

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACH IN THE CONSERVATION OF HERITAGE BUILDINGS IN TAIPING, MALAYSIA

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***Abstract**---Community engagement has been revealed as a significant approach for heritage building conservation. This study aims to identify the extent of local community involvement in the community engagement efforts that had been undertaken to conserve heritage buildings in Taiping. It also seeks to determine the relationship between the perceived costs and benefits of the project and the level of involvement in decision-making. Besides, the relationship between the level of involvement and support of the community for the conservation of heritage buildings was also explored. The data collection methods used were questionnaire survey and interviews. The questionnaire survey forms were distributed to 82 private building owners of gazette heritage buildings in Taiping. Then, interviews were conducted among eight private building owners who are directly involved in the conservation of heritage buildings and an officer of the local authority for validation purpose. The findings obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analyses show that the level of community involvement in conserving heritage buildings was low, as their opinions were not taken into account throughout the decision-making process. The community support was also low due to the losses incurred. Perceived benefits and perceived loss were found to have a significant relationship with the level of community involvement.*

***Keyword**---community engagement, decision making, heritage building, conservation, Taiping*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Heritage buildings are part of cultural heritage that have become a crucial element in the heritage tourism sector. Prior studies show that cultural heritage was valued differently, often in clashes or conflicting arguments and depending very much on particular concerns and motivation of a certain group [1]. A heritage building is defined as an old building that has survived for at least 100 years [2]. The building has an outstanding heritage value from the historical, artistic or scientific points of view where it opened up business, investment and job opportunities to the local community. Malaysia established its own National Heritage Act in 2005 to provide support for the

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conservation and preservation of the country's national heritage. The national level movement to protect national heritage in Malaysia was also established at the state government and local authority levels [1].

Isa et al. (2015) suggested that community engagement allows the society to support the effort towards conserving the heritage buildings [3]. Consensus building, being a goal of the community engagement exercise, is very important to the heritage building conservation because many problems that exist may affect diverse groups of people with different interests. Nonetheless, the local community's willingness to get involved in, and support, the heritage building conservation depends on several factors such as the sense of community, perceived benefits, participation in decision making process and so on [4]. Meanwhile, community involvement is the main factor that can affect the process of tourism development. Without community involvement, tourism development is difficult to be achieved. Tourism is central to this respect, since heritage buildings can draw tourists to a specific destination [5]. Prior research shows that the local community should be involved in the decision-making process so they too can benefit from tourism. Currently in Malaysia, community engagement in the decision-making process of valuing heritage value or heritage significance is rather minimal or limited to the early stage of identifying the history and background of the site [1].

Based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET), perceived benefits and costs are effective predictors of the support for tourism development [6]. If the host residents perceive that they are likely to benefit from such exchanges without incurring intolerable costs, these residents are likely to get involved in, and support, the tourism development. However, if the host residents perceive that the tourism would incur more costs than benefits, they are likely to oppose this development [7]. A study by Lee (2013) [11] revealed that community involvement significantly and directly correlates with perceived benefits and indirectly affects the support for sustainable tourism development for the host residents living in a community-based tourism area. The residents of a community decide whether to become dependent on the benefits and costs of tourism by weighing economic, social, cultural, and environmental concerns [6, 7]. Factors that influence the local community support for tourism development had been extensively studied by tourism scholars. However, relatively few studies have been conducted on the relationship between community involvement in the decision-making process with the support of the community for the conservation of heritage buildings through a community engagement approach. Thus, this paper aims at contributing to this debate. The discussion builds on the analysis of Taiping heritage town, a well-known gazetted heritage town in Malaysia, in which the community engagement approach had been implemented for almost eleven years. However, most of the heritage buildings in Taiping were not being cared for, demolished or abandoned to generate higher profits through economic activities that have been carried out in the new developed area.

This paper reports a discussion on the community engagement approach applied to the conservation of heritage buildings in Taiping heritage town, according to the following research questions: to what extent has the involvement of local communities been undertaken to conserve the heritage buildings?; is there any relationship between the perceived costs and benefits of the heritage building conservation with the involvement of the communities to the conservation efforts? Also, is there any relationship between the level of community involvement in the decision-making and their support for the building conservation efforts?

