

Birds' Nests, Heritage Trails, and Shopping Malls: Nostalgia and Contested Heritage in Malacca (West Malaysia)¹.

Ema Cláudia Pires

Univ. Évora, Lisbon Univ. Institute and Anthropology Research Network (CRIA), Portugal

This paper explores relations between Anthropology, Heritage and Cultural process in Malacca (West Malaysia). Historical references trace back the city's origins to around 1403 A.C. Its growing importance in the network of trading activities in the Malay Archipelago made it fall under colonial rule of European powers. Malacca's contemporary urban cartography still reveals the historic thickness of successive colonial occupations. In contemporary Malaysian society, this 'colonial legacy' has been at times, reformatted and re-imagined and contested, through heritage (and tourism) process. Since 2008, the city has also been listed as «World Heritage» town². Who regulates what heritage is has become more problematic and a site of symbolic contestation. Based in ethnographic research, this paper explores linkages between nostalgia and alternative notions of heritage. I explore local residents' meanings ascribed to "heritage" (translatable as '*warisan*', in *bahasa melayu*). Building upon Rosaldo's (1989) notion of 'imperialist nostalgia' and Hertzfeld's (2005) concept of 'structural nostalgia', I end by discussing the production and consumption of colonial nostalgia in contemporary times.

1. Malacca's «Glorious Past»: Official Heritage Trails

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

«Melaka's history began in 1403 with the arrival of Parameswara, an exiled Hindu Prince from the Kingdom of *Sri Vijaya* in Sumatra. He assumed the title of *Raja*

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² Together with the city of Georgetown (in north Malaysia), Malacca has been listed as Historic City of the Straits of Malacca.

Iskandar when he embraced Islam and became the first ruler of this new kingdom which marked the beginnings of the Sultanate of Melaka.

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

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

Under the category «Historical Heritage», National Government highlights «Ancient relics that abound in the historical city», namely, *A'Famosa*, labelled as a «prominent landmark» built by the Portuguese in 1511. Description notes that «it was badly damaged during the Dutch invasion in 164. Timely intervention by Sir Stanford Raffles, a British official, in 1808 saved what remains of the *A'Famosa* today»; secondly, the publication invites visitors to «Discover Melaka's Past at the Stadthuys»: another «major landmark» in Malacca, «built in 1650 as the official residence of Dutch governors and their offices». Presently, «it houses the Museum of History and Ethnography. Originally white, it was given a striking salmon-red colour to match the nearby Christ Church». Other spaces pointed out under the label «Historical Heritage» are Churches, Cemeteries (Dutch and British), Mausoleums (of «Malay warriors»), a Fort, a Hill and a well, named after a Chinese Princess, Hang Li Poh. The way of dealing with the colonial legacy is visible in some of the descriptions of the spaces above mentioned. For instance, on Hang Li Po's Well it is said that it «was the only source of water during great droughts. The Dutch enclosed it with stout walls to reserve it for their exclusive use» (Tourism Malaysia 2008, s/p).

Under the category «Cultural Heritage», Tourism Authorities include groups of citizens themselves: «Malays», «Chinese», «Indians», and «Portuguese-Eurasians». Secondly, some of Malacca's Museums are pointed out³. The «Melaka Sultanate Palace», which is «the wooden replica of a 15th century Malay palace», turned into a

³ Namely the «Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum», «Chitty Museum», «The People's Museum», «Malaysian Youth Museum» (located in a «British colonial building [that] was formerly a post office, the «Maritime Museum» (located inside the replica of a «Portuguese vessel that sunk near off the Melaka coast»).

«Cultural Museum», stands in relevance among all other museums. Inside it, a «huge diorama depicts a sultan's court while the main exhibits relate to Melaka culture» of pre-colonial times. Another museum space is the «Proclamation of Independence Memorial», «housed in a 1912 British villa» that «was once the Malacca Club, a bastion of colonialism». Lastly, Malaysian Tourism's booklet includes «The Light and Sound Show», located «at Datharan Palawan» Shopping mall in the Cultural Heritage resources; according to tourism officials, that is the «best way to learn about the history of Melaka», as some of its' «significant events» «are re-enacted by means of lights, narration, dialogue, music and sound effects to project real-life drama».

