

# **BREAKING SHADOW OF THE PAST: TOURISM AND A BETTER IMAGE OF THE JAPANESE IN PENANG, MALAYSIA**

**(MENGHILANGKAN BAYANGAN MASA LALU, PARIWISATA DAN CITRA JEPANG YANG LEBIH BAIK DI PENANG, MALAYSIA)**

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between Japan and Southeast Asian countries has shifted from occupation to a better political and economic partnership in the last few decades. However, in Penang, Malaysia, bitter legacies rooted in the occupation period are continuously reproduced through the educational system, folklore and the existence of the Penang War Museum. This article aims to identify the role of direct encounters between the host community in Penang and the Japanese visitors in shaping a better image of the Japanese. Employing qualitative methods, findings from a series of observations and in-depth interviews in Penang reveal several interesting facts. First collective memories inherited from the Japanese colonization still exist although the economic and political relationship with Japan has reached its best level. Second, the role of direct interaction completed by the economic benefit from tourism is effective in breaking the cultural block between groups inheriting conflict in the past. Moreover, direct interaction between Japanese visitors and the host community in Penang has significantly produced a better mutual understanding, compared to the perception of people who did not have any interaction with the Japanese visitors. It shows that tourism can be considered as the alternative soft diplomacy to complete the puzzle of public diplomacy through its people-to-people interaction.

**Keywords:** memory, tourism, image, understanding, Japanese, Penang

## **Abstrak**

*Hubungan antara Jepang dan negara-negara Asia Tenggara telah bergeser dari penjajahan menjadi kemitraan politik dan ekonomi dalam beberapa dekade terakhir. Namun, di Penang, Malaysia, warisan masa pendudukan terus direproduksi melalui sistem pendidikan, cerita rakyat, dan keberadaan Museum Perang Penang. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi peran interaksi langsung antara penduduk Penang dan pengunjung dari Jepang dalam membentuk citra yang lebih baik tentang Jepang. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, temuan dari serangkaian observasi dan wawancara mendalam di Penang mengungkapkan beberapa fakta menarik. Pertama, ingatan kolektif yang diwarisi dari penjajahan Jepang masih ada meskipun hubungan ekonomi dan politik dengan Jepang telah mencapai tingkat terbaiknya. Kedua, peran interaksi langsung yang dilengkapi oleh keuntungan ekonomi dari kegiatan pariwisata cukup efektif dalam memecah ketegangan budaya antara kelompok-kelompok yang mewarisi konflik di masa lalu. Selain itu, interaksi langsung antara pengunjung Jepang dan masyarakat tuan rumah di Penang secara signifikan menghasilkan pandangan baru terhadap orang Jepang, dibandingkan dengan persepsi masyarakat yang tidak memiliki interaksi dengan pengunjung dari Jepang. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa pariwisata dapat dianggap sebagai alternatif diplomasi budaya untuk melengkapi pencapaian diplomasi publik melalui interaksi antar masyarakat.*

**Kata kunci:** memori, pariwisata, citra, pemahaman, Jepang, Penang

## **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between Japan and Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, has transformed from occupation to close cooperation after World War II, particularly in terms of economics, infrastructure, and trading. Moreover, fashion, language, food, tv shows, education and tourism have also influenced the relationship between these two regions in the last few decades. The establishment of Fukuda Doctrine which was based on a speech delivered by Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in 1977, the relationship between Japan and ASEAN countries has significantly shifted to be based on mutual understanding, including from economic dependence to “complex interdependence”. This article pays a lot of attention to cultural diplomacy between “people to people” through tourism based-interaction as an effective approach to enhance cultural understanding. Theoretically, tourism facilitates the encounter between people from different cultural backgrounds, both among guests, or in this project; between guests and local people. Thus, the main purpose of the study is to reveal whether direct interaction between Japanese visitors and Malaysian hosts in Penang could enhance a better cultural understanding between people inheriting conflict in the past. Furthermore, this present project also aims to investigate whether tourism can transform the image of the Japanese; from the enemy who brought sorrow in the past to a partner with a good image.

