

# The Dynamism of Local Culture in Metagovernance

## *A Cursory Look at George Town World Heritage Site, Malaysia*

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**Abstract**—Inclusionary governance in the form of metagovernance expanded in George Town when the city was listed as a World Heritage Site. However, the governance culture in Malaysia favors hierarchism where public engagement is not entirely robust. Nevertheless, the local cultural climate in George Town allows for greater public engagement in the governance of the heritage site. This study seeks to understand the factors that allow for a conducive cultural climate to prevail in the metagovernance of George Town World Heritage Site. A total of four respondents were interviewed from various tiers of stakeholders. Based on the findings, factors such as the environment, flexibility, expectation and approaches taken by the stakeholders are found to aid in creating the right culture for inclusionary governance.

**Keywords:** *metagovernance; local culture; heritage site governance; George Town*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The influences of local culture on governance are observable, especially in inclusionary governance where power interaction occurs among various stakeholders with unique interests. The act of governance itself is not static and is responsive towards the local climate. If governance is seen as a form of social coordination [1], then the styles of governance would reflect the underlying social norms in terms of values, attitudes and beliefs that are prevalent in the society [2]. However, the clash of roles between governing norms and local expectations does impede governance to a certain extent. The form of governance in Asia with its remnants of "Asian values" and Confucian Dynamism are still found to hamper the democratization of governance [3][4][5] with conflicts arising with a demanding public [6][7]. Hence, cultural traits should be considered as elements that may inhibit or nurture the growth of inclusionary governance. Also, the belief that governance doctrines that are presented as "best practices" in one context may not be necessarily transferred to another society without facing challenges especially from a cultural context [1].

A study of national governance requires an understanding of the nation's institutional cultural context [8]. For instance, [1] noted that the United Kingdom had a long history of modest level of government involvement in the public discourse. Hence, it was more receptive of market based governance when the method was introduced in the 1980s as opposed to Germany with its stronger Rechtsstaat (state-centric) administrative culture. To that end, the flexibility of

societies to accept a more inclusionary form of government is directly related to the historical administrative culture of a nation [1].

As for Malaysia, the governance structure is varyingly described as semi-democratic [9], nominal democracy [10] and illiberal democracy [11]. Hierarchism is ingrained in the governance psyche of the state, notably on deciding policies without proper public engagement. In effect, egalitarianism on the part of the public administrators in opening up input from the population at large is an evolving phenomenon brought on largely by the new media [12]. Even then, pessimism persists among the population over the effectiveness of such public engagement. It is mostly driven by the belief that administrative fiats are decided beforehand based on the interest of the state. Hence, a culture of paternalistic hierarchism is deemed natural for the state where the population is expected to confirm to regulations that are decided.

With the recognition of George Town as a World Heritage Site (WHS) by UNESCO in 2009, inclusionary governance was introduced to govern the site. Hence, governance of George Town was expanded to include a wider number of stakeholders under a form of metagovernance, moving away from a predominantly state-centered model. The province of Penang in Malaysia, where George Town is located had always been known to have an active civil society that engages with the government in aspects of policy making [13]. The increasingly political slant of certain civil societies aided in nudging the victory of the opposition alliance in Penang in 2008 [14]. Viewed as civil-society friendly, the new governing authorities of Penang were expected to be more transparent. Nevertheless, democratic transitions of governance practices with deeply entrenched statist values towards a more responsive, engaging and accountable style is a difficult and slow process [15].

Consequently, implementations of metagovernance in the governance of George Town World Heritage Site faces challenges especially in regards to the position of the state in its interactions with the civil society. Although governance through negotiated interactions between state and non-state parties are meant to provide flexible solutions to issues, it is still hampered by differing levels of uncertainties [16]. In this context, there is a clash of roles between the statist tendencies of the bureaucracy with the civil society expecting a higher level of equitability. Nevertheless, the prevailing socio-political culture of Penang allows for greater engagement by the state

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with the population as opposed to other Malaysian provinces [17][18]. Although the relationship is occasionally strained, public engagement through civil societies in Penang is higher and more active compared to the rest of Malaysia. This entails the need to understand the local cultural norms that sets George Town apart. Therefore, this study aims to identify the main factors that allow local cultural traits in Penang to be more receptive towards metagovernance as opposed to the governance culture in Malaysia at large.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

### A. Qualitative Method

This study utilized a qualitative, semi-structured interview method, selected due to its versatility in adapting questions to elicit richer data [19][20][21]. Moreover, culture is not static and goes through phases of change, hence a direct interaction would allow for a more immersive understanding of the context to be studied. Four tiers of respondents were interviewed, selected with purposive sampling method. For the state organization, an official from the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) was selected, the parastatal agency, George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) was represented by its senior official while a senior member of Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) spoke for the organization. Also, a social activist experienced in dealing with the state in matters regarding cultural heritage conservation was also selected.

