks that:<sup>50</sup>

the Koay jetty and mangroves are part of an international as well as a local issue. There are many related issues, too, such as ecologically sustainable approaches to city design, the marginalization of culturally diverse minorities, and the inappropriateness of multi storey apartments for lower socio-economic groups. George Town and the Island of Penang offer many opportunities for international centres of built and cultural heritage as well as centres for support and enhancement of bio-diversity. It would be a local as well as an international tragedy if such opportunities were lost through the inappropriate application of western approaches to urban issues.

For its part, the Defence Committee for the Koay Jetty responded in these terms to the announcement of its destruction: “Koay Jetty was demolished in 2006 and the entire community was uprooted and dispersed.”<sup>51</sup>

Even those who take an active role in constructing Penang’s heritage espouse a discourse that simultaneously raises the local and the global. In effect, this assumes broad experience on their part in heritage conservation that is local and national as well

<sup>49</sup> This supports, for example, previously cited Atkinson, who wrote: “For a democratic nation access to choice is paramount: choice in housing type, housing location, livelihood, religious practice, community engagement, education. At the global scale democracy means openness to, and sharing of, ideas and resources. In the case of the Koay Jetty and, to some extent, the Peng Aun Jetty, there is a unique opportunity to preserve—in the short term—the right of the jetty dwellers who wish to stay to maintain their living heritage with pride while offering them an important role in the development of an international centre of research and eco-tourism,” in “George Town—the Koay and Peng Aun Jetties.” p. 5. See also the UNESCO publications that address the same issue: *Tourisme, culture et développement durable* (Paris: UNESCO 2006) [Archive CLI/CPD/CAD – 06/13], on-line at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001475/147578F.pdf>; *UNESCO and Civil Society* (Paris: UNESCO 2008) [Archive ERC-2008/WS/6], at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001633/163367e.pdf>; *Historic Districts for All: A Social and Human Approach for Sustainable Revitalization* (Paris: UNESCO 2008) [Archive SHS/SRP/URB/2008/PI/H/2], on-line at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001583/158331E.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> For this declaration, see the PHT archives and Atkinson, “George Town—the Koay and Peng Aun Jetties.”

<sup>51</sup> See “Koay Jetty. The Lost Heritage of Penang”.

as international; full understanding of cosmopolitan values; intellectual expertise and creative and imaginative organizational skills; in-depth understanding of the surrounding institutional and cultural problems; a capacity to adapt to continuous environmental changes; skills in bringing out cultural significations that comply with international criteria and making them attractive to the local population; and finally, very strong citizen involvement. Having these skills legitimizes their roles as experts and spokespersons for the Penangites' entire society.

### **Dissenting Voices: Some Koay Jetty Residents Speak Out**

This legitimate discourse, fuelled by international standards for preserving nature and culture, conflicts with the demands of local reality and the more immediate needs of the concerned population. Indeed, a notable part of the population favoured demolition of the jetty because they saw it as an opportunity finally to obtain new, modern and comfortable housing. What is the source of this discontent against those who protested to keep it? Their actions resulted in petitions and protests; the immediate neighbours of Gat Lebu Macallum, who believed that such a clean-up would benefit the whole district, also participated.<sup>52</sup> The content of the protesters' banners, written both in English and Chinese, was explicit, to say the least: "Outsiders keep out, do not mislead the public." "Mangrove bush was here only 2 or 3 years. We here [sic] more than 40 years. Man important or bird and bush important?" "Foreigners and outsiders keep out. Don't spoil our chance to own a proper home."<sup>53</sup>

The content of these banners demonstrates the virulent tone of the polemic between the two parties. Here we must underscore the role of real-estate developers, political representatives,<sup>54</sup> and local press agencies in radicalizing positions and exerting pressure on the community to gain its support for the project. Most notably, on 14 September 2004, this hostility led to a physical altercation on site when the ad hoc Defence Committee for the Koay Jetty took the initiative to organize a clean-up day for the mangrove.<sup>55</sup> The incident resulted in the chairman of the Defence Committee, Dato (Dr) Mohammed Anwar Fazel, lodging a complaint against its opponents that cited the threat of violence and false accusations (more precisely, misleading the public, displaying bad intentions, depriving residents of improved housing).<sup>56</sup> In the same complaint, he was careful to underline citizen involvement from members of his association, their interest in the public's well-being and the constructive dimension of their activity. The Defence Committee for the Koay Jetty proposed, in effect, an alternative concept to the government plan that, according to the committee, corresponds to the spirit of "Vision 2020".<sup>57</sup> In contrast to "bad development," it hopes to promote a mixed site that brings together housing, transportation and an international ecology and heritage centre.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The chairman of the Gat Lebu Macallum Resident Association, Tan Chin Huat, estimated that the 21,000 residents living close to the jetty would breathe more easily after the project's implementation (*The Star*, 24 November 2004).