The study of public diplomacy slowly shifted to the need for cultural relations as an important part of public diplomacy between people experiencing conflicts or colonization. In the context of Japan and Southeast Asian countries, the role of cultural diplomacy to build the image of Japan is an important area to study, to complete political and commercial/economic diplomacy. According to Eckart Conze (2003), cultural diplomacy is connected to the “functional” role of culture to achieve foreign particular policy goals through using culture for spreading culturally-shaped images and enhancing “stability, security or even hegemony. Moreover,

Kim (2017) emphasizes that cultural diplomacy is considered the core of public diplomacy paving the way for the increase of economic relationships. It appeared in Malaysia when the first Japanese investment arrived in 1957, or only about twelve years after the end of the occupation, marked by the establishment of a joint venture textile manufacturing (Ismail, 2013).

Mubah (2019) investigates how Japan’s cultural diplomacy has been conducted through several agencies, particularly in introducing Japanese culture, art and education in Southeast Asian countries. It has been started from the new perspective of the Japan government to consider that in the contemporary world, the role of people’s direct interaction is important to complete public diplomacy conducted by the state actors. This strategy then directly been completed by delivering various forms of “virtual” cultural diplomacies through the influx of TV shows displaying the Japanese cartoon movies. Rather than resisting, most Southeast Asian countries and their people accept the influx of these Japan’s symbols. Thus, together with the heavy investment supported by Japan’s advanced technological achievements, it is resulting in a good image of the Japanese brands for its good quality of electronic devices and automotive products. Two common things about public diplomacy through politics and the economy above are; (1) state-sponsored and (2) only involving a limited role of people-people interaction which is an important strategy to enhance cultural understanding in various micro aspects. The concept of cultural understanding is the main theory used to explain the development of a new image of the Japanese which is shaped through tourism as the arena. According to Van Nispen (2015), cultural understanding should be based on the existence of cultural competence which is the ability to deal with cultural differences and conflict in the past and may be depicted as a bridge between your own culture and the culture of the other party you are dealing with. Thus, the relationship between the Japanese and local people in Penang can be considered a bit more challenging when not only culturally different but also inheriting the legacy of conflict during the occupation period.

The study of the relationship between Japan and Southeast Asian countries is dominated by the political circumstances during the colonization and its legacy. Yang (1998) identifies the arrival of the Japanese in Malaya Peninsula in 1941 also stimulated the Malay nationalism sentiment and transformed a single administration body as the starting point for modern Malaysia. Furthermore, Roof (1967) emphasizes before the period of the Japanese occupation, the idea of Malaya as a political entity was not as strong as after the influence of Japanese power. In a similar vein, the arrival of Japan also contributed to the development of Indonesia as a single political identity. Beck (2015) poses that the Japanese invasion had two different aims; to wipe out the Western influence and to exploit the natural and human resources for the Japanese war effort. Thus, the slogan of the older brother of the Indonesian and proud to be Asian triggered Indonesian nationalism. Moreover, the Japanese were also clearly involved in the preparation of the Indonesia Independence declaration in 1945.

The economic and cultural relationship between Southeast Asian countries, particularly Japan with Indonesia and Malaysia also has become the other popular issue to study. The study from Khoiriati (2021) shows the transformation of the relationship between Japan and Indonesia; from political to economic, and then from economic to security issues. After Soekarno's administration opened public diplomacy through political relationships, the New Order continued with the economic agenda focusing on the trading agreement and the engagement of various infrastructure projects in the following decades. Just like Indonesia, the Malaysia government ruled by Mahathir's administration, shifted its economic orientation to Asia by choosing Japan as the role model and encouraging Japan to lead the East Asian Economic Caucus (Furuoka, 2007).