## **II. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR HERITAGE BUILDING CONSERVATION**

Community represents the stakeholders on the nature entity and also refers to communities that create, possess and use the spaces [8]. People who live in one area cannot be separated from the physical elements that exist in their environment as they are also included in the cultural, social and environmental elements. Therefore, the engagement of the community in development is important because it will affect the condition and quality of their lives. Through the community engagement approach, the community feels that they are part of the decision-making process and this will enhance their sense of responsibility.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a framework for looking into the depth and scope of engagement. It is a useful framework for thinking about different objectives and approaches for community engagement. At one end of the spectrum, engagement is simply an information-sharing exercise and at the other end, engagement can lead to genuine community empowerment and local control [9]. The framework is based on five stages of engagement, each one increasing the levels of participation and involvement. The first stage of engagement is to provide the community with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the opportunities, problems, alternatives and/or solutions. The community is kept informed through information dissemination such as by using newsletters, websites and/or exhibitions. This is a one-way process that becomes the starting point of dialogue with the community. The second stage of engagement is to consult the community by obtaining their feedback on the analysis, alternatives and/or decisions made. The community could be consulted through focus group discussions, surveys or public meetings. The third stage is to involve the community by working directly with them throughout the process to ensure that community concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. The fourth stage is collaboration, whereby it requires partnering with the public in each aspect of the decision. The final stage is empowering, in which the final decision making is placed in the hands of the community.

## **III. COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

The support of stakeholders is one of the key success of tourism development implementation in a community [10]. Currently, tourism development decisions are mostly made from the top down, where 'experts' make decisions and often decisions made are not reflective of the community's interests and opinions. SET was regularly used by various researchers within the tourism literature as their theoretical base when studying the perceptions towards tourism and its impacts on the communities. Based on the SET, if the local community perceives that the benefit is assured without incurring more costs, then the local community is likely to be involved in tourism and activities that will lead to its sustainability [11] and tend to oppose its development if the local community perceives that the costs will be more than the benefits [7]. Besides of SET, Network Theory is also relevant in understanding the local community's support for tourism development. This is because many of the tourism destination's natural or manmade assets appear to be jointly owned [12]. Therefore, community involvement as a supporting factor for tourism development in the heritage tourism destination tends to be rooted and connected with the network theory [4]. The support of the local community for tourism development can be enhanced if they are involved or if they participate in the decision-making process [13] of tourism development as the host community [4]. Meanwhile, the Power-relations Theory is concerned with the power the individuals and organizations have to exercise to advance their own interests. The issues of power and authority need to be addressed at every stage of the collaboration

process. This can be achieved by ensuring that all legitimate participants of tourism-related activities in a local community are involved in the decision-making process of tourism development [3, 4].

#### **IV. TAIPING HERITAGE TOWN**

Taiping is a gazetted heritage town that is rich with historical heritage buildings. However, most of the heritage buildings in Taiping had not been cared for, demolished or abandoned in order to generate higher profits through economic activities carried out in the new developed area. The proclamation of Taiping as a heritage town does not get full support from the owners of the private heritage buildings [3]. The strict guidelines that have to be complied by the owner of the heritage buildings have led them to protest and claim that the proclamation had a negative impact on the increase in the added value to their properties [3,14].

In 2008, the local authority of Taiping, had introduced a 12-year planning program to preserve and conserve the tourism area of the city, known as RKK (*Rancangan Kawasan Khas, Kawasan Warisan Taiping*) or Special Area Plan of Taiping Heritage Town. RKK has provided several benefits for the communities for conserving heritage buildings. The community or building owners involved in the displacement due to the development on their land were given the priority to own a house or shops at reasonable prices. In addition, they were given the option to rent the business space with reasonable rates and good returns. The communities were also given preference in job offers including the involvement in the construction and suppliers' jobs. They were given the opportunity to engage directly in the tourism and hospitality sectors [15]. One of the plans in the RKK, is known as 'Heritage Buildings Preservation Project'. Among the key strategies being implemented to ensure the success of this project is to encourage local community engagement, particularly by undertaking development in collaboration with the owners of the gazetted heritage buildings in Taping [15]. Three types of incentives had been given to the owners of heritage buildings when they are involved in the heritage building conservation project. The incentives include the reduction of taxes for the building owners and paint subsidy provision from the Heritage Department or private agency (paint manufacturer) to engage in the heritage building, incentives in terms of the exclusion of processing fees of applications for planning permission and to speed up the planning approval process. Through the 'adaptive re-use building' method, the heritage buildings' owners were allowed to change the use of the building to be more economical, while keeping the buildings in requirement of the characteristics of Taiping Heritage Town and maintaining the building's façade [15].

