Kuala Lumpur Historic City Centre Through the Lenses of International Tourist

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article history:**
Received 12 October 2014
Received in revised form 26 December 2014
Accepted 1 January 2015
Available online 17 February 2015

**Keywords:**
Kuala Lumpur historic city centre (KLHCC), visual preference, Historic Urban Area, Cultural Heritage, Development, Historic image,

**ABSTRACT**

According to the significance of cultural heritage, either to maintain the identity of nations or to serve as a source for tourism industry, the necessity of conservation and preservation is inevitable. Among a broad spectrum of cultural heritage including of tangible or intangible, materials and objects, singly or in group, historic urban areas are those inclusive assets witness the most dramatic changes forced by urban development. Similar to other fast growing metropolitan areas, Kuala Lumpur has also been experiencing a rapid changes of its image due to the vast constructions and development just in a century-an-half since its formation. It leads to the deterioration of urban heritage and consequently loss of historic image, and identity crisis. This paper outlines the result of a study set out with the aim of assessing preference of international tourists towards the historic centre of Kuala Lumpur. The most significant finding of the study demonstrated low preferability of the study area in eyes of respondents.

**INTRODUCTION**

Heritage conservation literature supports the effective idea through which historic urban conservation needs to be a coherent and integrated part in all the process of socio-economic development, regional and urban planning [1,2]. Rapid economic growth in Malaysia is reflected in the changing image of its capital city of Kuala Lumpur by new constriction of high-rise buildings and infrastructures. Consequently, a modern and standardized image of globalized universal characteristic replaced the traditional urban townscape [3]. Despite of being a young city and likewise every other human settlements, Kuala Lumpur restrain valuable urban heritage spread all around its conserved historical zone. As an initial evaluative step, there is a need to understand effectiveness of preservation and conservational interventions held by authorities in this area. The finding from this process add substantially to our understanding of the present situation of historic urban heritage of Kuala Lumpur and effect of intervened safeguarding actions from stakeholder’s point of view.

**Kuala Lumpur Historic City Centre:**

Kuala Lumpur Historic City Centre (KLHCC) addresses the most historic area in the capital city of Malaysia matching its primary heritage zone. This area is the formation point of the present modern city from which early settlements, commerce, and city structure spread out [4]. The muddy confluence of the two main rivers of Kelang and Gombak that the city has laid in, has given it the name of Kuala Lumpur. It backs to the late 1870’s when the early shops along the Gombak river bank launched to cater tin prospectors. The city shifted from a jungle and swampy area to two quarters of Chinese and Malay villages and then capital city of the Federation of Malay States in 1896 [5]. A roughly rapid growth of city formation has been experiencing since 1860, specifically after 1950’s when the country gained its dependency after a long time colonization by Britain.

Historic district is defined as place that shows integration of historic and important buildings [6]. Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020 has divided the city centre of Kuala Lumpur into three heritage zones, namely the primary, secondary and tertiary heritage zones including four categories of heritage [7]. The primary heritage zone has been located in prominent areas that include the Merdeka square vicinity, the old Railway station...
neighbourhoods, and the Merdeka stadium area (Fig 1. Left). Therefore KLHCC can be considered as the historic district of Kuala Lumpur. Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council (DBKL) has assigned the noted area as the cultural heritage attraction district in the Kuala Lumpur structure plan, 2020 [7]. The historic core of the city is a valuable tourist spot which has encompassed most of early commercial, residential and administrative buildings with a unique architecture were built in the late 19th century and present the past ages of the city. Among them, the Merdeka square area and its adjacent historic buildings encompasses the most rich and diverse heritage assets (Fig. 1Right). This heritage zone was also used as the colonial district during the British colonization era and contains the largest number of historic buildings among others [8].

**Methodology:**

As part of a comprehensive research, a quantitative preference study was carried out by using a photo questionnaire that sampled 308 international tourists from 54 countries while visiting the study area. International tourists were selected to be surveyed since they contribute to one of the Malaysia’s main economic sectors, the tourism industry. In addition to responding to the socio-demographic information, respondents were asked to rate 50 representative group of scenes that were taken from all around the study area in various angles of public visitors. This photo rating was to identify how much they prefer each of the scenes on a five point Likert scale from not preferred to very preferred. Descriptive analysis was employed to profile socio-demographic background of participants and their group visual preference toward KLHCC, the study area. This output was also complemented by carrying a one sample t-Test to determine whether the measured preference of respondents differs from the minimal preferability of area representing with preferred, 4 out of 5 in the questionnaire.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The socio-demographic background asked through the survey included of gender, age, level of education, and respondents’ country of origin as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1In terms of country of their origin, all 54 countries were grouped into seven regions as listed at the same table. The main research question of this study was to understand how international tourists perceive the KLHCC. The last column of the table represents the visual preference score for different sub-groups of respondents which was based on cumulative mean scores of the rated scenes. The total visual preference calculated for this study was only 3.13.

Table 1: Profile of participants and their visual preference score.
A one-sample t-Test was run to determine if the visual preference score of participants was different to preferred, as defined as a preference score of 4.0. As the assumptions of reliable analysis, the preference scores were normally distributed with a skewness of 0.137 (standard error=0.139) and kurtosis of 0.127 (standard error=0.277). Moreover, inspection of a boxplot showed no outliers in the data. The mean preference score (3.13 ± 0.53) was lower than the preferred preference score of 4.0, a statistically significant difference of 0.87 (95% CI, 0.81 to 0.93), t (307) = -28.81, p = .000 (Table 2). It confirmed the tendency of measured preference score to 3, somewhat preferred, as it was significantly different from 4.

In spite of ongoing heritage conservation by the government at the study area, the findings of this study disclosed low preferability of KLHCC as a prominent historic area in the eyes of international tourists. In other words, this study revealed that international tourists do not prefer KLHCC as a well preserved urban heritage area. This finding precisely confirms the previous studies both those who emphasized on Kuala Lumpur’s low attractiveness for heritage tourism and those who highlighted indistinguishable image and identity of Kuala Lumpur [3, 9-11]. Despite passing time, it is in contrast with the visions of the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan (CHKL 2020), trying to designate the historic urban core of the city as the main cultural heritage centre with a diverse attractiveness [7].

**Summary:**
Significant role of a well-preserved historic urban heritage is inevitable since it contributes to the tourism industry by providing diverse attractiveness of destinations as well as maintaining the identity of nation and the image of city. The finding of this study revealed the moderately low preferability of KLHCC in eyes of international tourists. It can lead to the loss of heritage appealingness of Kuala Lumpur as an important source for tourism industry in Malaysia. There might be several reasons for this outcome. One of the significant reasons for low preferability of urban heritage sites could be referred to as inappropriate urban heritage preservation and conservation. It can be concluded that, despite of adequate attention to most of the historic heritage buildings in KLHCC, less consideration was given to their context, surroundings, and immediate vicinity. To become more specific, an in depth study is required to identify potential factors affecting preference of international tourists toward historic urban areas.

**REFERENCES**