Besides public policy and the economy, tourism also needs to be considered as a part of the cultural diplomacy between Japan and Malaysia. The study by Miyagi et, al (2007) proposed Malaysia as the main destination of

the Japanese elderly through the tourism project namely; My Second Home Project. It aimed to consider Penang as the place for the Japanese retired and elderly by using the root syndrome; memorizing Penang as an important place for the Japanese in the past, including through conducting the Penang Bon Odori Festival. Meanwhile in Indonesia, besides several cultural projects conducted by the Japan Foundation through regularly organizing courses "s events are *cha no yu* (drinking tea ritual), *ikebana* (flowers-making art), *igo* (Japan chess), *Kimono* (Japanese traditional customs), *Furoshki* (wrapping art), *Origami* (Papers-folding art), *Kurata* (Japanese traditional card games) and *shodo* (Japanese calligraphy art) in Jakarta to re-build after the World War II, the issue of tourism is rarely researched (Imam, 2020).

The study by Juwita et.al (2019) focuses on the language barrier and culture shock of Indonesian travellers when visiting Japan. Language is the key to interaction, however, the limited number of Indonesian visiting Japan for short-period tourism who are able to speak Japanese and the different levels of discipline in the public space are two areas for the lack of understanding between these two groups. It shows that there is a sense of a limited cultural understanding of the Indonesians toward Japan although intensive cultural diplomacy has been delivered as previously discussed. Meanwhile, Sari and Listiani (2019) emphasize that Indonesia is listed as the 8<sup>th</sup> top foreign tourist visiting Japan in 2019, and the increasing number of Indonesian visiting Hokkaido for its snow and how the Japanese are listed on the 6<sup>th</sup> rank of foreign tourists visiting Bali in 2019. The novelty of this study is in its focus; when many other studies focus the tourism as an important part of the economic agenda such as the number of tourist's arrival, the economic impact or projection, and how to maximize the flow of outbound tourists to one and another, this project gives the attention to the development of cultural relationships between people to enhance the cultural understanding. Moreover, it focuses on direct cultural diplomacy to strengthen the better understanding between people who have

the bitter collective memory inherited from the colonization period in the past. This issue is rarely given attention; thus, it hopes that grassroots cultural diplomacy through tourism can be placed as an important part of public policy between Japan and Southeast Asian countries.

Ismail (2013;302) gives a clear insight on how cultural understanding can be explained through the interaction between the Japanese expatriates working in Penang with local society through differentiated into four types; provincial (low-level communication and cultural adaptation skill), individualistic (high-level communication skill but do not curios), semi-cosmopolitan (Low-level communication skill but high cultural adaptation) and cosmopolitan (High-level communication and cultural adaptation, have a curiosity to local culture). Thus, this study goes further by taking tourism as its medium of interaction between the Japanese and host community in Penang. In Indonesia, Tobing's study (2018) reveals that intercultural understanding has been effectively developed through various symbols of Torajan culture in Eastern Indonesia. However, the study does not provide sufficient attention to the impact of direct interaction between visitors and local Torajan people on intercultural understanding as mentioned above. Furthermore, Gerke (2011) pays attention to the role of Penang as the "knowledge hub" mediating the encounters between Western culture and Asian. Meanwhile, Azmi et.al (2015) emphasizes the development of a new perspective for tourists after visiting various cultural sites in Yogyakarta as the most popular tourist destination in Indonesia after Bali. However, Azmi's study missed the point of view of the host community after encountering their hosts. Thus, this present study attempts to fill the missing gap of the lack of host's point of view after encountering their guest. Moreover, Japanese visitors are chosen for their connection to the legacy of the colonization period both in Malaysia and Indonesia.

The main idea of this study is to understand the impact of direct interaction through tourism between people having a legacy of conflict in the past, particularly in Penang, Malaysia. The background is the sorrow of Japan's

imperialism era is still continuously reproduced in the educational system, storytelling, and museum in Penang. The attention toward tourism as the grassroots cultural diplomacy to address the problem of cultural clock inherited from conflict in the past is rarely given, meanwhile, it is important to accelerate both political and economic relationships between Japan and Malaysia. Moreover, findings from this study are expected to be useful to encourage tourism as one influential sector to support better public and economic diplomacy between different countries. In general, not only believed as the key driver for various socio-economic progress, but tourism also has enhanced a better intercultural understanding for people having different cultural backgrounds. Thus, understanding the legacy of the Japanese imperialism to the people living in Penang is important to start analyzing the impact of direct encounters with Japanese visitors bringing several transformations in perceiving the Japanese from time to time.

