



## Understanding culture and creativity in urban development: what it means for George Town, Penang?

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### Abstract

Culture and creativity are fast emerging as catalysts to spur economic development in urban settings. Many Western cities have leveraged upon culture and cultural industries to revitalize and regenerate their urban spaces following a failure in their industrial base. This trend is also unfolding in Asian cities like George Town where the elements of culture and creativity are currently being earmarked as the city's engine of economic growth and progress. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore and understand the meaning of culture and cultural industries in George Town, especially with the influences of internal and external global forces shaping the city's urban development. As a city that is undergoing constant social transformations, the element of culture and the types of cultural industries that follow suit are also in a constant state of flux. Thus, defining and understanding culture in a continuously morphing city like George Town will assist urban managers and policy-makers towards more informed decisions on how next to leverage upon culture as the city's main source of endowment.

**Keywords:** Culture, creativity, cultural industries, George Town, urban development

### Introduction

The notion of an economy driven by culture and creativity is not novel. Countries in most advanced economies, particularly in the Western world, have long had a history of harnessing and leveraging on their culture to spur local economic development (Smidt-Jensen, 2007: 5; Bayliss: 2004). In these countries, cultural development has taken on an instrumental role towards revitalizing and regenerating their urban spaces and places. Notably, the value and catalytic role of culture are increasingly being viewed as invaluable resources in the production and consumption cycle, especially in post-industrial cities across Europe.

Broadly speaking, the shift towards a cultural-based economy is inadvertently shaped and necessitated by the changing economic structure as a nation or city progresses along their development trajectory shifting from agriculture to industrialization and ultimately services and cultural-related industries. As more and more advanced economies languish due to the vagaries of their failed industrial base, the element of 'culture' and the viability of cultural industries emerged as the new panacea to cure all. To reinstate their economic rationale, urban managers have turned to exploiting and harnessing the potentials of 'selling (urban) culture' to boost a city's economy and vibrancy (Smidt-Jensen, 2007:2). By exploiting and capitalizing on culture, creativity and cultural/creative industries, new and unique forms of employment opportunities and income have since emerged. In many instances, such cultural industries tend to locate in urban settings (Florida,

2002, 2008). More importantly, the growth of cultural industries is instrumental towards stimulating other upstream and downstream industries, thus, creating a vibrant and much desired spin-off effect (Kong, 2000).

Of late, many Asian cities, like Chiang Mai (Thailand), Yogyakarta (Indonesia) and George Town (Penang, Malaysia), are also leveraging on culture to drive the city's economic development. As a city bestowed with diverse cultures, creeds and ethnicities, it comes as no surprise that the element of culture, especially the city's intangible cultural heritage, was in fact pivotal towards George Town's inscription into the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008 (SGP, 2013). Now, eight years after the inscription, the current situation is one of more accentuated and aggressive promotion of culture to expand George Town's cultural re-imaging locally, nationally and globally. The UNESCO inscription is clearly a transformative force that effectuates change in George Town, particularly in ways where culture has been moved to the forefront of policy agendas and earmarked as an economic spinner for local growth and development.

Hence, at the outset, it is pertinent to explore and comprehend what George Town's culture means to us today, especially with internal and external global forces infringing upon and shaping urban development. Concerns pertaining to whether George Town's culture has been able to withstand and sustain changes, or, has the city's culture been exposed to threats and then forcibly required to morph with times are indeed enquiries that warrant further and immediate exploration. At this juncture, partaking the task to define and revisit the notion of culture amidst volatile social transformations that are underway in George Town will assist urban managers and policy-makers towards more informed decision on how next to leverage upon culture as the city's urban resources and endowments. This paper attempts to address this enquiry for the city of George Town, Penang.

In an overview, this conceptual paper is organized into four sections. The paper begins by introducing the background and aim of the paper. Section two reviews key literature related to culture, cultural industries and the emergence and importance of a cultural economy in most advanced countries. In this section too, the role of culture is unearthed as the fourth pillar to fit in and complete the sustainable development equation; and then the discussion continues on to identify culture as a viable form of urban cultural resource. Subsequently, section three attempts to dissect the meaning of an economy based on culture in Malaysia generally and George Town specifically. The last section concludes the paper by providing some recommendations towards harnessing culture and deliberates on the viability of relying on an economy-based on culture for George Town, Penang.