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

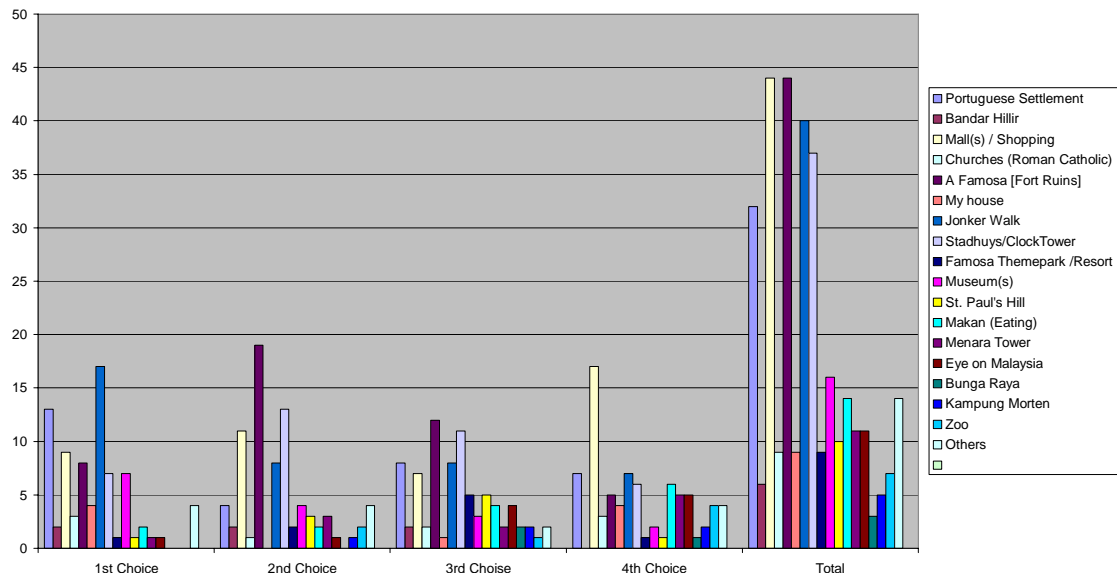
2. *Jalan-jalan* in Town: Alternative Trails

From a methodological point of view, ethnography enables us to grasp various scales in the social fabric of cultural processes related to heritage. From local citizens' practices to the multiple agencies of organizations (local, national and transnational), there are multiple voices that regulate, reclaim and appropriate rights to urban space and to inscribe «heritage» in the towns' local map. Malaccans themselves have a say in how they value space and heritage process. Their views on «heritage» (*warisan*), were at times clearly integrated into their shopping and their “going around” (*jalan-jalan*) itineraries. During fieldwork, my first insights into alternative meanings ascribed to heritage occurred during a walk with my host family, in an august Sunday afternoon in 2006. My host was a member of a local heritage trust. Occasionally, he also volunteered as tourist guide to groups of university students, and scholars. He and his wife took the lead in showing me around. In that first promenade with them, I learnt about Malacca by participating in this unwritten heritage walk; the trail was mapped by their local knowledge, and by discursive tourist narratives directed to what they assumed were my interests and curiosity, (as European and Portuguese student). Some of these spaces were not listed in the official *warisan* cartography of Malacca by Malaysian authorities;

but they were valued as such by my hosts and by their Eurasian⁴ fellow citizens. Among the spaces highlighted by my hosts were some ruins of old, decrepit buildings, in various parts of town. They were presented to me, wrapped up in discourses of nostalgia, longing for a time when Malacca's Eurasians were more visible in town as a social group. That time of reference overlapped with the colonial rule of the country.