## **METHOD**

This study applied the qualitative method as the research design to gain a complex description of the impact of people -to people interaction through tourism toward the development of a better mutual understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach to understand the individual and group's meaning connected to particular social problem. Thus, the method involves emerging questions and data collected in the participant's setting. Moreover, the data were analyzed inductively building from particulars to general themes, then interpretations was given to the data. The primary data collection relies on participant observation, in-depth interviews and visual documentation to reveal the impact of the tourism activities involving Japanese visitors in Penang.

The interviews focused on whether or not direct interaction can produce different images of the Japanese and what factors determine it. It was started by exploring the early image toward

Japanese connected to the occupation period, what are factors shaping the early image and the present image after encountering the Japanese visitors. 15 informants had been interviewed in Penang with different cultural and economic backgrounds; 8 people from Malay ethnics having different economic backgrounds; hotel staff, online drivers, common people and academia. 5 people of Chinese descents from various economic backgrounds and 2 Indian descents who are a guest house owner and common people were interviewed to complete the Malay perspective. This research was conducted in Georgetown, Tanjung Bunga and Gelugor in Penang added by a series of observation in Penang War Museum, Kedah and Langkawi. Primary data from this research was then completed by the secondary data analysis to reveal the impact from direct interaction with the Japanese visitors on the image of the host community toward Japan in general. Moreover, data analysis focuses on interpreting the different images before and after these interactions in Penang from the different ethnic groups.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Legacy of Sorrow and the development of tourism in Penang

In terms of tourism and the history connected to Japanese imperialism in the past, Penang can be taken as having the strongest one. Penang or “Pulau Pinang” is one of 13 states within the Malaysia Federation which are famous both for its connection to the Japan imperialism in the past and also one of the hot spots for international tourists to visit Malaysia. Penang is a unique state within the federation because of the huge Chinese population compared to the other states. Regarding the Penang State Government report, the number of Chinese groups reaches 39, 5 % of the total population, compared to Malays (44.5%) and Indian descent (9%) from 1.740.405 residents. Moreover, one of the informants, Yow Boon Hong who lives in Tanjung Bunga claimed that the Chinese population in Pulau Pinang may reach 60% of the total population and dominate the business sectors in the state.



Figure 1. Map of Penang State (Source; The Penang Institute)

Japan has a strong historical connection to the Penang community after the British. Almost all the residents of Penang are familiar with the history of the Japanese occupation that came after the British in 1941s. Nurzalina, a researcher from the University Utara Malaysia (UUM) in Kedah emphasized that Japan is known for conquering the British army in Butterworth Port at the end of 1941, then inheriting a lot of stories and sorrows among the people. The image of the Japanese can be represented in the Penang War Museum in Batu Maung, the eastern of Penang Island where many sites describing the horror during Japan’s occupation era. Nurul, one of the Malay women mentioned that the early image of the Japanese would be related to the history subject during secondary school and the display of countless pain as the impact of the Japanese invasion of Penang at the Penang War Museum.

All research informants in Penang from the Malay, Indian and Chinese backgrounds shared two common things in perceiving the history of Japanese occupation in the past; *first*, it was the worst era for the people in Penang in history when thousands of local people were killed, raped, or even beheaded by Japan’s soldiers. Moreover, NA (37-Malay), NH (25-Malay), F

(23-Malay), Aidil (28-Malay), ZA (47-Malay), TS (41-Malay), CST (57-Chinese), YBH (39-Chinese) and NK (53-Indian) emphasized that what is displayed in Penang War Museum gives the clear evidence of the sorrow brought by the Japanese in the past. Penang War Museum is the strongest symbol of World War 2's horror in Malaysia placing the Japanese at the most antagonistic site. El (25), the Chinese girl working at Penang War Museum explained that she never witnesses the Japanese visit the museum, except for academic or research purposes. Meaning, for the contemporary Japanese inheriting the history of the colonization period, it also brings a sort of traumatic sense.