However, there are several costs to be paid by the owners of the heritage buildings such as to comply with the development control guidelines that require the building to be preserved with its original condition. Control actions and requirements of the heritage building preservation by road in Taiping as formulated in Larut Matang Local Plan 2015 Report explained that heritage buildings are not allowed to be demolished or renovated. Meanwhile, the height of the buildings should be according to the original height. Most of the private heritage buildings are at a height of not more than two floors [16]. Most building owners claimed that the implementation of the guidelines had prevented them from adding value to the properties [14]. The other issues such as maintenance costs, safety and soundness of the old buildings and business competitiveness to the surrounding new economic growth areas are also considered as the costs that are to be incurred by the heritage building owners. Consequently, the buildings were

dilapidated and abandoned by the owners in order to generate higher profits through economic activities carried out in the new economic growth area.

Recognizing the importance of community engagement to achieve sustainability, especially to a heritage town which is closely related to the tourism sector, the local authority had introduced the community engagement approach to implement the RKK efficiently. There are four stages of community engagement that had been documented in RKK [15] including to establish a steering group which comprises all levels of the community who are interested to get involved, to provide a number of forums for people to present their views and feedback, to formulate several strategies and development programs by considering public opinion, to evaluate and interpret public opinion on development plans, to manage the allocation of funding and sponsorship, to identify the priority of the project implementation phases and to revise all processes for controlling and regulating. Besides, the monitoring process and giving recognition such as by providing incentives and awards to the community or individuals involved in the projects were also mentioned in the documents.

## **V. METHODOLOGY**

The research design of this study relies upon extensive quantitative and qualitative research of a case study which is Taiping Heritage Town. The primary data collection is mainly based on questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews (directed towards the owners of private heritage buildings and the local authority officer). Meanwhile, the secondary data collection was mainly based on the government documentary sources including Local Plan of LarutMatang 2015 and Special Area Plan of Taiping Heritage Town.

### **Sampling and replication logic**

The questionnaires were distributed to the building owners of private gazetted heritage buildings in Taiping. Eighty-threesets of questionnaire were sent out and 82 (99%) completed questionnaires were received. The questionnaire covered almost the whole population of the private heritage buildings in Taiping since the population of the building totaled 83. The other one building owner had not been interviewed as the building was abandoned and the owner could not be reached. Then, interviews were conducted among eight private buildings' owners and a local authority officer who was being directly involved in the activities and programs of heritage building conservation in Taiping. The building owners were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8 and the local authority was coded as G1. They were questioned about their involvement in the community engagement efforts undertaken by the local authority in conserving heritage buildings. Benefits, losses and the level of support for the heritage building conservation were also queried to obtain more detailed information. The respondents interviewed were selected via a snowball sampling technique, asking each key informant to indicate a list of other prospective contact persons and then the process is repeated.

### **Data Analysis**

Data collected from the questionnaire survey were analyzed by employing the quantitative analysis method, while the qualitative analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. Descriptive statistics was used to identify the extent of the involvement of the local community in conserving heritage buildings. Pearson correlation was

employed to identify the relationship between the perceived costs and benefits of the heritage building conservation efforts and the support of the community towards conserving heritage buildings; and the relationship between the levels of community involvement in decision-making and their support towards conserving heritage buildings. Meanwhile, the qualitative data obtained from the interview sessions were analyzed using the content analysis method to explain the quantitative result.

## VI. RESULTS

### *Quantitative results*

A total of 56 (68.3%) men and 26 (31.7%) women were involved in this study. Briefly, two respondents (2.41%) aged between 20-30 years, 20 respondents (24.4%) aged 31-40 years, 33 respondents (40.2%) aged between 40-51 years, and 27 respondents (32.9%) aged older than 51. Respondents consist of two nations which are two Malay respondents (2.4%) and 80 Chinese respondents (97.6%). The respondents consist of three types of religions namely Islam (2 respondents), Buddhism (65 respondents) and Christianity (15 respondents). The level of education showed that three respondents (3.7%) had completed their studies at the Lower Secondary Assessment level, whereas 26 respondents (31.70%) had graduated at the Malaysian Certificate of Education level. Meanwhile, a total of 25 respondents (30.5%) graduated with Diploma. Next, a total of two respondents (2.4%) and 26 respondents (31.7%) had graduated at the top level of Bachelor and Master's degree, respectively. In terms of employment, the majority of respondents are self-employed with a total of 68 (82.90%). They are the heritage building owners and they run their own business. Next, a total of 12 (14.6%) respondents work in various private sectors. The rest consists of a respondent who works in the government sector and also a housewife.