### B. Thematic Analysis

This study would rely on hermeneutic understanding of the spoken communication derived from the respondents. Hence, a thematic analysis was performed on the transcribed interview to underscore the cultural issues that aid the implementation of metagovernance in the governance of the site. Data collection utilizing the qualitative approach produces rich data representing wider epistemological and ontological perspectives on the subject [23]. Besides, thematic analysis is noted to be an inquiry method that is not reliant on theory, hence its adaptability transcends into a wide range of theoretical and epistemological approaches [24][25].

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. City Council (MBPP)

Based on the analysis of the transcribed interview, MBPP displays a considerable degree of hierarchism in its interactions, even though it has become more flexible. A point to note is the legal status of the organisation itself as a major authority in the planning within the site. The respondent highlighted that " *we have the final say in anything related to heritage, it is still MBPP*". However, the respondent further added, " *We would still bring the issue back to our committee meeting; the Technical Review Panel that is made up of other experts, NGOs. From that meeting, we would then come up with a decision regarding the project*" to highlight the actual decision-making process that integrates a wider number of stakeholders. The collaboration process is further elucidated, " *...we do listen to the considerations from NGOs, because*

*there are many experts with more experience from NGOs, but the final decision maker would still be MBPP, after listening to comments from all other departments and NGOs*". Interactions with NGOs and peripheral stakeholders in the heritage enclave are essentially two-fold, co-option and statist. The relationship with select NGOs such as the Penang Heritage Trust is significantly more harmonious as opposed with several others. " *We have a professional relationship with PHT and several other NGOs, especially in dealing with conservation works or discussions*". However, detachment is apparent in the dealing with peripheral stakeholders and several other more outspoken NGOs. " *It is quite complicated to deal with traders, from time to time we engage in public relations (PR), but sometimes they question us*". The contestation of authority is prominent in the dealing of the city council with business entities directly related to tourism. " *It's tough when we deal with them and such situations happen often, people basically do not understand what we are doing*". Based on these engagements, the role played by the city council in governing the heritage site receives different types of reaction from the other stakeholders.

### B. Parastatal Agency (GTWHI)

As a parastatal agency, the interaction by GTWHI reaches out to a wider spectrum of stakeholders in the metagovernance of George Town. Hence, the interaction transcends the boundaries established by hierarchism. However, anti-establishment tendencies on the part of commercial traders and certain building owners inhibits the role of GTWHI in metagoverning the heritage site. " *...there are many cases where building owners would restore their buildings illegally, even though we try to monitor them, they would ask the contractors to work on Saturdays and Sundays where our staff are not working*". The parastatal agency even faced deception from several unscrupulous building owners. " *There are times when the proposal submission is complete and fits the requirement of GTWHI but once work is started, it doesn't follow the approved guideline*".

While the parastatal agencies attempt to practice egalitarianism in its dealing with peripheral stakeholders, the agency needs to adhere to the bureaucratic norms expected of it from receiving state funding. " *...our most active interaction is with state bodies especially MBPP, we are actually under the state government*". Yet, the agency does function as its original role is intended, to be semi-state agency with independent traits. " *We mostly adhere to the policies of the state in heritage conservation, especially in helping out conservation works, but we are mostly free in our dealings with others*". Egalitarianism structures the working relationship of GTWHI with established NGOs dealing with intangible culture such as the PHT. " *...for intangible cultural conservation, we work actively together with NGOs such as PHT because we don't really have the expertise, so we would appoint agencies that includes PHT with the experience and knowledge to undertake such program and work together with them on many other issues. We mostly work together, sometimes there are issues, but we manage it*". Being detached from hierarchical norms, GTWHI informally engages with a

wider audience even though reciprocity by several peripheral stakeholders are wanting.

C. Non Government Organisation (PHT)

Being an organization devoid of direct association with state authorities, the cultural traits that structures the relationship of PHT with other stakeholders are more independent in nature. Previously excluded from the governance of George Town, PHT was co-opted as part of the metagovernance network of George Town WHS. "...at first, they viewed us as antagonistic and very outspoken in the media, eventually they start to invite us, we sit in many of the discussions and meetings, regular meetings and so on".