Figure 2. The display of the Japanese guillotine at Penang War Museum, Penang

The figure of Tadashi Suzuki, one of the Japanese armies at the Butterworth area on the main island is the ultimate horror for the local people, until today. Suzuki is known for killing and beheading hundreds of Chinese and local Malays people during the occupation both in Butterworth, Pematang Pauh and Gelugor area in Pulau Pinang. To make it worse, as it is displayed at the museum, Suzuki is believed dripping blood from his sword into his wine bottle and drank it. Nurzallyna, explained that the museum has effectively brought the legacy of horrors to contemporary Malaysian, and the problem is; that some parts of Suzuki's horror are merely fantasy. However, the story of the legendary figure of Tadashi Suzuki is continuously reproduced across generations in Penang, including used by parents to warn children not to do bad things or Suzuki would come to punish

them. It appears from Nurul's story about her childhood time when her mother often told her not to return home too late in the evening because the spirit of Suzuki still in Penang.

The brief background above shows that the educational system, storytelling within society and the existence of the Penang War Museum have shaped the early image of the Japanese in Penang. However, the long history of trading activities and the legacy the colonization both during the British and the Japanese period have paved the way for the present development of tourism in Penang through the existence of various colonial heritages, particularly in Georgetown where visitors can easily enjoy the old Europeans, Indian, Malaysian, Arabian and the Japanese buildings. It shows that Penang has a rich history, not only because it was a colony of the British Empire but also because it was a trading hub that witnessed the fusion of diverse cultural identities.

For the Japanese, Penang is a special place due to the history of the Japanese army's arrival in Southeast Asia at the end of 1941. According to Furuoka (2002), the economic relationship between Japan and Malaysia is described as "close and friendly", due to the position of Japan as the major provider of foreign direct investment, including taking tourism as one of the strategic sectors. Widiyanto (2019) emphasizes Malaysian's government placed tourism as one of the economic sectors besides the other popular industry such as rubber and tin, both in Malaya Peninsular and North Borneo. The turning point which brought the tourism sector become a more important sector occurred in the 1970s, when Malaysia hosted the Pacific Areas Travel Association (PATA) in Kuala Lumpur. Guan (2018) explores the evidence of the importance of Penang for the development of tourism in Malaysia, particularly connected to the Japanese visitors in the existence of The Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) Program for Japanese retirees. Penang is considered as the Japanese retiree's second home not only for its historical connection but also for its low living cost. The program was delivered by the state government of Penang in 2002 to obtain the economic benefit from Japan's policy of encouraging retirees to live abroad in 1986.

**Tourism: transforming enemy to partner**

Penang State is divided into two different areas; Penang Islands and Seberang Perai in the mainland of the Malaya Peninsula, and consists of 5 districts; Northeast and Southwest in Penang Island and South Seberang Perai, North Seberang Perai and Central Seberang Perai in the mainland. The most of Chinese descendants live in the Northeast and Southwest Districts in Penang Island, and it also influences the pattern of interaction with foreign visitors, including the Japanese as the focus of this study. The main tourist destination in Penang is located in the islands, particularly in Northeast District where Georgetown, Little India, Batu Feringgi and Tanjung Bunga Beach are located. Georgetown and Little India are popular for architectural heritages based on Indian, Chinese, British and Malay legacies. Moreover, many shopping centers and hospitals are also located in this area. Penang is also considered one of the best places for medical tourism in Asia, particularly for Indonesian visitors, thus the two top lists of the biggest origin countries for international visitor to Penang is Singapore and Indonesia.

numbers then drastically decreased to only 130.000 foreign visitors coming to Malaysia in 2021, due to the outbreak of the Pandemic Covid-19 hitting across the world. As previously mentioned in the background, the development of tourism as an important economic sector in Malaysia has emerged along with the early coming of heavy industrial projects brought by the Japanese in 1957.

