



LIVING ON DISPLAY: NEGOTIATING GENTRIFICATION AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE IN CHEW JETTY, GEORGE TOWN, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The designation of World Heritage Sites often precipitates a paradox where tourism capital threatens the very living heritage it aims to safeguard. This study examines Chew Jetty, a historic clan settlement within the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, Malaysia, to analyse how residents negotiate the tension between economic opportunism and cultural continuity. Adopting a qualitative case study approach with a sample representing a significant majority of the population, the research identifies a distinctive phenomenon of ‘commercial gentrification from below’. Motivated by the ‘rent gap’, residents actively commodify domestic spaces, leading to phenomenological displacement within the home. However, findings indicate that this does not equate to cultural erasure. Instead, the community exhibits ‘negotiated resilience’, employing strategies such as spatial regulation and the bifurcation of rituals to sustain their intangible heritage. The study challenges existing facade-oriented planning frameworks, arguing that true heritage sustainability in UNESCO sites depends on recognising resident agency. It concludes that governance must support community-led adaptation to prevent the ‘museumification’ of living settlements.

Keywords: Gentrification, Cultural, Resilience, Heritage Sustainability, UNESCO

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INTRODUCTION

The designation of World Heritage Sites often precipitates a ‘preservation paradox’, while global recognition seeks to protect cultural value, the subsequent influx of tourism capital frequently threatens the very living heritage it aims to safeguard. In historic cities across Southeast Asia, this tension manifests as tourism-driven gentrification, a process that reconfigures urban space to prioritise visitor consumption over local social reproduction (Lin et al., 2023; Lo & McKercher, 2023; Raja Othman, 2017). More recent studies further highlight how tourism-driven gentrification reshapes socio-spatial dynamics in heritage cities, particularly in Southeast Asia, where increased global visibility intensifies pressure on local communities and traditional practices (Chan et al., 2017; Suyadnya, 2021). George Town, Penang, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, exemplifies this dynamic. While designation has catalysed economic revitalisation, it has simultaneously introduced intense market pressures that commodify local culture and displace traditional lifestyles, particularly within the fragile waterfront settlements known as the Clan Jetties (Lim & Pan, 2017; Salim & Rahman, 2022).

Among these settlements, Chew Jetty stands as a critical case study. Established in the 19th century, this clan-based maritime community is now a focal point of global tourism. However, unlike standard gentrification narratives where residents are displaced by external developers, Chew Jetty presents a more complex phenomenon. Here, residents remain physically present but face ‘phenomenological displacement’ as their domestic spaces are repurposed into commercial enterprises to capture tourism revenue, a process this study identifies as ‘commercial gentrification from below’.

Despite the growing literature on heritage tourism, current scholarship often frames residents as passive victims of structural change. Limited attention has been given to the internal mechanisms of cultural resilience specifically, how communities actively negotiate the ‘rent gap’ and adapt their intangible heritage to survive. In particular, there is a lack of empirical studies that examine how residents who remain physically present within heritage sites actively negotiate and adapt to tourism pressures through everyday spatial and cultural practices. This paper addresses this gap by asking: How do the residents of Chew Jetty negotiate the tension between economic opportunism and cultural continuity?

Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research examines the interplay between gentrification pressures and community agency. By situating resident experiences at the centre of analysis, the study contributes to theoretical debates on heritage sustainability by demonstrating that resilience is not a static resistance, but a dynamic process of ‘negotiated adaptation’ (Holtorf, 2018a)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism-Driven Gentrification: From Displacement to Self-Commodification

Gentrification has evolved from its original formulation as a process of middle-class reinvestment in working-class neighbourhoods to a broader framework encompassing economic restructuring and symbolic displacement. N. Smith (1987) Rent Gap Theory provides the structural basis for this analysis, conceptualising gentrification as a capital-driven process triggered when the ‘potential ground rent’ of a site exceeds its current use value.

In heritage cities, this gap is frequently widened by tourism. Heritage designation revalorises historic districts, transforming cultural assets into economic resources, a process Wilson (2014) terms ‘aesthetic consumption’. While classical gentrification involves the physical eviction of residents by external developers, recent scholarship in Asian heritage cities, such as Hoi An and George Town, identifies a more complex dynamic. Here, gentrification often manifests as ‘commercial gentrification’, where residential spaces are converted into cafes, boutique hotels, and souvenir outlets (Rahman, 2018). This transformation is often driven by the physical characteristics of the heritage fabric itself, where the tangible heritage value of shophouses and timber structures is leveraged to determine their most profitable usage (Yun & Marzuki, 2025).

