

Capacity Building Activities in Sustaining the Intangible Living Culture among Traditional Artisan Trades at George Town World Heritage Site

Anthony Tee MooiKwong*

School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract

Intangible heritage such as practices, representation, customs and skills handed down from generation to generation were often ignored because its existence and recognition depend mainly on the human will, which is immaterial, and it is transmitted by imitation and living experience. A significant number of age-old traditions and trades are in danger of disappearing irretrievably. Safeguarding the intangible living culture anchors our sense of identity and continuity, which has become integral to the life of all societies. This research was set to investigate the significance of traditional artisan trades which forms the intangible living culture of George Town World Heritage Site (GTWHS). Although the traditional trades have high significance to George Town World Heritage Site, they are facing the pressure of economic development that is affecting sustainability of cultural tourism particularly the living culture of traditional artisan trades in GTWHS. One of the approaches to sustainable tourism development is capacity building which has been acknowledged as an important tool to enhance and sustain the tourism development. The qualitative research undertaken has discovered existing capacity building activities seems to be emphasizing on creating awareness regarding the existence of the traditional artisan trades among the local community as well as tourists. Research findings indicate that the capacity building activities are rather limited with little engagement being done among the stakeholders particularly between the state and the artisan traders. There is a differing view regarding responsibilities in engaging capacity building activities. If the present situation persists, there is a possibility that some of these trades may not exist in the near future. The sustainability of the traditional trades as a form of intangible living culture are critical hence it need some forms of structured and systematic forms of capacity building to enable the traditional artisan trade to sustain.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism; Intangible living culture; Capacity building; Cultural tourism

Introduction

The combination of a rich and diverse cultural heritage in George Town World Heritage Site (GTWHS) and the increasing demand for culture based tourism, provides unique opportunities for the development of tourism business that creates local income and employment opportunities, improving living standards and protecting the unique and rich indigenous local cultures. George Town was chosen because the town is endowed with specific multicultural heritage that is both tangible and intangible together with unique architectural and cultural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia. Besides that it has developed over 500 years of trading and cultural exchanges between East and West in the Straits of Malacca.

However, the pressure of economic development has put significant strains on the sustainability of cultural tourism in particular the living culture of traditional artisan trades in GTWHS. The sustainability of intangible living culture which was recognized by UNESCO as having Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) particularly the traditional artisan trades in GTWHS is facing uncertainty due to the problem of inheritance of the trade by younger generations. Among the traditional artisan trades facing threats of sustainability are traditional joss stick maker, Indian goldsmiths, paper oblation craftsman, beaded shoes maker and tombstone engraver. These intangible living culture is a form of heritage that is not renewable, although valuable new works can be added to it, but it cannot be reconstituted once it has been destroyed for it would no longer be the same heritage. Intangible living culture manifests human genius and human history, with their positive and sometimes less positive sides.

It is therefore important to identify the types of capacity building activities to sustain the intangible living culture of traditional artisan

trades in GTWHS and to determine how extensive and engaging these activities are among the stakeholders as well as determining the mechanism to monitor the capacity building activities.

Literature Review

Sustainable tourism

The concept of sustainable tourism has become popular since the release of Brundtland Report on sustainable development in 1987 and in the context of tourism, sustainability focus on meeting the needs of present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs [1]. The definition of sustainable tourism by World Tourism Organization [WTO] [2] encompasses three key areas namely the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural. Tourism has to be sustainable in all three areas to truly be considered sustainable tourism. Apart from the definition and scope provided by WTO on the sustainable tourism, there are myriad of other definition provided by scholars and organizations which are centralized around these three elements. Liu proposed stakeholders involvement, while Butler, Page and Dowling emphasize sustainable development from different angles; Cronin [3] define it through development policies;

*Corresponding author: Anthony Tee MooiKwong, School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia, Tel: +604-653 3888; E-mail: teeanthony@gmail.com