In Penang, the rise of the Japanese investment has been marked by the arrival of Malayawata Steel, Penang in 1961. It was a joint venture between the Malaysian government and Yawata Steel from Japan. It directly has increased the number of Japanese livings in Penang, both as expatriates working in several of Japan’s companies or those who are contemporary living in Penang and other Malaysian states as a tourist. The official data from the Japan Embassy in Malaysia shows that around 1400 Japan’s enterprises operated in Malaysia in 2019. Moreover, 27,215 Japanese are claimed to reside in the country, including 3056 lived in Penang. Thus, the Japanese visitors in Penang can be divided into two different types; the Japanese tourists directly coming from Japan and the Japanese residing in Malaysia visiting Penang both for official trips or holiday trips.

Groups	Memory of occupation	Early bad images of the Japanese	Better image after interaction	Attending Bon Odori Festival
Malay				
Full interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Limited	Yes	Yes	No	No
Chinese				
Full interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Indian				
Full interaction	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. The image of the Japanese before and after interaction (source; primary data)

According to the official data from the Malaysia Tourism Department, around 424.694 from 26. 100, 784 foreign tourists visited Penang in 2019, and 22,473 were from Japan. These



Figure 3. Penang Tourism Map (Source: The Penang Institute)

In the last few decades, the heritages from the past, urban lifestyle including shopping tourism and nightlife, fascinating beaches and medical tourism activities have brought Penang to be one of the important tourism hubs in Malaysia. Tourism activities on the island are centered on Northeast District where Georgetown, Little India, Batu Ferringgi and Tanjung Bungan Beach are situated. Thus, most of the restaurants, hotels, shopping centres, hospitals and public beaches are located. Penang state government also annually organizes several festivals to attract both domestic and foreign visitors such as Georgetown Festival and Bon Odori Festival which involving the Japanese. Georgetown was established as one of the World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2008 for its unique, hybrid and various legacy rooted in different cultures. Thus, the Northeast District, particularly Georgetown is the hotspot of tourism activities for foreigners coming to Penang, including the Japanese. Coincidentally, from the geographic point of view, the resident of the Northeast District is dominated by the Chinese and Indian, meanwhile most of the Malay people live in the other areas. It means that, besides the Malay people working in Georgetown or tourism sectors, Chinese and Indians have a bigger possibility to engage and interact with foreigners, including the Japanese. Then it determines the way in shaping the image of the Japanese from the historical point of view in the past and the nowadays situation. The evidence is shown by Table 1 describing the fact that Chinese and Indian in Penang tend to have a better image of Japanese compared to Malay, including the willingness to attend to the Bon Odori Festival.

Five informants have Chinese and Indian backgrounds; YBH, LBL, Wong KF, Cheng ST and Nila K are residents of Georgetown. Yow, Wong and Cheng have tourism-connected activities; the work as online drivers which transporting visitors from the airport, tour guides and guest house owners, meanwhile Loke Bee and Nila are common residents living in the tourism area. All of these informants admit that they got the history subject during secondary school emphasizing various tragedies in Penang during the Japanese occupation in 1941-1945. They also recognized

the figure of Tadashi Suzuki for beheading hundreds of local people after visiting the Penang War Museum. However, they agreed that after intensively encountering many Japanese in the last few years, there is no problem in building a relationship with the Japanese. YBH strongly argued that the coming of the Japanese are good for business, and he hopes that Japan Government should open the border for foreign visitors, and vice versa, allowing the Japanese to visit Penang after two years of the pandemic. Moreover, CST added that nowadays is no longer the war period, so it is not relevant to compare with the colonization periods. He also stated that the museum only provides horror for visitors for the sake of attracting visitors.

In a similar vein, NK living in Tanjung Bunga and RJ in Gelugor shared their different experiences. Before Tanjung Bunga was established as a tourist area, it was quite rare to interact with the Japanese. However, since 2005, many the Japanese came and stayed by renting houses nearby his house. Thus, NK stated that before intensively encountering and hosting the Japanese visitors he still thought that the Japanese had bad characters as described in the school. After his family hosted a Japanese family at the end of 2013, he directly witnessed the kindness of the Japanese to his family. Furthermore, the Japanese guest introduced him to the famous festival held in Penang, Bon Odori as the ritual to commemorate the ancestors. Bon Odori or "Bon dance", is a style of dancing and drums performance to welcome the spirits of ancestors. The history of Bon Odori Festival in Penang is connected to the effort of the Japanese expatriates in Penang to maintain their cultural connection with their home country in 1960s. However, nowadays it becomes an annual festival to attract tourists to come.