Crucially, this process is not always externally imposed. Emerging research suggests that residents themselves may act as agents of gentrification, exploiting the rent gap by converting their domestic spaces into commercial ventures (Chan et al., 2016). This internal commodification reconfigures the home from a lived space into a ‘performative landscape’, prioritising visitor experience over social reproduction. In George Town, this has led to a distinctive morphology where traditional trades vanish, replaced by a monoculture of tourism, threatening the ‘intangible’ qualities that justified the UNESCO listing in the first place.

Cultural Resilience as Negotiated Adaptation

While gentrification literature has historically focused on displacement and loss, contemporary resilience thinking emphasises the adaptive capacities of communities. Cultural Resilience is defined not merely as the ability to withstand shock, but as the capacity of a social system to absorb disturbance, reorganise, and retain core identity (Adger, 2000; Magis, 2010).

In the context of living heritage, resilience is increasingly understood as a process of negotiation. Wilson (2014) argues that communities do not simply ‘resist’ change; rather, they engage in ‘pathway creation’, adapting cultural forms to ensure survival. For instance, Cerchiaro & Houtman (2021) and Surata et al., (2024) observes that in tourism-heavy environments, rituals are often bifurcated:

simplified ‘front-stage’ performances are presented for tourists, while complex ‘back-stage’ traditions are maintained privately for the community.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from vulnerability to agency. It suggests that modifications to intangible heritage, such as the shortening of rituals or the regulation of spatial boundaries, are not necessarily signs of cultural erosion, but strategic adaptations that allow the community to coexist with the tourism economy.

Heritage Sustainability: The Missing Link of Community Agency

The concept of Heritage Sustainability extends conservation discourse beyond the preservation of physical fabric to include social and economic vitality. Smith (2006, 2009) critiques the "authorised heritage discourse" which privileges visual authenticity (e.g., facade preservation) while often neglecting the social systems that sustain the place.

Poulios (2014) argues that true heritage sustainability requires recognising communities as active custodians rather than passive beneficiaries. However, existing planning frameworks in Southeast Asia often lack mechanisms to support this agency, focusing heavily on architectural conservation while overlooking the "living" dimensions of heritage. This creates a policy gap where the physical shell of the settlement is preserved, but its social heart is hollowed out, a phenomenon termed ‘museumification’ N. Smith (1987).

Addressing this gap requires an integrated approach that links the structural pressures of the Rent Gap with the adaptive strategies of Cultural Resilience. By synthesising these perspectives, this study positions Chew Jetty as a critical case for understanding how living heritage communities navigate the tension between economic opportunism and cultural continuity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives that illuminate the dynamics of heritage transformation and community resilience in Chew Jetty: Gentrification Theory, Cultural Resilience, and Heritage Sustainability.

Tourism-Driven Gentrification and the ‘Rent Gap’: The analysis adopts Smith’s (1987) Rent Gap Theory as a foundational lens. Smith conceptualised gentrification as a structural process driven by capital reinvestment when the ‘potential ground rent’ of a site exceeds its current use value. In heritage settings like George Town, this gap is widened by tourism demand. However, this study extends the framework to consider ‘commercial gentrification from below’ or ‘self-gentrification’. In this iteration, the rent gap is not solely exploited by external developers but also by existing residents who convert domestic space into commercial enterprises to capture tourism revenue. This theoretical nuance

facilitates the analysis of cultural commodification (Zukin, 1987), where the displacement observed is not necessarily physical eviction, but the phenomenological displacement of private life by commercial activity within the home.

Cultural Resilience as Negotiated Adaptation: To understand community response, the study employs Cultural Resilience Theory, defined as the capacity of communities to absorb disturbance and reorganise while retaining core functions and identity (Adger, 2000; Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; Holtorf, 2018b; Järvelä, 2023; Magis, 2010). Crucially, this framework rejects a binary view of resilience as mere 'resistance' to change. Instead, drawing on Wilson (2014), resilience is conceptualised here as a process of 'negotiated adaptation'. This lens posits that changes to intangible heritage, such as, the modification of rituals or the regulation of social space are not inherently signs of cultural loss, but are adaptive strategies employed by the community to sustain their identity amidst external pressures.