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Bramwell and Lane [4] equates sustainable development of tourism as environment protection; Cater and Farrell [5] define sustainability in the context of function and objective; Prosser define sustainability as social change; Hunter [6] indicate economic activities, while Garrod and Fyall [5] point out that sustainable development of tourism are based on environmental balance and social benefits [7]. The Charter of Sustainable Tourism developed at the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, on 27-28 April 1995, has adopted principles of sustainable tourism development emphasizing on sound management of tourism which integrates natural, cultural and human environment, involvement of stakeholders in tourism planning, giving special priority to vulnerable environment and cultural spaces, promoting sustainable alternative tourism and sharing of appropriate sustainable tourism technologies [8]. The principles of sustainable tourism development by Charter of Sustainable Tourism will be the framework of sustainable cultural tourism particularly the living culture of traditional artisan trades in GTWHS as it has tremendous potential to be the model of well maintain and preserved world heritage site in this region if the intangible living culture is preserved.

Capacity building

As capacity building which has been recognized and acknowledged as an important tool to enhance and sustain the heritage tourism development, there is need to identify the areas of capacity building activities to sustain the intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades within GTWHS.

Capacity building involves increment and enhancement of individuals, groups, organizations and societies abilities in performing core functions, defining and achieving objectives, solving problems as well as understanding and dealing with developmental needs through sustainable and broader contexts. It incorporates three broad areas namely the human resource development, organizational development and institutional and legal framework development [9] defines capacity building as a process in which individuals, organizations, institutions and societies develop abilities to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives [10]. Tourism capacity building often involves undertakings of activities with the purpose of improving the capacity of the government officials and people or the community by focusing on improving the economy and social wellbeing as well as preservation of the environment in and around a tourist's destination or attraction with aims to sustain the development of tourism [11]. The proponents of participatory tourism development such as Gunn, Haywood, Keogh, Murphy, Reed, Scheyvens, Simmons, Timothy, and Tosun which is part of capacity building has written extensively on community empowerment focusing on pro-active approach has clearly indicate the importance of community participation [12].

It is necessary to determine the capacity building activities that advocate sustainability of intangible living culture of traditional artisans at GTWHS and its degree of engagement as well as identifying community participation activities and monitoring mechanism framework that advocate sustainability of intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades. Among the forms of capacity building activities that can be undertaken are in the area of human resource development, engage with traditional artisan traders to enhance their ability to sustain the intangible living culture through financial assistance and organizing apprentice workshop. Capacity building is seen as the pragmatic approach in describing community effort, time, resources, leadership and commitment directed towards community identified goals and change, which in turns provides the basis for further change and development [13]. Capacity building can be seen as

the way forward to enhance the capacity of local artisans in particular their strengths, skills, values, local knowledge, role as custodian of living culture and heritage that are able to contribute to sustainable development of heritage tourism in particular the intangible living heritage of the traditional artisan trades in GTWHS. The literature review also suggests that there is a gap to be filled in the area of capacity building and its role in sustaining the intangible living culture. A theoretical framework developed for this study was based on Bell [4] sustainable tourism capacity building model. The premise of this model is that for sustainable tourism development to be successful, critical elements must first be addressed that allow for the growth of community capacity.

The successful implementation of a strategic tourism plan hinges on capacity of having the right people, with the right skills or capability, with sufficient capacity, institutional support and budget. The capacity-building system is geared to improve understanding of the tourism system and enhance the implementation of the tourism development actions in a tourist's destination or attraction in ensuring sustainability. Engagement with local community that creates empowerment of the locals in tourism development will ensure that the carrying capacity is sustained while preserving the intangible living heritage at GTWHS.

Intangible living culture

WTO predicts that cultural tourism will be one of the five key tourism market segments in the future, and notes that growth in this area will present an increasing challenge in terms of managing visitor flows to cultural sites [14]. UNESCO [15] through the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has defined intangible cultural heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills passed down from generation to generation which provides communities with a sense of identity and is continuously recreated in response to their environment. Recognizing the existence of intangible cultural heritage is highly dependable on human will which is immaterial and transmitted by imagination and experience. Intangible living heritage or intangible living culture encompasses many traditions, practices and customs such as stories, events, gatherings, languages, songs, natural spaces, beliefs, trades and cultural practices.