Meanwhile, RJ a seller at Tun Sardon traditional market, Gelugor said that he never met the Japanese in person, but he does not have any problem with the Japanese. "I will come to the Bon Odori festival if I have time and money, he says". LBL, a housewife in Georgetown claimed since the beginning she does not have any bad perception of the Japanese, although she heard a lot of bad stories during the Japanese colonization from her teacher, including about



Tadashi Suzuki. Having a university education and living in a multicultural neighborhood, LBL has an open-minded perspective without keeping a sort of stereotype of foreigners. It can be understood because the educational system in a multicultural area like Penang will give a lot of the opportunities to encounter students from different cultural backgrounds. An interesting fact, these informants also usually join the Bon Odori Festival at Esplanade, nearby Little India and they expect the festival will be held this year after two years of idle due to the pandemic. The Indian and Chinese informants emphasized that the Japanese are welcome to Penang, and the festival is needed to revive the economy of Penang.

Different from the Chinese and Indian informants, the Malay as “*bumiputera*” or “son of the soil” has a slightly different in perceiving the Japanese. Both the Malays, Indian and Chinese shared one thing in common; admitting the sorrow as the legacy of the Japanese occupation period in the past. However, the Malay people living outside the tourism areas share a different opinion about the Japanese, including how to respond to the Bon Odori Festival. NA, NH, Ai, and F live in Gelugor, the other sub-district nearby Georgetown settled by the Malays. Meanwhile, Aidil, ZA and TS are residents of Seberang Perai in the mainland but working at Pulau Pinang. Nur Aini and Ning operate a guesthouse in Gelugor called Anggerik, but in the last 10 years, there was no Japanese guests staying there. Gelugor which is located at the outside of George Town as the hot spot of tourism in Penang and having no much tourism attraction can be considered as the explanation for why not many Japanese visitors stayed in Anggerik Homestay in the last 10 years.

Aisah and Farah work at a national company in Georgetown, meanwhile Aidil, ZA and TS are the online drivers and hotel staff in Tanjung Bunga. As local people getting the fantasies about Tadashi Suzuki and horror brought by the Japanese through the history subject in school and Penang war Museum, unfortunately, Aini, Ning, Farah and Aisha only have limited opportunities to meet and deeply encounter the Japanese, so they still keep the image of horror

when imagining the Japanese in the past and do not have any better idea about the contemporary Japanese. However, they do not want to come to the the Bon Odori Festival due to the warning from the Penang Islamic Mufti; Wan Salim Wan Mohd Noor who emphasizes the festival as a Japanese religious practice (Bernama, June 7, 2022). Nur Aini stressed that food and drinks provided during the festival are containing pork and alcohol which are forbidden for Muslims.

A slightly different voice is explained by Aidil, ZA and TS who often encounters the Japanese before the pandemic. Tahir who works as a tour guide in Georgetown hosted and accompanied a Japanese family to the festival in 2019, meanwhile, Aidil and ZA are the online drivers who usually dropped and picked up the Japanese visitors to and from the airport in the last five years. For them, the sad and bad stories connected to the Japanese period in the past should not influence the friendship and economic partnership between Japan and Malaysia in the contemporary days. Zahir said “forgiven and forgotten”, because the contemporary Japanese are different from the Japanese armies in the past which are perceived as cruel or impolite. However, based on their own experience encountering the Japanese visitors in Penang, the Japanese are polite, disciplined and never deliver complains in a direct or impolite way.