Heritage Sustainability: Beyond the physical, the concept of Heritage Sustainability extends the discourse beyond architectural conservation to include social and economic dimensions (Fabbricatti et al., 2020; Pendlebury, 2012). This perspective critiques the "authorised heritage discourse" that privileges visual authenticity and instead argues that long-term sustainability depends on community agency. It frames the residents of Chew Jetty not as passive objects of preservation, but as active custodians whose economic survival and social adaptability are prerequisites for the survival of the site as a living heritage settlement.

Synthesis together, these theories provide a comprehensive foundation for examining Chew Jetty (see Figure 1). Gentrification identifies the structural pressures; Cultural Resilience explains the community's adaptive mechanisms; and Heritage Sustainability defines the outcome of a living system that balances economic viability with cultural continuity.

While previous studies have applied these theoretical perspectives independently, this study integrates Rent Gap Theory, Cultural Resilience, and Heritage Sustainability into a unified analytical framework. This integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both structural pressures and community responses within a living heritage context. Unlike conventional approaches that emphasise external drivers of gentrification or view resilience as passive resistance, this study highlights the active role of residents in shaping spatial, cultural, and social adaptations. As such, the framework advances existing scholarship by demonstrating how internal community dynamics influence heritage outcomes, particularly in contexts where residents remain physically present but experience transformation within their everyday living spaces.

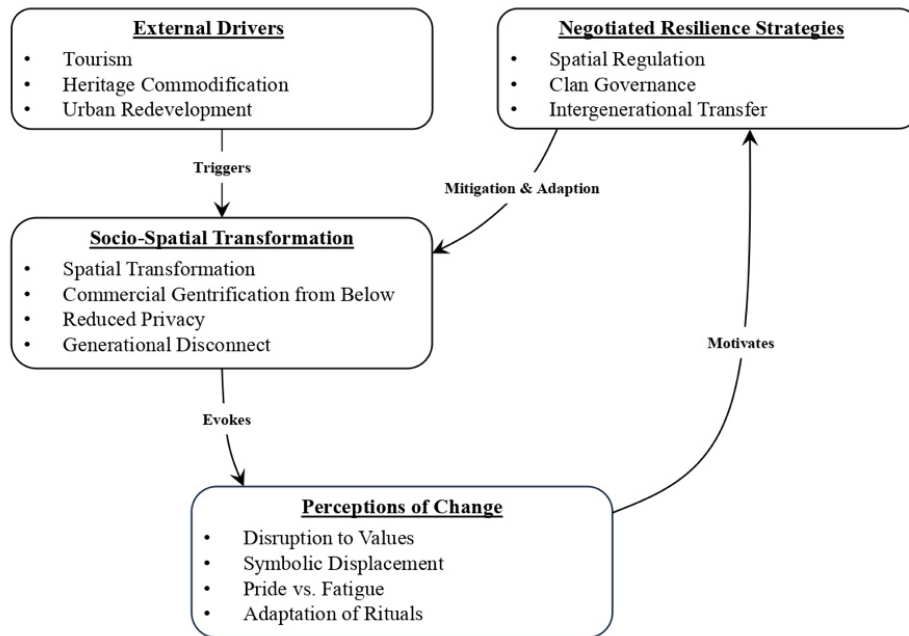


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, situated within an interpretivist epistemology, to examine the complex interplay between gentrification and cultural resilience. The single-case design was purposefully selected to capture the 'paradox of living heritage' at Chew Jetty, George Town. As a Clan settlement established in the late 19th century and a focal point of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the jetty represents a critical microcosm of the tension between traditional maritime lifestyles and the pressures of the modern visitor economy. This approach prioritises subjective meaning-making, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how residents negotiate the "rent gap" and commodification within their own homes.

Sampling and Respondent Profile

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender	Male	12
	Female	8
Years of residence	10–20 years	6
	21–40 years	7
	>40 years	7
Role	Clan leader	2
	Business owner	8
	Resident	10

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit respondents with a minimum of 10 years of residence in Chew Jetty. This specific criterion ensured that all respondents possessed substantial, longitudinal knowledge regarding the settlement's historical development, traditional cultural practices, and recent tourism-driven transformations.