## Literature Review

### *Culture, Cultural Industries and the Cultural Economy*

Generally, the notion of culture is often understood and positioned within the fields of anthropology and sociology. Simply put, 'culture' is defined as "a way of life" (Smidt-Jensen, 2007: 10) or can be understood as the traditional beliefs and customary norms of a particular group in a society or community. Culture also refers to the social relations and relationships that occur within and between societies. When culture is perceived as a commodity and become commodified, it will result in the birth of a new economic branch - cultural industries - which are enterprises that produce cultural goods and services. At this juncture, it is still a conceptual challenge to accurately conceptualize and measure cultural industries given the myriad of diverse meanings attached to this widely-contested economic domain (Khuo, Badarulzaman, Samat, Sirat & Sheikh Dawood, 2015). A review of literature has illustrated that the meaning and conceptualization of cultural industries is diverse across different contexts and countries, and it becomes particularly challenging to

assertively delineate which are the industries that fall in this domain and otherwise (Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale & Cohen 2006). Nevertheless, the following sections will attempt to compare and contrast several definitions of what a cultural industry is by drawing out their similarities and differences.

For instance, according to Meshondhalgh (2002: 11-13) (cited in Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale & Cohen 2006: 6), cultural industries are industries that are involved in producing “social meaning in the form of texts and symbols.” Examples of cultural industries are television, the cinema, radio, music recording, magazine, publishing industries, newspapers and the performing arts. No doubt, in fleshing out the social meanings of texts and symbols, the ‘artistic’ aspect embedded within a (cultural) economic activity and industry is a vital component and differentiating factor. To this end, the German perspective conceptualizes culture industries as all enterprises and self-employed persons whose economic activities are involved in the production, dissemination and intermediation of artistic and cultural products and services (Fesel & Söndermann, 2007: 16). The German viewpoint further defines culture industries as all market segments and sub-sectors that are associated to “culture in a wide sense”, and this includes the arts, film industry, publishing industry, music industry and also all individual artistic ideas, creations and original works of art and the applied arts. Presently, cultural industries in Germany are made up of a core area of nine cultural sectors as displayed in Table 1 below:

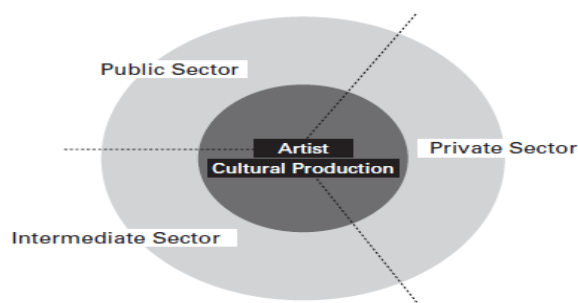
**Table 1: Cultural and Creative Industries in Germany**

<b>A. The core sectors of the cultural industries include:</b>	
1) Publishing industries	Book publishing houses, newspaper publishers, publishers of phonographic records and music
2) Film industries	Film, TV, video production, distribution, cinemas
3) Broadcasting industries	Private radio/television
4) Music, visual and performing arts	Independent artists, private theatres, cabaret and variety theatres, theatre and concert agencies, technical stage enterprises
5) Journalists/News agencies	-
6) Museum shops, arts exhibitions	Commercial museum activities and arts exhibitions
7) Retail trade of cultural goods	Music stores, book stores, galleries, art trade
8) Architectural offices	Interior, garden, design, building and civil engineering architects
9) Design industries	Industrial, product, fashion, textile and similar design
<b>B. The creative sectors to be included in the new concept are:</b>	
1) Advertising	Advertising agencies etc., excluding advertising design
2) Manufacture of software/games	Development of software, games including consultancy, excluding hardware and data processing services
<b>1 + 2 = Creative Industries (11 economic sectors)</b>	

(Source: Fesel & Söndermann, 2007: 16 & 17, extracted from official economic statistics of the German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) and the European Statistical Office, EUROSTAT)

[NOTE: Oftentimes, deliberations on cultural industries are intrinsically linked and cannot be detached from the much-popularised concept of creative industries. Even though these two concepts are not similar but there are overlaps in terms of defining and delineating their boundaries. In the German situation, by simply adding two more sectors (i.e. advertising and manufacture of software/games) to the initial nine core sectors will result in the birth of the creative industries as a whole that comprises 11 sectors.]