D. Social Activist

As someone who had worked with both state linked agency and independent consultative work, the social activist noted that public engagement is alive in Penang. "Depending on the issue, you can actually see many people attending public engagement activities organised by the state or some other NGOs". The situation in Penang is considerably unique compared to other places. "I have been involved in some heritage themed talks in Melaka and few other places, usually it is very less and you only see familiar faces". The state authorities are predisposed to the idea of engaging the public in matters related to development and heritage, "The idea in Penang is that public engagement is usually done in some matters", though it may seem to be PR exercises sometimes, "...but I won't say they do it just to listen to them". Flexibility on the part of the state itself is conditional. "It is actually pretty difficult to explain that, depends on how flexible the state wants itself to be, in certain issues, they may not be willing to compromise". Hierarchical tendencies on the part of the state and parastatal agencies are clear. "I do realize that they may face certain pressure, this applies to other state linked agencies too"

Based on the analysis of the transcribed interview, several cultural themes and sub-themes are apparent in the metagovernance of George Town as depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1.

Themes and Subthemes from Transcribed Interview	
Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Environment	- Cultural climate depends on the setting of the organization - The creation of rapport among stakeholders
Flexibility	- Willingness to adapt to ideas that diverges from expectation - Theoretical and actual roles played
Expectation	- Having ideas expected by all - Handling conflicts - Societal expectation of roles
Approaches	- The selection of approaches - Perceptions on the selection of approaches

E. Environment

Generally speaking, the cultural climate that is found in the interaction between the stakeholders is dependent on the setting of the organization. As expected, the state authority, in this case the city council exhibits traits of hierarchism. Based on the

Cultural Grid Theory, hierarchical cultural traits include strong collectivist tendencies with clear demarcation of roles in nested groups [26]. On impulse, the state-actors would expect conformity with their agenda especially with development decisions. Although the city council expects its decisions to be adhered, it allows more space for engagement as opposed to the situation in George Town's heritage partner, Melaka [27][17]. The political environment in Penang, revitalized with opposition legislature that are more receptive towards public engagement allowed for greater deviation from the hierarchical cultural trait of the state agencies.

The cultural environment guiding the roles played by the parastatal agency is more complex in nature, aligning more towards an egalitarian cosmology. This cultural trait stresses on fairness in dealing with every other partner. Hence, the parastatal agency exhibits greater tendency to engage with other state agencies and individuals. As discussed previously, the egalitarian method of the parastatal agency is still dependent on the changing political climate of the government. This is especially so when there is a clash of state agenda with heritage conservation when the parastatal agency adopts a more pro-state policy. As discussed by [28][29], parastatal agencies in developing countries have a greater tendency to slip to patrimonialism, especially in budding democracies. In the Malaysian situation, the administrative culture percolates with ruling-party politics, as such the tendency of parastatal agencies to occasionally act in accordance with the politics of the day is apparent.

The climate of independent social activism that Penang is well regarded for creating the individualist cultural cosmology for NGO and other peripheral stakeholders. Although co-opted in the legal framework of governance of George Town, organizations such as the PHT also metagoverns the site independently. In effect, a confrontational environment permeates in the relationship with the state especially in certain aspects of development decisions, such as the Penang Transport Masterplan and Jerejak Island redevelopment. Moreover, a cultural detachment from the governance is prevalent among NGOs in Penang [30], for instance, PHT actively sought private funds in the restoration of the Suffolk House.

F. Flexibility

The governance style adapted by nation-states are initially dependent on the socio-politico-administrative context of the country [1]. The modernization of public sector in the form of metagovernance, network governance and market governance commences with a mould determined by the cultural norms of the nation. However, the actual governance mode eventually adapted is flexible, based on the situational need. Flexibility is notable in the interaction between the stakeholders. This is especially so on the part of the parastatal agency and the city council itself in dealing with building owners. The flexibility is apparent from the willingness of the state to engage in soft-diplomacy by using their operational staff in dealing with errant traders within the site. In effect, flexibility found in institutional cultural norms are often attributed to "soft-steering" approach provided by collaborative governance such as metagovernance [31]. Diverging from its stand as a pro-

conservation entity, PHT is also able to be a part of the official collaborative governance apparatus. By sitting on the Technical Review Panel organized by the city council, PHT indicates that flexibility is possible in dealing with the government even when the NGO opposes many of the stands taken by the state in matters of development. In this regard, culture in itself is not static and all the stakeholders avail themselves the flexibility in adapting their stance when required.