Sustaining the intangible living culture particularly the traditional artisans involving manual skills in forming traditional handicraft, craft associated with traditional customs and festivals as well as work associated with traditional observances and rituals within the GTWHS is seriously challenging and needed prime attention as the proprietor of these businesses are in their advanced years. The traditional artisan trades that are under serious threat are 'songkok' maker, Chinese seal engraver and calligrapher, handmade joss stick maker, traditional goldsmith, anchor maker and flower garland marker. There is a real concern that their skills, some inherited from their forefathers who came from China and India, will die out in the years to come if the younger generation do not take up the trade and the constant pressure of economic development has put significant strains on the sustainability of cultural tourism in particular the living culture of traditional artisans in GTWHS. The living culture of traditional artisans in GTWHS which is recognized by UNESCO as having Outstanding Universal Values comprise of one or more of the intangible cultural values that are in the local context, involves manual skills, a form of traditional handicraft, craft associated with traditional customs, work associated with traditional observances and rituals, craft associated with traditional festivals, activities that needs specific traditional tools and materials, goods supplies to specific market or other reasons. The fear of losing this form of intangible living culture is imminent and capacity

building would be the appropriate actions to be taken in ensuring the sustainability of the intangible living cultures of traditional trades in GTWHS.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, but also in market research. Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of issues, perceptions or behavior and the reasons that govern such issues, perception or behavior. The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive. According to Nargundkar [16] and Qualitative Research Consultants Association [17], among the unique aspects of qualitative research contribute to rich, insightful results are synergy among respondents, engages respondents more actively, having the opportunity to probe, observe, record and interpret non-verbal communication (i.e., body language, voice intonation) as well as the opportunity to engage respondents in “play” such as projective techniques and exercises, overcoming the self-consciousness that can inhibit spontaneous reactions and comments. Since this study employed qualitative approach, a series of semi-structured interviews that consists of open-ended questions are chosen to collect information from stakeholders at GTWHS. Semi-structured interview are most common type of interview used in qualitative social research as it gives freedom to respondents to elaborate on their opinions [18].

This study has employed qualitative research approach by selecting GTWHS as case study to investigate the existing capacity building, its level of engagement among stakeholders and the monitoring mechanism needed to sustain the intangible living culture of the traditional artisan from the perspective of stakeholders such as the artisans, the state and non-governmental organization. The qualitative methodology to investigate capacity building among the traditional artisan trades at GTWHS is appropriate to the theme of this research. Bush et al. [19] and Fawcett et al. [5] recommended qualitative methods in measuring community capacity building, while Riley and Love [20] and Decrop [18] adopted qualitative approach to study community capacity building among community groups engaged in tourism development.

The respondents of this research were selected based on purposive sampling and expert sampling in data collection process based on direct relation to the research topic [6]. the purposive sampling method known as total population sampling is adopted because the size of the population of the traditional traders at GTWHS that has the particular set of characteristics that this research are interested in is very small based on the published booklet by George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) and expert sampling is used where researcher needs to glean knowledge from individuals that have particular expertise and this is used to seek opinions from relevant institutions. The specific data was collected through qualitative interview with traditional artisan traders, state officials and non-governmental organizations.