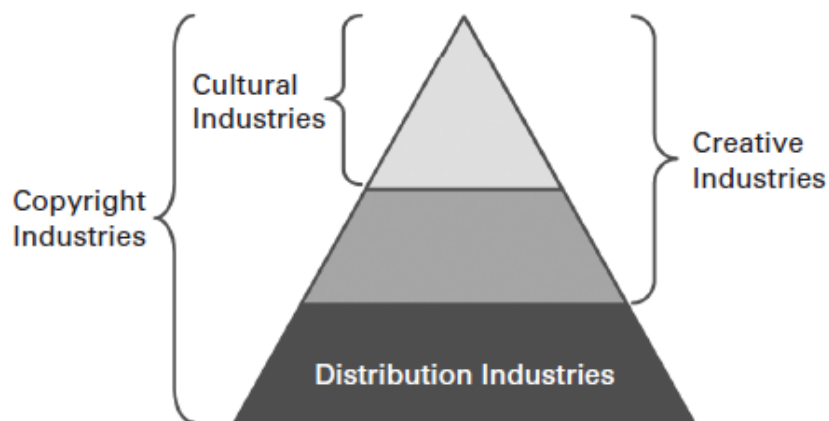
Acknowledging the function assumed by independent cultural professions across a variety of sectors has resulted in the emergence of the Swiss three-sector-model. Based on this model, the cultural sector is separated into two, namely, i) a core area comprising of artists/cultural production; and ii) a periphery section consisting the public, the intermediate (non-profit) and the private (market-oriented) sub-sectors. Within the periphery section, the first two sub-sectors are known as “non-profit oriented culture” whilst the third sub-sector assumes a “profit-oriented” or “commercial” culture and is popularly referred to as the “culture industries” (Fesel & Söndermann, 2007: 14). Refer to Diagram 1 below to view the Swiss three-sector-model.



**Diagram 1: The Swiss three-sector-model of the cultural sector**

(Source: Fesel & Söndermann, 2007: 14)(Extracted from original source: Erster Kulturwirtschaftsbericht Schweiz 2003 [First Cultural Industries Report Switzerland 2003]; edited by: University of Art and Design, Zurich)

In addition to the above Swiss three-sector model, the “Singapore Model” is another option to refer to in terms of dissecting the meaning of cultural industries. Moving ahead, the Singaporean Model provides a broader and more comprehensive coverage of the position of cultural industries *vis-à-vis* creative and copyright industries (Fesel & Söndermann, 2007). As depicted in Diagram 2 below, cultural industries are a sub-sector within creative industries and collectively they fall under copyright industries.



**Diagram 2: Singapore Model of Creative Industries**

(Source: Fesel & Söndermann, 2007: 15)

(Extracted from original source: Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore 2005)

In America, for instance, movements like Americans for the Arts (AFTA) define cultural industries as businesses (both for-profit and nonprofit) that create and distribute the arts. Basically, their taxonomy comprises industries that generate cultural products such as movies, novels, musical recordings, paintings, prints, TV and radio shows as well as industries like architecture and design which are instrumental towards the creation of space and aesthetic character for consumption. In addition, AFTA also acknowledges the role of museums, public art, performing arts and arts education towards enhancing community livability via direct and live cultural experiences (Markusen, Wassall, DeNatale & Cohen 2006: 15).

#### *Some Key Characteristics of Cultural Industries*

Broadly speaking, the key characteristics of cultural industries are defined by the element of time. Some cultural industries are historic production methods that warrant preservation whilst modern forms of cultural industries leverage on technology substantially. For instance, the size of cultural industries can range from being large to very small or even exist as a one-person enterprise. Nowadays, 'solo' and 'soho' working patterns are popular and common amongst creative employees. This pattern of work is prevalent especially in modern cultural industries where state-of-the-art technology and cost-efficient equipment and gadgets are used to facilitate and ensure timely production. Technological innovations adopted by creative employees in modern cultural industries have also opened up and made the industry and its employees more vigorous and malleable. For instance, modern cultural industries consist of small enterprises and freelance employees who are flexible, adaptive, creative and highly responsive towards changing internal/external environments, market demands and trends. Having understood the meaning of culture, cultural industries and their characteristics, the next section will highlight the role of culture in sustainable economic development.