A second example of alternative mappings of heritage assets is found among Malacca students⁵. Students were asked to fill in a diagram⁶ provided, and to design an itinerary around Malacca. Preliminary results show that the spaces most chosen by students for a city itinerary around town are: «A Famosa», and «shopping malls» [each with 44 responses], followed by *Jonker walk/street* [40] and *Stadthuys* [37].

«My Malacca: Cultural Mapping and Heritage Awareness»



⁴ According to Lee, the «term 'Eurasian' has generally been understood to refer to someone of mixed European and Asiatic parentage and/or ancestry since the nineteenth century» (Lee 2004, 2). This author notes that in Asian territories under European colonial administration, «Eurasians had often been perceived as the living embodiment of colonial encounters. They belonged to a marginalized and isolated colonial category that straddled racial, ethnic, and sometimes national boundaries» (Lee 2004, 8).

⁵ During fieldwork, students in my area of residence collaborated in my research. The School is located in Ujong Pasir, on the outskirts of town, in the urban village of *Kampung Portugis* (Portuguese Settlement). Students were aged 13 to 17 years old. The sample was made of 80 students, and among these, 70 were Eurasians; data collection occurred from February to April 2009.

⁶ I asked the students to imagine that a friend from outstation would be visiting them soon; he/she has never been to Malacca before; so each student would choose four places where she would like to take her/him» and Write each of these names in one of the circles provided in the sheet I had previously given them. These places were chosen by them individually. After doing that, they «briefly described the places» and also wrote down «why» they chose them. After that, I collected all the paper sheets. We discussed further, in two group interviews, their views about the townscape layout, and related issues.

Source: Students Responses, Classes of Year 2009, Canossa School, Ujong Pasir, Malacca.

2.1. «Historical places», Shopping Malls, and Jonker Walk

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

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

The Malls, and especially the newest shopping mall in town, built near the ruins of A'Famosa, are also clearly integrated into students' choices. *Datharan Palawan* «is a big shopping complex complete with a cinema [...] known as one of Malaysia's biggest cinemas. This place also has a lot of variety. We can also relax and walk around» [Robyn Lopez, 15]. Younger students view the mall as a leisure space where they go to «play games» [Wendy de Costa, 13], «bowling and karaoke» [Sheena Lazaroo, 13]. Andrea Chin writes about using *Padang Palawan* – an open field occupying the ceiling of the shopping mall – to «teach» «the old games» to her friend. [Andrea Chin, 13].

Students present other reasons to choose the Mall: «going shopping together» [Andrea Chin, 13], «to have fun [Andrea Gomes, 13], «to find cheap stuff» [Kimberly Lynn, 17], to «buy souvenirs» [Abigail Gomes, 15; Malvinder Kaur, 13], and «to eat» [Wendy de Costa, 13]. Or, simply because they are “located around the history places” [Valentina Monteiro, 13]

Students' trails also include Chinatown's World Heritage Area. According to students, *Jonker* street offers an open market where we can see «many old games, traditional clothes» [Andrea Chin, 13], «buy lots of handicrafts and handmade items» [Michele Wong, 13], and «old times' stuff» [Alina de Cruz, 17]. Another student specifies that «There's even a shop selling beaded shoes», a «traditional footwear wore by the *Peranakan* people» and «on Sunday morning, there's a flea market where people sell some antique things [Nicole Sta. Maria, 16]. Besides, at Jonker «they also sell things such as teddy bears, chains, earrings and more» [Angie Francis, 13]. Food is another element connected to the definition of the space by students: *Jonker* is defined as «a long street with many stalls selling local food» [Kimberly Lynn, 17] «such as *rempah udang*, *cendol*, *laksa* and many others» (Annestta Theseira, 13). Student Joyce Lim summarizes her view about the street with emphasis on how the space is appropriated by the people: «Jonker walk starts operating in the evening. [...] it is crowded with people starting from 8 o'clock, especially on Friday and Saturday. There are many food stalls, clothes and luxurious stalls and we can see joyful faces there. There will be different performances too» [Joyce Lim, 17]. According to Alina de Cruz, «the street is full of people and many cultures, [...] [and] moreover, it is situated near Sungai Melaka, a place for tourism [Alina de Cruz, 17]. Apart from shopping, the street's built form is an attraction in its own right: «All the houses are very unique and beautiful. There is also a big stage where we can hear men and women sing the song of their choice» [Michele Wong, 13]. Additionally, «the lights there at night are spectacular and amazing» [Lucy de Costa, 17].