<sup>53</sup> See the *Kwong Wah Yil POH* newspaper from 15 September 2004. Some letters from readers also take on this tone: "Jetty residents, not birds, should take priority" (*The Star*, 3 November 2004).

<sup>54</sup> The most resolute political supporter of the renovation project was, undoubtedly, the Pengkalan Kota assemblyman Lee Hack Teik, representing the district where the jetties are located. He was defeated in the last elections, in March 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Organization of a "Clean-up Day," a "*gotong-royong* (mutual aid)," Sunday, 19 September 2004 from 6:30 am to 11:30 am (PHT archives).

<sup>56</sup> PHT Archives.

<sup>57</sup> *Wawasan* (or Vision) 2020 is a Malaysian ideal introduced by the former prime minister, Mahathir Bin Mohamad, in 1991. It notably stresses "democratic community", "community that has a high morality, an ethics and religious strength", "community that is mature and tolerant", "community rich in values and loving culture", "community with a fair economy."

<sup>58</sup> See "Koay jetty" at <http://koayjetty.tripod.com>.



Figure 17. Replanting the Koay mangroves that were destroyed by the authorities  
([www.koajetty.tripod.com/id9.html](http://www.koajetty.tripod.com/id9.html))

Supporters of the renovation project who formed the Jetty Residents Association advance the following arguments: first and foremost, they emphasize the mangrove forest's small size (0.4 ha), youth (three years), unexceptional character, and deterioration. Next they cite the housing's unhealthy conditions and its lack of comfort and safety. They also point out the residents' limited economic means and the fact that they do not own their homes.<sup>59</sup> Given these conditions, they assert the difficulty for those living in there to ensure their children's future: "We want to make it clear that this proposed development is the culmination of our hopes and dreams for a better and healthier quality of life for us and our children. For once we can enjoy proper sanitation and for once we do not have to worry about the safety of our children."<sup>60</sup> Basically, the desire for a better quality of life clearly emerges from the residents' demands: "We are the long-standing and long-suffering residents of Koay Jetty. We are the ones whom any change to the jetty will affect. What is ironical is that the impending change, which is one we have been anxiously, happily, waiting for, has become a crusade by a bunch of busybodies who have not hesitated to use religion, culture, nature, heritage, UNESCO listing (!) and God knows what else to make a mountain out of a molehill (...)." They reproach those who defend the jetty for a lack of concern for their fate: "What is more sobering and more eloquent by its silence is that not a single reference has been made by these crusaders about us, the residents, and our welfare ..."

The general tone of the residents' grievances is one of indignation. The dominant feeling that comes through is of being robbed of their identity and home by outsiders.<sup>61</sup> They clearly see themselves as victims of a desire for preservation that, under fallacious pretexts (nature, religion), deprives them of finally obtaining clean and comfortable housing<sup>62</sup> and, especially, of attaining the status of homeowners, if their

<sup>59</sup> The TOL, or Temporary Occupation License, officially labels the situation of the clan jetty residents, as also residents of other Penang districts, as people who do not own the space where their housing is built and must pay an annual tax to the government to occupy it.

<sup>60</sup> Open letter signed by the "Residents of Koay Jetty and Surroundings". See PHT archives.

<sup>61</sup> The secretary of the residents association was careful to specify to the press that "the people who protest against the development were not residents of the jetty" (*The Star*, 3 March 2004).