### *Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development*

In the last decade, the discourse on sustainable development is beginning to recognize the element of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development in addition to the dimensions of economics, social and environment (AuthentiCity 2008; Khoo & Badarulzaman 2011). For instance, two consecutive “Culture and Development” United Nation General Assembly Resolutions in 2010 and 2011 respectively, have highlighted the importance of culture in development. The resolutions called for ‘mainstreaming of culture into development policies and strategies, and underscored culture’s intrinsic contribution to sustainable development’ (UNESCO 2012: 3). Increasingly, culture is deemed an enabler and a driver for sustainable development by strategizing and leveraging on cultural/creative industries, cultural heritage, sustainable cultural tourism and cultural amenities. The cultural and creative industries are promising sectors in the global economy with a growth rate of 17.6% in the Middle East, 13.9% in Africa, 11.9% in South America, 9.7% in Asia, 6.9% in Oceania, and 4.3% in North and Central America (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008)(cited in UNESCO 2012: 4).

Besides generating revenue, a culture-sensitive approach is fundamental towards addressing and solving both the economic and human rights dimension of socio-economic issues (i.e. poverty, discrimination, marginalization). Intervention and development approaches that consider the cultural context and the idiosyncrasies of a place and community’s culture are important. Amidst volatile global changes, initiatives and efforts in advocating grassroots participation and empowering local communities to uphold their culture and local knowledge are vital towards making development more sustainable and inclusive. On this score, UNESCO (2012: 7-8) has recommended measures to leverage on culture’s contribution to sustainable development as outlined below:

- To support and nurture cultural and creative industries, cultural tourism, cultural institutions and culture-based urban regeneration as economic catalyst to spur local economic development, generate employment opportunities and encourage entrepreneurship.
- To safeguard cultural assets, especially intangible cultural assets, that are considered unique, non-renewable or endangered due to rapid modernization.
- To harness on the promise and potential of arts to promote civic-mindedness, social cohesion, develop creativity and encourage entrepreneurship.

This paper, however, will look specifically at culture as an urban cultural resource to stimulate local economic development.

### *Culture as an Urban Cultural Resource*

Increasingly, culture has been earmarked and capitalized as a pivotal resource to construct the image and identity of a place, especially in the urban context. As cities globalize and compete in today’s global economy, many cities are repositioning themselves to leverage on the cultural endowments of their cities for value-added comparative advantage and competitive edge (AuthentiCity 2008: 22). Like in many European, North American and even some Asian cities, urban planning initiatives are moving towards integrating and capitalizing on the dynamisms of ‘place, culture and economy’ to facilitate the rise of culture-led urban regeneration as a new urban planning strategy (AuthentiCity 2008: 21). Buzzwords such as ‘cultural industries, cultural occupations, cultural employees, cultural economy’ have inundated both scholarly literature as well as policy agendas (Bianchini et al, 1988; Smidt-Jensen, 2007; Sasaki, 2008). The notion of ‘culture-led urban regeneration’ is steadfastly emerging as the strategy to revitalize and stimulate

local economic development in cities, hence, the birth of the “creative/cultural city” vision (Bianchini et al, 1988; Landry, 2000, 2005). Besides considering only the physical, economic, technological and public policy domains, planning for sustainable urban development now focuses on integrating the element of culture in the planning process (Smidt-Jensen, 2007; Steward & Kruska, 2008:3). Scholars and proponents argue that strategic planning and utilization of cultural resources can foster local community development and develop urban areas accordingly (Landry, 2005). In quoting Charles Landry (2005: 7),

*“cultural resources are embodied in peoples’ creativity, skills and talents. They are not only ‘things’ like buildings, but also symbols, activities and the repertoire of local products in crafts, manufacturing and services .. Urban cultural resources include the historical, industrial and artistic heritage representing assets including architecture, urban landscapes or landmarks. Local and indigenous traditions of public life, festivals, rituals or stories as well as hobbies and enthusiasms. Resources like language, food and cooking, leisure activities, clothing and sub-cultures or intellectual traditions that exist everywhere are often neglected, but can be used to express the specialness of a location.”*

As succinctly highlighted by Landry (2005), there is an abundance of unique cultural resources that can be found within the boundaries of a city. These unique urban resources can then accord a particular city its competitive edge and differentiating factor. The challenge, however, is to synergise these cultural resources together with citizen creativity to form an innovative economic base propelled by culture (Sasaki, 2008). This vision of culture-led urban regeneration has been operationalised in many Western cities (i.e. Manchester, Melbourne, Edinburgh) and even in Asian cities like Kanazawa, Chiang Mai and Singapore. A sterling example is the city of Toronto in Canada where the city is driven towards culture-led regeneration based on a multi-dimensional approach. The City of Toronto officially adopted a ten-year Culture Plan that leveraged on Toronto’s arts, culture and heritage assets to strategically brand the city as a global cultural capital. Thinking ahead, Toronto has even encapsulated cultural planning as the city’s future with initiatives such as *Vision 2011: Thinking Big about Culture-led Regeneration* which will continue to re-use, renew and rejuvenate the arts and other cultural resources as culture assumes a key and transformative role towards urban revitalisation (AuthentiCity, 2008: 41, 43-44).