Nearly all students value positively the space of «Jonker Street» turned into tourism attraction «Jonker Walk». In their voices, it's a «walk of food, traditional clothes, and old houses. When you go to Jonkers, you'd notice that people in the older days were very bright in the sense that they were able to make a little alley into a street market» [Abigail Swee May, 15].

April's Walk

Seventeenth year old Eurasian April Danker, commenting on her choices of *Jonker Street*, *Bunga Raya*, *Stadhuys* and *A Famosa*, illustrates them as follows:

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

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

Bettina's Walk

Bettina Ann, 15, Malaysian Chinese student, elaborates further on her choices:

- «1. Stadhuys – It is said that the *Stadhuys* is probably the oldest remaining Dutch colonial building left in Southeast Asia. I [would] like to take her there because it has a great history behind it. She could learn a lot about our oldest days and [about] our country's history. It is also a main tourist attraction».

Bettina's second place of choice for hosting a friend from outstation is the Portuguese Square located outside the heritage core zone. According to Bettina,

«I think it's a good idea to bring her there so that she would have the opportunity to savour traditional Portuguese food and also witness the colourful cultural dances by the Eurasian community».

Thirdly, she chooses *Jonker Walk*:

«a street in Chinatown, with many antiques stores. On weekend nights the whole street is closed for traffic and turns into a lively night market. I would love to take her there because it's really beautiful at night, with the red lights and all. She would also have the chance to see real antiques from ages ago. It's really lively so it's fun walking around. It also has bars nearby where you can stop and have a drink».

Lastly, the trip would end at *A Famosa*. In Bettina's works, «I'd like to take her there to show her our times back when we were ruled by the British. It's an amazing place because it's been around after so many years. It shows a great history about our country». Bettina's itinerary is composed of three spaces labelled as heritage by national and transnational organizations. Her words compose an itinerary filled with articulated labels concerning each space. Either through realistic descriptions where the colonial past is presented, or through her local knowledge and taste, Bettina's Walk, reproduces a view of the past and its endeavours in the townscape.

Voices from the Street: Heritage Salvaged and Contested

Architects Lim Huck Chin and Fernando Jorge, who are members of *Badan Warisan Malaysia* (Heritage Trust of Malaysia) have a different view on Jonker street's transformation. In a detailed research published under the title *Malacca: voices from the street* the urban architectural history of the city's old quarters is depicted in a very thorough and detailed manner⁷. A urban process that would be transformed through tourism, in contemporary times. In year 2000, local tourism authorities created «Jonker

⁷ According to the authors, the street was «Officially christened *Jonker Straat* (Nobleman's Street) by the Dutch» following the city's take over, among «local inhabitants, the area soon acquired the Malay name *Kampong Belanda* (Dutch Village), as increasing numbers of Dutch residents claimed prime position along the two parallel roads»; despite the prominence of Dutch residents, the road «was still home to mixed community late in the 18th century» (Lim & Jorge 2006, 70). With the decline of the Dutch power, and «the transition to British rule in 1825 [...], most of the properties were acquired by the Chinese merchant class», therefore redefining the street through «new architectural lines and forms», and through other structures, such as the «*hay kuan* (Chinese Clan Associations)», a Free School and a Temple, as well as «new businesses and residents» (Lim & Jorge 2006, 73). During early XXth century, other groups also had their meeting points in the street, namely the Malacca Eurasian Club (Lim & Jorge 2006, 74). Japanese occupation was another turning point in the occupation of the road, forcing the moving out and impoverishment of «countless Straits Chinese families». Eventually, «after the war, business serving the more mundane needs of Malaccans moved in: printers, barbers, photo studios, provision shops and premises selling electrical products as well as junk were – alongside the *hay kuan* – the pulse of Jonker Street for much of the latter half of the 20th century» (Lim & Jorge 2006, 78).