#### G. Expectation

In the Malaysian administrative political psyche, the expectation of a paternalistic state is high. A bureaucrat is expected to show deference to his political masters while ensuring policies remain sound [32][33]. Therefore, the roles played by every stakeholder in a governance system is consciously expected. Essentially, the state is expected to govern while the civil societies are expected to comply, sympathetic to the state cause or be inactive. This is apparent in the case of Melaka where the role of the state is prominent and the governance of the heritage site itself is state-centric with a largely absent civil society [27]. However, divergence from Malaysian administrative cultural norms in Penang is not entirely unique. As laid out by [1], actual governance system that develops are situational and is dependent on the cultural norms of the locality. Consequently, Penang, having had a history of active civil society is expected to have a thriving governance culture and not necessarily comply with cultural norms practiced elsewhere.

#### H. Approaches

The cultural domain that structures governance styles in Malaysia does apply in Penang [34], however [35] noted that approaches taken are dependent on the different cultural stances of local communities. While the more established NGOs were able to engage the state authorities in rationale discourse, the same does not apply to select local residents who are more antagonistic in nature. Two approaches were notable, (i) to evade the authorities by engaging in illegal renovations during non-office hours and, (ii) utilizing political influences by tapping into the federal-provincial political antagonism to achieve the agenda. This cultural tendency is best described as autonomous in nature, where independent efforts were engaged, side-stepping the influence available through established NGOs in settling the issue.

A look at the four main themes or factors emerging from this study indicates that the environment had allowed hierarchism to guide the state while still being porous in its external dealings. Flexibility allows for adaptability in the mode of governance, for instance the state uses a “soft-steering” approach in dealing with other stakeholders instead of relying on brute force. It is also apparent in the dealings by PHT, with its willingness to be part of the legal governance mechanism while opposing the state in other development matters. Expectation of roles attributed to every stakeholder does exist, however the divergence of roles is seen in George Town. Because of its active civil society, even the government expects the active roles played by the civil society as opposed to other Malaysian states. Approaches taken by the various stakeholders are also dependent on their predisposition, for

instance, the government is willing to be accommodating by engaging directly or indirectly through GTWHI. However, certain interest groups confront the state relying on federal political antagonism. Hence, the local cultural conditions in George Town that aids in its metagovernance does face external pressure from outside of the state.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Looking at the context of culture in the metagovernance of George Town, it is apparent that hierarchical cultural norms that is expected in major parts of Malaysia is not reflected in its entirety in Penang. A wider level of leverage is exhibited by the state and parastatal agencies in allowing for greater stakeholder participation in decision-making. However, consultative governance itself is not absent from the historical culture of governance in the region. Concepts such as *musyawarah* and *muafakat* is found in the *adat* of pre-colonial societies in structuring the socio-political relationships in villages [36]. Hence, such concepts are not entirely alien to the society and have lapsed as the patriarchal colonial ideal of “state knows best” had become the norm in the Malaysian setting.

The dynamic nature of governance culture is explored by [1] who stated that governance method itself is transferable. In the case of George Town, the majoritarian centralistic method of governance gave way to the more inclusive method of governance post-World Heritage Site inscription. It can be argued that this shift is nudged by the UNESCO requirement for increased community engagement in heritage sites, however the vibrant civil society culture of Penang laid the initial groundwork. Factors such as the environment, flexibility, expectation and approaches utilized in the governance process are inherently influenced by the cultural traits dominant in the socio-political climate of Penang.

This study has some limitations as well. The findings are based on the feedback from three tiers of stakeholders, state, parastatal, an NGO and an independent activist. It does not include the feedback from other peripheral stakeholders such as marginal NGOs, traders, residents and players from the tourism industry who are also involved in metagoverning the site.

Also, a comparative understanding on the cultural issues dominating governance of Melaka WHS is also needed. As discussed previously, governance of Melaka WHS is state-centric, since both George Town and Melaka share the same heritage status, it is vital to understand what are the cultural issues dominating the issue of governance in Melaka. Therefore, it is recommended that a similar approach to be extended to cover a wider number of stakeholders, especially peripheral stakeholders in George Town and Melaka. Furthermore, this method can also be extended to natural heritage sites such as Kinabalu Park WHS where local community is linked physically and spiritually with the site.

In conclusion, while governance in Malaysia is still widely guided by the colonial legacy of hierarchism, local cultural tendencies allows for greater flexibility in a conducive environment. In Penang, the existence of vibrant civil society along with an engaging public allows for greater inclusiveness on the part of the state in decision-making regarding the city’s

heritage city. Undeniably the state is still resistant in some matters guided by political expediency, but the greater allowance for inclusivity governance in George Town can be extended to other fields of governance around Malaysia.

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