At this juncture, the profit-oriented economic notions that derived from selling culture are delicately balanced by a turn towards social inclusiveness upon which each indigenous cultural industry is positioned within. In the UK for instance, integration of the social dimension manifested through local engagements, community empowerment and participatory cultural activities are strongly advocated by the central government in the late 1990s (Smidt-Jensen, 2007: 9). Based on this rationale, economies and cities worldwide are beginning to capitalize on their own homegrown and indigenous ‘culture’ as a socio-economic means towards sustainable economic development as mentioned earlier.

However, adopting culture as the main economic driver of urban spaces is not without critiques. Opponents have contended that an economy based on culture if motivated purely by economic gains will inadvertently nurture high lifestyle consumption patterns that are elitist, materialistic and socially exclusive in nature. Ironically, the call to champion for inclusiveness and integrate social dimensions into urban development is merely rhetoric and has little practical reality. This is because cities leveraging on culture are currently experiencing tensions, conflicts and divides at the local level. Culture industries which are predominantly consumption-driven are in a way bias towards wealthy and elitist groups. No doubt that the emergence and flourishing of cultural industries in urban areas have actualized a ‘renaissance effect’ by giving the city a new lease of life and putting into motion the gentrification process (Bianchini, 1993). Nevertheless, it is

also the pervasiveness and often irreversible process of gentrification that has created the divide in the city. Scholars have argued that in their overzealousness to drive and increase their city's competitiveness based on culture, the conflicts and incompatibilities between social and economic policies are often overlooked. Arguably, the gentrification process set forth by cultural industries will presumably cause indigenous communities and businesses in a society to languish due to exorbitant rents and escalating property prices. This process subsequently hollows out and displaces the poor in cities (Zukin, 1995).

### **An Economy Based On Culture: What It Means For George Town?**

On the Malaysian front, efforts and initiatives towards a culture-led urban economy are promising and forthcoming. Many Malaysian cities like George Town, Malacca City, Taiping, Kampar, just to name a few, are city centers that are bestowed with unique cultures, local knowledge, traditional trades/livelihoods and location-specific norms/customs/beliefs that ought to be preserved and conserved. Beyond doubt, when the economic benefits of these cultural resources are carefully harnessed, they will serve as a viable economic base to provide local employment opportunities, generate income for the local populace and encourage entrepreneurship towards sustainable livelihoods. From a social perspective, collective preservation of cultural endowments will foster social cohesion, encourage youth involvement and enhance the identity of a community or society. In the George Town context for instance, to keep Penang culture alive, the public are urged to think of "*Penang as a Culture Capital, and by thinking of Culture as Capital*" (Ooi, 2011). By the same vein, local scholars have explored the notion of capitalizing on urban cultural resources in George Town (Khoo & Badarulzaman 2011; Khoo, Badarulzaman, Samat & Dawood, 2014). For instance, George Town's gastronomy has also been examined as a viable cultural resource to stimulate urban regeneration (Khoo & Badarulzaman 2014a; Khoo & Badarulzaman 2014b; Khoo & Badarulzaman 2014c).

Incidentally, George Town's inscription into the UNESCO World Heritage List on 7 July 2008 augurs well towards transforming the city to be an economy led by culture. No doubt that George Town was inscribed due to the city's fulfillment of three criteria of UNESCO's Outstanding Universal Values upon which 'culture' has a dominant role to play. Under Criterion (ii), George Town is representative of 'exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns in East and Southwest Asia...' whilst Criterion (iii) recognizes George Town as a 'living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life.' Finally, Criterion (iv) acknowledges the way George Town's physical and built environment manifests 'a unique architecture, culture, townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South Asia' (Malaysia, 2011: A4-1).