<sup>62</sup> The danger is real, as demonstrated by the fire that ravaged 5 houses in the Chew jetty the day after Chinese New Year in 2009. See "Fire razes five homes," 5 February 2009, in *The Star online*, at: <http://thestar.com.my/metro/story.asp?file=/2009/2/5/north/3195654&sec=North>.

present housing is maintained. They saw the government relocation project as a unique opportunity. In this respect, their attitude is humble and by no means demanding, one that seeks to point out the opportunity offered to them through this project rather than to claim the right to housing. The residents sense a lack of understanding about their socio-economic conditions and their desire to improve them as much as they perceive a form of condescension towards them in the defenders' interventionist attitude. Their discourse results in anxiety about the present and calls out for hope. The indecision surrounding the Koay jetty's permanence has endured for a long time, and the relocation project seems to be, in their eyes, a question of survival, the only way to ensure the future for coming generations. Confronted by a situation outside their control, with initiative and counter-initiative controlled externally, they find themselves in a subordinate position. But in spite of everything, these conditions are not going to prevent them from achieving their dream—not that of preserving a “living tradition,” as the PHT would hope, but to benefit from a substantial housing project.

As one might expect, it is difficult for the multiple actors—residents, heritage advocates, civil servants, governmental officers, politicians, tourists, economic developers, etc—to reach agreement about the definition of a “living tradition,” and especially about how to preserve and maintain it. In the particular case of the Koay jetty, “living tradition” held little significance for most of those who claimed this identity when they thought they might live differently from the way they had experienced up until now. Their priority was the immediate material gains on offer from the government project. The PHT found itself imprisoned by a fairly idealistic, even essentialist, perception of the Koay jetty; yet at the same time supporting the preservation of the site was a necessity within the coherent political framework for protection and heritage conservation in compliance with the UNESCO principles. Its action in defence of the Koay jetty was not in vain, since it contributed to better protection of the other jetties, subsequently located in the core zone of the new plan to protect George Town that was submitted to UNESCO. The “sacrifice” of the Koay jetty served as a springboard for protecting the other jetties. Thus, these other jetties found themselves cast and consolidated into the position of living tradition.

### **The Ambiguity of the Jetties' Inscription as UNESCO World Heritage, or How to Cease being Marginal**

The PHT's actions have shown the jetties to be communities with a history and culture worthy of attention and interest. In addition, these actions have made decision-makers conscious of the need to restore the environment and improve socio-economic conditions in these communities. However, moving the margin toward the centre creates a paradoxical effect on the jetties: it definitely reinforces the group's identity and its capacity to act, yet it simultaneously supports the process for heritage preservation that jetty residents have not necessarily chosen and certainly do not control. Moreover, this identity now transcends the unique character of each jetty, placing them in a more homogeneous category, that of general “clan jetty”. Henceforth, the clan jetties must think of themselves as a single entity. Specifically, this new trend has resulted in the construction of a community hall on the Chew site, with government support. It houses the history of the jetties under one roof and is reinforced by a large collection of photos, film archives and cadastral reconstructions selected by PHT.

This “museum” displays a stereotypical picture of clan jetty communities that includes facts about the environment (number of houses and inhabitants, number of temples, number of commercial and artisan shops), founding date, links with mainland China (mention of the natal village, reasons for emigration), religious and cultural activities (types of revered divinities and their origins, festivals and ceremonies), and social organization (resident association committee, types of social relationships within the jetty, connections to relatives in China). Penangite historians concerned with



understanding the memory of local communities have already noted this construction in the academic research.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 18. Picturing the history of the clan jetties, community hall (authors' image)

All of these efforts have contributed to producing a homogenous representation of the clan jetties, most notably by highlighting certain activities that were practiced together, for example, the dragon boat race, or by establishing celebrations as activities that are representative of all the jetties. These include the celebrations devoted to the Emperor of the Sky (the Jade Emperor God's birthday) during Chinese New Year. Such standardization tends to erase the clans' differences, but also their disagreements and conflicts, as was the case between the Lees and the Chews who were occasionally combined with the Lims and the Tans. Similarly, the new community building, the community hall, is supposed to unite the jetties under the same banner to represent them in a way that is both unified and purified for local and foreign tourists. The actions that took place (demonstrations, exhibits, tours, ceremonies) and the reasons they were on display (history, social organization) aim to make it a site of memory recalling the immigration of the Chinese diaspora to Penang Island.