### *Involvement of building owners in the community engagement efforts towards conserving heritage buildings*

According to the RKK, There are 10 heritage building conservation efforts that had been conducted by the local authority as listed in the first column of Table 1. However, the result shows that the majority of the respondents (65.2%) had not been well informed about the community engagement program conducted by the authority in conserving the heritage buildings in Taiping (Table 1). This is in line with their involvement in the community engagement program which is at a low level (mean score of 2.35).

Table 1: The level of involvement of the local community in the heritage building conservation efforts in Taiping.

No	The heritage building conservation efforts by the local authority	Well informed on the efforts		Respondents involvement	
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Mean Score (MS)	Level
1.	Established an association to represent the community. The community had been encouraged to join the association.	54.9	45.1	2.23	Low
2.	Conducted several forums to receive the views and feedback from the owners of the heritage buildings. The owners had been invited to attend the forums.	30.5	69.5	2.06	Low
3.	Developed strategies and implemented the development programs by taking into account the views of the building owners. The owners were invited to share their views.	53.7	46.3	2.84	Moderate
4.	Evaluated and translated the building owners' views into the development plan.	92.7	7.3	1.91	Low
5.	Provided an amount of financial (budget) and sponsorship to the heritage buildings' owners involved. Owners were required to get involved and support the conservation strategies.	3.7	96.3	1.91	Low
6.	Made revision on the process of controlling and supervising the work on the heritage buildings.	50.0	50.0	3.01	Moderate
7.	Ensures the implementation of the project is according to the time and strategy that had been determined.	14.6	85.4	1.90	Low
8.	Provides the incentives and awards for the representative of the resident association and individuals involved in the project.	4.9	95.1	1.60	Low
9.	Prioritises the local people who are involved in the project, to work in the construction sector of the area.	12.2	87.8	1.93	Low
10.	Residents were given the opportunity to participate directly in the tourism field.	30.5	69.5	2.42	Low
<b>Total</b>		<b>34.8</b>	<b>65.2</b>	<b>2.35</b>	<b>Low</b>

Scoring Guide: (MS = 0-2.49) = low (MS = 2.50-3.49) = moderate (MS = 3.50-5.00) = high

***The relationship between perceived benefits and costs with the level of involvement in the community engagement approach.***

The respondents' perceived that their satisfaction with the benefits gained from the heritage building conservation efforts in Taiping was moderate (MS = 2.79) while the losses incurred were high (MS = 4.28) (Table 2). This was due to the fact that the benefits or incentives offered by the local authority did not fully benefit their business. Some incentives or benefits as stated in the RKK were not implemented by the local authority due to budget constraints. Most of the benefits were not all in the form of cash. There were several benefits provided by the local authority in the form of maintaining business premises, reducing tax rates and so on. Yet, the benefits were not interesting. The involvement of building owners in the heritage building conservation program in Taiping town was also forced to incur high losses as shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Level of satisfaction of local community in the benefits incurred from the heritage buildings conservation program of Taiping.

No.	Provided Benefits	Level of Satisfaction	
		Mean Score (MS)	Level
1.	The image of Taiping town is enhanced as a heritage city.	4.45	High
2.	Low-income heritage building owners are assisted to repair their properties.	2.08	Low
3.	The local authority seeks to encourage tourist arrivals in Taiping.	4.67	High
4.	Building owners are given the option of renting business spaces at low costs.	1.51	Low
5.	Granting paint subsidies to the owners to maintain the authenticity of the building.	3.16	Moderate
6.	Building owners are given the priority to own a home / shop at reasonable prices.	1.62	Low
7.	Tax exemption on business premises.	2.06	Low
<b>Average</b>		<b>2.79</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

*Scoring Guide: MS 0-2.49 = low; MS 2.50-3.49 = moderate; MS 3.50-5.00 = high*

Table 3: Losses incurred from the heritage buildings conservation program of Taiping.