Walk», a tourism project that consisted of closing the road on weekends to give way to a night market. According to conservationists and heritage advocates, that «project has become catalyst for the destruction of the street's heritage» (Lim & Jorge 2006, 78), as traditional businesses «have been displaced by rising rentals since the introduction of “Jonker Walk”» (Lim & Jorge 2006, 74).

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

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

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

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

4. Birds' Nests

The core zone listed under Unesco, includes Jonker Street and other adjacent areas of Chinatown, comprising an area of 38 hectares. The urban quarter has been reformatted over the last decade, through tourism and heritage processes, giving way to handicrafts shops, cafeterias, and other services. This process has generated contestation by local conservationists and Malacca citizens. In parallel with these new activities, another economic activity has been practiced in the yards of the old houses: raising birds for sale. This activity is practiced by Malaysian Chinese residents, in empty roofless houses along the Chinese quarter. Raising birds for sale is a successful activity, from a local commercial point of view. However, it has come to be considered as an embarrassing activity in the face of tourism process. From a heritage point of view, conservationists –

by transnational organizations [e.g. Unesco] and members of non-governmental organizations in Malaysia, [e.g. Heritage Trust of Malaysia (Badan Warisan)] – defend that the raising of birds destroys the houses' built forms and their historical uses. Additional pressure against it came from the spectre of global epidemic of flu that was present during 2008-2010. In the local and national newspapers, the issue was made public, and came into front page.

Beyond the national level, there were also symbolic and ideological reasons: raising birds in a historic area was seen as dirtying the area, and that would go against the UNESCO criteria of what World Heritage Areas are supposed to look like. In 2008, following the listing under UNESCO, this transnational organization has urged the Malaysian government (both state and local government) to prohibit the activity. The reason for banning it is related to heritage criteria and hygiene measures: emptying the historical core area of birdshit and preventing bird-flu. Personal observations during fieldwork have made it quite visible: in October 2008 I observed a meeting in which a UNESCO adviser visiting Malacca urged a Malacca's local politician to ban the activity as soon as possible. The politician emphasised that the activity was in the hands of an ethnic group in particular and that it needed some time to make the changes. The advisor then answered, quite vehemently: "do you want to be known as the capital of birds' shit?" In response to the Adviser, the local politician, who was the hosting the event, tried to contemporzize with the comment of the invited advisor. He followed the Malay code of etiquette, and abstained from answering further. The passive reaction of the Malacca politician tells us much about local codes of hospitality, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, it also reminds us about passive acceptance of regulations imposed by transnational institutions. I felt, while observing the scene, that this was a metaphor of relations of power in heritage politics.

On Nostalgia and Heritage

Skimming though some of the literature on nostalgia, I find Renato Rosaldo's (1989) notion of imperialist nostalgia, Michael Herzfeld's (2005) analysis on structural nostalgia, and William Bissell's (2005) work on colonial nostalgia to be quite helpful tools in deconstructing linkages between heritage and nostalgia in Malacca. The case of Zanzibar's *Stone Town* described by this last author draws many similarities with the Malaysian context, and, is rather comparable to Malacca's *Jonker Street*. Cunningham Bissel's (2005) approach to colonial nostalgia sheds light into heritage practices and

their alternative meanings in Malacca: here, conservationists, local politics, foreign expatriates, and local residents have puzzling and non-overlapping views on mapping and valuing *warisan*. Work in progress shows the existence of diverse, and at times conflicting, modes: one advocates for conservationism and is held by trans-national organizations (such as UNESCO) and some Malaysian Non-Government organizations (such as *Badan Warisan*). Another one is held by local, State and National Government organizations, advocating for creative transformation.

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

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

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