Renovation of temples carried out with government support, such as the Chew temples, also contributes to interweaving and displaying this connection with mainland China. Symbolically, the temple at the end of the jetty, when it exists, is supposed to mark migrants' arrival by sea, while temples systematically located at the jetty entrance highlight their final settlement on the site.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the two temples delineate time and space on the jetties by marking the migrant's imagined itinerary. Moreover, this imaginary construction of the community is reinforced by photos of the journeys hung in the temples showing members of the jetty communities in their natal villages in China. This affirms a kind of reproduction of the place of worship.

<sup>63</sup> For example, this was the case for Chan Lean Heng's research on clan jetties, "Rediscovering historic communal sites and commemorating their histories", that she presented during the closing international conference on "The Penang Story" (see fn 27 for conference details).

<sup>64</sup> The new temple of Tai Por, moved from MacNair Street and rebuilt on the former site of the Koay jetty, is an interesting example. It clearly symbolizes the mainland China connection and the past by using figurines to represent the migrants' maritime route, while the materials used and the artisans' skills came directly from there. The luxurious temple was built with financial support from several Penang donors (including prestigious private persons and families, and national or international companies in construction and civil engineering, import-export, trading) at an overall cost close to 1,533,000 RM (US\$431,825), which raises the question of whether this kind of rehabilitation of the Koay jetty site borders on gentrification.



Figure 19. Tai Por Temple, Gat Lebu Macallum (authors' image)



Figure 20. Immigrant boat, Tai Por Temple (authors' image)

As some brochures and publications suggest, the “History of clan jetties [has] to go on display.”<sup>65</sup> Several plans propose to intensify this tourist-oriented activity, such as the construction of a walkway to connect the jetties and create a panoramic view from the sea, building a floating seafood restaurant just off the jetties and accessible by a shuttle service, developing fishing pools, with the possibility of sea excursions, and opening souvenir and handcraft shops.<sup>66</sup> Some imagine jetty development similar to the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, or dream of a tourist seafront.<sup>67</sup> In concrete terms, little has actually been done, other than building the community hall, installing a direction sign at the entrance of each jetty and producing a diagrammatic outline that succinctly provides a visitor with the clan’s origin, date of settlement on the Weld Quay and its number of houses.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, *The Star* from 24 July 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Informal interview with the Penangite historian Ong Seng Huat and the Australian Will Marcus, specialist in ethical architecture and site rehabilitation, on-line at <http://www.argo.com.au/>. Both want to submit an integrated tourist-oriented project for the jetties to the local government.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Ong Yee Ting, “Tourism proposal for Clan Jetties,” 5 November 2007 [Penang Watch.Net/node/1824], Elizabeth Tai, “Have Camera, Will Rescue,” *The Star online*, 2 September 2007, at: <http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2007/9/2/lifefocus/18524978&sec=lifefo>.



Figure 21. Temple on the sea, Tan jetty (authors' image)



Figure 22. Direction Sign at the entrance, Ong Jetty (authors' image)

Finally, there is a risk that tourist-oriented promotion of the jetties could benefit only two or three clans. These are the most numerous, best organized and most entrepreneurial clans, as are currently the Chews, the Lims, and the Tans. Such a change could lead to reducing the number of jetties in the ongoing city-planning project to create quick access to the city centre. If this occurred, the jetties would undergo standardization as a unified space both inside and outside of the community, and such standardization would fulfil the function of heritage conservation that they have been

slated for. However, what capacities would the people directly involved have to take action in such a case? Would they be able to manage this process, with all its accompanying consequences like the promotion of tourism and economic activity, and even of real estate speculation? Would they be able to play a dynamic role within the framework of these activities? Would they really benefit from it? And what would be their status as non-owners in a place officially identified as a Reclamation Area? This characteristic distinguishes them from other residents of the core zone who own their homes and who can thus better control the issues surrounding heritage conservation, particularly the possibility of gentrification already taking place with the shop-houses in the city centre. By being included in the core zone, have they not lost the opportunity to be relocated to new housing, as was the case for the Koay and Peng Aun Jetties? Yet, as residents of a UNESCO protected area, have they gained a new capacity to negotiate with government and other civil and economic actors? These questions remain open.



Figure 23. Cadastre, Chew Jetty (authors' image)