Having identified the tangible and intangible cultural assets and endowments within George Town, thus, the operational definition of an economy based on culture for George Town would entail harnessing the economic potentials of these activities whilst at the same time take into consideration the elements of social equity and inclusiveness of all stakeholders towards sustainable economic development. To this end, strategic planning as well as functional check and balance mechanisms are required to develop, harness and leverage on George Town's cultural products and services. Pragmatically, the key for success depends mainly on the local people of Penang who are in the position to exploit, leverage and market the diverse and bountiful cultural resources that are readily available within the city's limits but these resources are often overlooked and disregarded by the community. Thus, to quantify and measure the presence of cultural industries in Penang, some key socio-economic indicators that can be used are as follows:



- Employment opportunities – headcount of cultural employee(s)
- Income generation – salary/wage paid to cultural employee(s)
- Volume of business related to cultural industries
- Market segment of cultural industries – domestic or foreign?
- Revenue generation – profit or loss?
- Existence and type(s) of ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ industries/sub-sectors to support or act as feeder industries to existing cultural industries/sub-sectors
- Statistics to show and report the use of
  - a) local expertise/manpower;
  - b) local material/ingredients;
  - c) local knowledge/skills/know-how in the production process.

Bearing in mind that a culture-led economy might encounter situations where economic motives (through indiscriminate processes and undesirable outcomes of gentrification) might overpower the benefits of social objectives and jeopardize the overarching principles of sustainable development, therefore, extra care and caution have to be exercised when implementing and operationalizing policies towards an economy based on culture. Studies have shown that globalization and homogenization of culture across the globe pose as a serious threat towards local culture when indigenous cultural endowments and original resources are at risk of being compromised. For example in built environment, scholars are questioning why architectural manifestations are increasingly similar and “westernized” to the extent of being less respectful and being insensitive towards local cultures (Steward & Kuska, 2005: 3). Hence, to incorporate and integrate culture in sustainable development, the adoption and promotion of culture as an catalytic impetus of development has to be embedded in local culture and knowledge systems instead of emulating imported and hybridized western cultural products and value systems (Khoo & Badarulzaman 2014: 23-24; see also Evan, nd: 43).

In reality, however, the issue of Western culture permeating and infringing upon the integrity of local culture is fast playing out in George Town post-UNESCO listing. The most striking example amongst others would be the infiltration of Western bistro and café culture in inner city George Town. The way Western-styled café bistros have sprouted and made such a marked presence in inner city George Town is alarming and a cause for concern. Under such circumstances, naturally, Penang’s own local culture is being threatened by potential adverse impacts on the historic city’s tangible and intangible heritage. With the mushrooming of many Western-styled bistros, George Town’s built environment and tangible heritage will, to some extent, have to give way to this ‘new culture’ and embrace architectural styles that are incongruent and insignificant to the local context. By taking a stroll in the inner city, one would be surprised to witness how traditional Penang shop houses have been indiscriminately converted and remodeled to look like cafés in a setting that is totally foreign to the local urban milieu. Such examples are rampant in the inner city along Armenian Street, Beach Street and Carnarvon Street. Likewise, the interior ambience, setting, dining culture and even menu found in these cafés belong to a cultural setting and value system that is totally alienated to the local community. For instance, Italian types of coffee such as cappuccino, latte, macchiato and such are mainstays in these menus replacing traditional beverages like ‘Kopi-O’ and ‘Teh Tarik’. Similarly, traditional breakfast fares like ‘Roti Bakar’ or ‘Nasi Lemak’ are gradually losing their appeal as they are being replaced by Continental favorites such as croissants, baguettes and the whole array of Western breads, tartlets and cakes. As such, the move to leverage and over-emphasize on culture has to be undertaken with much care and caution. Otherwise, as illustrated in this case of a foreign culture infiltrating and blemishing

George Town's local culture will result in a tensed situation of unnecessary cultural conflicts and clashes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, to comprehend and provide an operational definition for an economy based on culture is indeed a challenging endeavour given the diverse meanings and peculiarities that are attached to the meaning of culture and cultural resources for different contexts and societies. In this paper with George Town as the focus, the above comprehension and operational definition of cultural industries are proposed in line with the elements of culture as highlighted in the Outstanding Universal Values that won the city its UNESCO World Heritage City accolade.

Based on the three criteria of the OUVs, George Town should strive to harness the city's cultural resources and prowess in its quest to be an economy that is driven by culture, and yet simultaneously, precautionary measures by all stakeholders should go towards conserving the authenticity and integrity of the city's cultural resources without comprising the opportunity for future generations of Penangites to enjoy and fathom the cultures, norms, values and local knowledge that was passed down by their forefathers.

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