In total, 23 traditional artisans (traditional traders) were selected from the published list obtained from (GTWHI). There were eleven heritage artisans and cultural practitioners, four heritage food and beverages traders, two heritage household goods traders, one heritage Hindu religious goods and kitchen ware trader, one heritage textile traders, one heritage forex and antique coin traders, one heritage performing arts trader, one heritage trading company and a heritage printing company. The focus of interview with traditional artisans was to identify the types of capacity building activities to sustain

the intangible living culture of traditional trades in GTWHS and to determine how extensive and engaging these activities are among the stakeholders as well as determining the mechanism to monitor the capacity building activities. Total duration of two months was needed to complete the data collection through qualitative interview with the selected respondents. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to 40 minutes on average but there are few that exceeded 60 minutes. The main themes addressed during the interviews includes sustainability of traditional trades, characteristics of traditional trades, capacity building activities and monitoring mechanism in sustaining intangible living culture.

The state government’s sole entity relating to preservation of GTWHS, the GTWHI was selected because they are directly responsible for the administration of GTWHS. Besides that they are the only authoritative body with expertise and custodian to preservation of cultural practices and historical sites within GTWHS. While Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) was selected as they are active in advocating preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Penang. The selection of these two organizations in the sampling list is based on expert sampling, a form of purposive sampling. These two organizations are important in providing their views relating to forms of capacity building activities and levels of engagement among the stakeholders in capacity building activities. While the remaining traditional artisans involving in various trades operating within GTWHS for interview sessions to represent different views or perspectives on capacity buildings activities and sustainability as well as significance of traditional artisan trades in relations to tourism development within GTWHS. Before proceed to data collection, semi-structured interview questionnaires are drafted based on the research problems and objectives.

The process of qualitative data analysis (QDA) usually involves two things, writing and the identification of themes. Writing of some kind is found in almost all forms of QDA. In contrast, some approaches, such as discourse analysis or conversation analysis may not require the identification of themes. Nevertheless finding themes is part of the overwhelming majority of QDA carried out today. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and analysed with the framework technique as a systematic procedure for handling qualitative data for producing analysis with potential for actionable outcome [21,22]. The framework for the qualitative data analysis has five key stages; familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and lastly mapping and interpretation.

Research Findings

The analysed interview data were from 25 respondents comprising of eleven heritage artisan and cultural practitioners, four heritage food traders, two heritage household goods traders, one heritage religious goods trader, heritage textile trader, heritage coins and forex trader, heritage performing arts trader, heritage trading company, heritage printing trader, a non-governmental and governmental organizations. The primary aims are to discover the types of capacity buildings activities undertaken and relevant capacity buildings activities that sustain the intangible living heritage of traditional trades among the artisans as well as determining the mechanism to monitor the capacity building activities and plans.

The sustainability of the traditional artisan trades within GTWHS is significant to the living heritage of the city. All the traditional artisan traders have given positive response toward the importance of tourism in sustaining the intangible living culture of the traditional artisan

trades. They believe the tourism helps to support local businesses, making the heritage area livelier, sustaining the living culture as well as heritage attractions. Tourism does bring positive contribution towards the sustainability of intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades.

Heritage exist both in tangible and intangible forms where both elements complement each other to form the complex fabric of society's cultural heritage and identity. The traditional artisan traders which was interviewed has expressed pessimism towards the sustainability of their trade except IFA designated place for artisan to trade is provided, control rental rates within GTWHS, organizing artisan workshops, conducts apprenticeship program, provide financial assistance and changing their products and services to cater for market needs.

Although some artisan traders have taken some initiatives to change their business operations in sustaining their old trades was seen as a positive steps towards preserving the intangible living culture, but it was done with a big investment which may not be affordable for the other traders due to problems of succession, changes in consumer trends as well as obsolete trades when the future is uncertain in taking the risk to sustain their trade just because of tourism or to maintain the living heritage.

The state agency acknowledges the importance and significance of the traditional artisan trades particularly the ones that are still beneficial to the community but the non-governmental organization(NGO) consider many of these traditional artisan trades are life time occupations. The traditional artisans generally agree that capacity building is necessary but the state authority and NGO argued that sustainability depends entirely on the whole eco-system of the city where artisans, customers and suppliers are interconnected. If any of the stakeholders in the eco-system is taken out it may not sustain. The state agency believes sustainability of traditional artisan trades as intangible living heritage is everyone's responsibilities and some trades that are no longer applicable should not be preserved although cultural heritage tourism may help to sustain intangible living culture.