When ZA and Aidil were asked what was their perception before intensively interacting with foreigners, especially the Japanese, they admit that they perceive the Japanese differently from now. Moreover, both Aidil and ZA attended the Bon Odori Festival in 2018 and 2019 with their family because they believe it was a part of the tourism agenda, not a religious practice of a Buddhist-Japanese religion. However, they did not buy any food and drink provided during the festival in order to avoid the pork-alcohol-containing food and drink. However, from a different point of view, Nurzallyna emphasized that the economic benefit generated from tourism activities in Penang is much more influential in shaping a better image of the Japanese. It means that the intensive interaction between the local community and the Japanese visitors is not the only factor transforming the

early image of Japan shaped by the educational system, direct experience visiting the war museum and the continuous storytelling about the horror of the Japanese occupation period to the better one.

The table above shows the different impacts of the interaction between the Japanese and the different race groups in Penang. The response to the Bon Odori Festival as one of the strongest pieces of evidence of Japan's culture present on the island also indicates the different perceptions toward the Japanese and the factors determining it. Bon Odori Festival has been conducted in Malaysia since 1977 by a small group of the Japanese expatriates to commemorate the ancestors and in the last few years established as one of the tourism agendas, organized by the Japanese Consulate in Penang and the state government. It involves various Japanese dances, foods, drinks, and fashion shows that attracted thousands of Japanese lives in Malaysia, foreign visitors, and also local residents before the pandemic. However, for the Malays, the debate related to religious issues has been colouring the festival due to the Islamic leader considering the festival as the "*syirik*" or polytheistic practice of providing pork and alcohol in the Islamic-ruled country.

Besides Chinese and Indian living in Georgetown are considered for getting more economic benefit from tourism compared to the Malays, they also do not have any problem with the festival according to their culture allowing them to eat pork or drink alcohol. Besides the religious sensitivity, geographical aspects and educational level also determine the perception of the Japanese. People living in the tourist area in Penang have more opportunities to meet and interact with foreigners, including the Japanese and it influences the development of a new image of the Japanese which is different from before the interaction. The other determining factor is educational level; LBL who does not have any contact with the Japanese but has a university degree also accept the Japanese as similar to others, although she got a lot of horror stories about the Japanese in the past. Thus, as Widiyanto and Agra's study in Sabah (2019) tourism is influential in shaping the new pattern of relationship between guest and host, including determining the new migration pattern in Sabah, Malaysia. A similar thing occurs in Penang

in terms of the development of newly constructed relationships between people inheriting conflict in the past.

## **KESIMPULAN**

The study aimed at addressing the question of how tourism plays its role to develop a better mutual understanding between the Japanese and Malaysian living in Penang. Findings show that sorrows rooted in the era of Japanese occupation between 1941-1945 have been continuously reproduced through the history subject in secondary school, storytelling across generations and the existence of the Penang War Museum. Despite many scholars emphasizing that some parts of history displayed merely stand between fantasies and facts and questioning the validity of evidence of the story, the museum has given an effective impact in reproducing a bad image of the Japanese to the Malaysian younger generations.

Thus, results show that direct encounters and interactions through tourism activities between the Japanese visitors with local people in Penang rooted in different cultural backgrounds have shaped a better image of the Japanese. However, direct interaction is not the only factor determining a better image of the Japanese, the stable economic benefit from tourism and educational level also play an important role in the transformation of the perception. On the other side, religious sensitivity particularly from the Malay-Muslim perspective also influences the development of cultural understanding to accept the Japan-rooted festival Bon Odori in Penang. The urgent thing to be followed up on for future research is to gather the guest's perspective, particularly from the Japanese visitors after encountering the host groups both from Malay, Chinese and Indian cultural backgrounds. The fieldwork has been done during the outbreak of the pandemic and there was no Japanese visitor who could be interviewed in Penang.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We would like to express special gratitude to the Sumitomo Foundation, Japan for fully supporting this ongoing research project entitled The Role of Tourism in Developing Cultural Understanding Between Japanese, Indonesian and Malaysian:

A Study in Hokkaido, Bali and Penang through the Japan-related Research Project Fiscal Year 2021. Second, we would like to thank Ambarrukmo Tourism Institute, Yogyakarta for giving various facilities and support to conduct this project, all informants in Penang and colleagues from University Utara Malaysia, Kedah for giving hands to make fieldwork in Penang, Kedah and Langkawi possible to conduct.

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