No.	Losses	Level of Losses	
		Mean Score (MS)	Level
1.	High maintenance costs.	4.43	High

No.	Losses	Level of Losses	
		Mean Score (MS)	Level
2.	Building renovation is controlled and limited.	4.45	High
3.	Need to comply with the requirements set by the local authority.	4.38	High
4.	Business location is poor	4.13	High
5.	Not profitable business	4.34	High
6.	Not interested in the maintenance of heritage buildings.	4.35	High
7.	The incentives provided by the local authority are low.	4.35	High
<b>Average</b>		<b>4.28</b>	<b>High</b>

*Scoring Guide: MS 0-2.49 = low; MS 2.50-3.49 = moderate; MS 3.50-5.00 = high*

A correlation analysis was used to show the relationship between the perceived losses, benefits of the project implementation, the level of involvement in making decisions and the level of the community support in the conservation of heritage buildings in Taiping. Table 4 indicates the Pearson correlation result. The result shows that there was a significant relationship between the level of perceived benefits and the level of involvement with  $r = 0.365$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . This indicates that the community was not interested to take part in the community engagement programs of heritage building conservation organized by the local authority because the benefits were not satisfying, and vice versa.

Table 4: The Pearson correlation result

Variables	Pearson ( <i>r</i> ) <i>Correlation</i>	Significant( <i>p</i> ) )	Strength
Perceived benefits and the level of community's support	.730	.517	Not significant
Perceived loss and the level of community's support	.200	.985	Not significant
Perceived benefits and the level of involvement	.365	.000	Significant
Perceived loss and the level of involvement	.443**	.000	Significant
The level of involvement and the level of community's support	.175	.115	Not significant

There was a significant and positive relationship between perceived losses and the level of involvement with  $r = 0.443$ ,  $p=0.000$ . The finding shows that the higher the level of involvement of the respondents, the higher the perceived losses that they suffered. This result was supported by the descriptive results of the perceived benefits of the heritage building conservation program in Taiping, which was at a moderate level (mean score of 2.97) and the loss was high (mean score of 4.28). Meanwhile, the relationship between the level of involvement of the local

communities in decision making and their supporting level towards conserving heritage buildings were not significant, with  $r=0.175$ ,  $p=0.115$ . A significant relationship was also not found between perceived benefits and the level of community support and between perceived loss and the level of community support. Therefore, perceived benefits and perceived loss can be used to affect the community involvement to conserve heritage buildings effectively. However, a community who has greater involvement does not mean that it sincerely supports heritage building conservation efforts. Although this finding conflicts with the results of previous studies such as by Lee in 2013 [11], this variance may be explained by differences pertaining to the studies of community development stages and attitude of the host residents.

### *Qualitative Findings*

Qualitative results show that all nine respondents including one local officer and eight building owners acknowledged the conservation efforts of the heritage building in Taiping. However, none of the heritage building owners was involved in the community engagement program conducted by the local authority. The local officer (G1) had been involved in the project since 2011. G1 stated that the community in Taiping was given late exposure on the heritage values. They only realized when most of the invaluable buildings were ruined. The community was kept informed by the local authority through information dissemination especially through a steering group, known as Chinese Association (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P8). Most of the interviewees claimed that their involvement in the decision making was at low level. They were consulted about the decision made by the local authority, mostly through the sharing of information (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8). Most of their views were not considered. All of the nine interviewees agreed that the community should be involved and empowered in the Taiping heritage building conservation. According to the interviews, the respondents were involved in the heritage building conservation in their own way. For example, P1, P3, and P5 remained the original architecture of the building such as the window design and building facade. They had the awareness after the local authority had spread the news about the Taiping heritage building conservation program.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Heritage building is a cultural resource that enables the generation of economic benefits to assist both communities and nations. Community involvement is the main factors which can affect processes of tourism development; thus, this approach is rendered valuable. According to the finding of this study, perceived benefits and perceived loss have a significant relationship with the community's involvement for heritage building conservation. Despite this, a community with greater involvement does not mean that they sincerely support the heritage building conservation. The finding suggested that the local authority roles especially in providing incentives to those who are voluntarily involved in the conservation program and the involvement of the community in decision making are the significance drives to increase the level of involvement in heritage building conservation in Taiping Heritage Town. In order to implement a successful program, the local authority should seek advanced support from all of the heritage buildings' owners.

## VIII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their deepest appreciation to those from the Ministry of Education Malaysia and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris as the funding bodies of this research under the University Research Grant [code: 2016-0033-108-01].

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