Among the forms of capacity building identified in this research to sustain the intangible living heritage of the traditional artisan trades are providing subsidy to traditional artisan traders to ease their rental burden while helping to sustain the trade within the GTWHS, provide grants to traditional artisan traders, create a designated place for artisans to practice their traditional craft, traditional artisan traders taking initiative to build their capacity, local council should keep the heritage enclave clean, organizing promotion and publicity for traditional artisan trades as well as making the heritage enclave vibrant to attract tourists. Locals must involve in organizing heritage events, organize permanent weekend cultural market and artisan workshop for public to keep the living culture alive as well as to enable the artisan to continue practising their skills.

The state agency believes the capacity building activities should be the responsibility of the traditional artisans by changing the way they do their business and the state will only be responsible in identifying and documenting the process of traditional artisan trades. The NGO suggested that the security of tenancy for rented premises by traditional artisan should be looked into as well as setting up a centre to administer funds to assist the traditional artisans as forms of capacity building initiative.

As on the matter relating to undertaking and monitoring capacity building activities, the state authority believes the responsibility should fall on traditional artisan traders to take initiative on capacity building

activities and if the trade is still relevant it will sustain. The NGO has suggested that safeguarding the intangible living culture is necessary by identifying the issues and government should step in to help solve the issues with financial assistance.

The existing capacity building activities are mainly focusing on creating awareness and publicity for the traditional artisan trades and the level of engagement is limited as it mainly focusing on organizing publicity event by the state. While the traditional artisans and NGO believe the state should shoulder the main responsibility in undertaking the capacity building activities.

The forms of mechanism that should be undertaken to sustain the intangible living culture of the traditional artisan trades within GTHWS includes the need for policy makers to engaged with the traditional artisans before embarking on any project or activities, the state authority should monitor and control the rental rates for properties within the heritage zone, organize dialogue to allow feedback between artisan traders and the state authorities, state authorities should look into the welfare of traditional artisans and setting up designated place for artisans to practice their trade. Although the traditional artisan traders and NGO has placed the responsibility of setting monitoring mechanism on the state authority, however the state authority does not consider monitoring the sustainability of the intangible living culture as their responsibility.

The level of engagements among the stakeholders in capacity building activities is minimal or rather insignificant. There has been no unanimous agreement on who should take the lead role in undertaking and funding the capacity building activities and monitoring the capacity building activities in sustaining the intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades. Feedback and suggestions given by the traditional artisan traders on capacity building should be heeded and take into consideration for future tourism planning in order to sustain the intangible living culture of the traditional trades within GTWHS which has OUV. Non-existence of structured monitoring mechanism for capacity building is certainly affecting the sustainability of the intangible living culture of traditional trades within GTWHS.

Conclusion

The sustainability of the traditional artisan trades which has great significance in meeting the cultural practices of the local people, serving the needs of locals, providing the essentials for the community, as life occupations and contribution to cultural dialogue and diversity within GTHWS is certainly under threat. This particular study has identified the forms of capacity building that can be undertaken to sustain the intangible living culture of traditional trades which have significant impact towards maintaining the inscription of GTWHS by UNESCO as well as retaining the charm of Penang as former trading port that were once the center of bustling trades between East and West. The intangible living culture of George Town is unique to GTHWS and this is the same for other world heritage sites, hence the uniqueness should be safeguard through enhancement of capacity of the traditional traders.

The state authority should set monitoring mechanism in ensuring the sustainability of the intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades such as consultation with various stakeholders through a structured entity with legal functions and responsibilities and registration of artisan trades in ensuring their welfare are being looked after and sustain the craftsmanship of the artisans through an endowment fund.

It is important for all stakeholders to engage actively to ensure the intangible living culture of traditional artisan trades is not going to vanish through capacity building activities that are accustomed to local needs.

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