The final sample consisted of 20 participants ($n=20$), purposefully selected to reflect the diverse social structure of the community. The respondent profile encompasses a range of demographic backgrounds, including varying lengths of residence (ranging from 10 to over 40 years) and distinct community roles, refer to Table 1. Specifically, the sample includes clan leaders, elders, business owners, and long-term residents engaged in both traditional and tourism-related livelihoods, ensuring a multifaceted view of the settlement's dynamics.

Sample Representativeness and Saturation

To clarify the representativeness of the sample, it must be contextualised within the specific demographics of the site. Chew Jetty is a compact settlement comprising approximately 30 to 40 active households; therefore, the 20 selected participants represent a significant majority, approximately 50% to 60% of the total resident population. This notably high coverage ensures that the findings capture a comprehensive community consensus rather than isolated narratives, providing extensive coverage of the settlement.

However, consistent with qualitative case study methodologies, this research adopted the principle of information-rich sampling rather than pursuing statistical representativeness. Participants were ultimately selected based on their capacity to provide in-depth, nuanced insights into the lived experiences of tourism-driven gentrification and cultural resilience. Interviews were conducted continuously until thematic saturation was achieved, whereby no substantially new concepts or interpretations emerged from subsequent conversations. Consequently, the high coverage of the sample ensures robust analytical and theoretical insights into the internal dynamics of living heritage communities,

rather than statistical generalisations extending beyond the specific case of Chew Jetty.



Figure 2: Informational Map and Spatial Layout of Chew Jetty, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in George Town, Penang

Source: Field Photo by Researcher, 2025

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through a triangulation of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored changes in daily life, ritual adaptation, and spatial usage. Complementary observations were conducted during routine weekdays and major events, such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, to document behavioural patterns and spatial regulation. Planning documents, including the George Town Special Area Plan, were reviewed to contextualise local narratives within the broader policy framework.

The triangulation of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis enabled cross-validation of findings, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study.

Crucially, the researcher possesses linguistic fluency in the local Hokkien dialect, Malay, and English. Interviews were conducted without the mediation of interpreters, facilitating a deeper rapport with elderly residents and allowing for the capture of nuanced ‘insider’ perspectives on clan politics and ritual modifications that might otherwise remain inaccessible to external observers.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using an abductive thematic analysis, which involved engaging in an iterative dialogue between empirical findings and the theoretical constructs of Rent Gap Theory and Cultural Resilience. To ensure systematic and rigorous theme development, the analytical process was guided by Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase framework. This included familiarisation with the interview transcripts, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis.

While the framework structured the procedural steps, the interpretation itself was theoretically driven through a hybrid coding strategy:

- **Deductive Coding:** Codes were informed by existing literature on gentrification, cultural resilience, and heritage sustainability. This allowed the study to track established concepts such as displacement, commodification, and community agency.
- **Inductive Coding:** Simultaneously, inductive coding allowed new, locally grounded concepts to emerge directly from the participants' narratives. This led to the identification of unique mechanisms such as *commercial gentrification from below*, *ritual staging*, and *boundary management*.

To strengthen the theme development process, codes with similar meanings were subsequently grouped into broader categories before being synthesised into overarching analytical themes through a method of continuous comparison across all interviews. To further enhance analytical rigour, this coding was conducted iteratively alongside ongoing data collection, allowing emerging insights to directly inform and refine subsequent interviews, refer to Table 2.

Themes were continuously reviewed against the transcripts, field observations, and documentary evidence until conceptual coherence and thematic saturation were successfully achieved. Ultimately, this hybrid analytical process enabled the study not only to apply existing theoretical perspectives but also to extend them by identifying the context-specific mechanisms through which the Chew Jetty community actively negotiates cultural resilience under tourism-driven gentrification.

Table 2: Example of Coding and Theme Development

Representative Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Final Analytical Theme
"We have to stay inside because there are too many tourists."	Loss of privacy	Spatial displacement	Commercial Gentrification from Below
"We now do prayers before tourists arrive."	Ritual adaptation	Negotiated cultural practice	Negotiated Resilience

Representative Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Category	Final Analytical Theme
"Some areas are off-limits for tourists."	Boundary regulation	Community governance	Relational Place-Making
"Young people are less interested in traditions."	Generational change	Cultural continuity	Intergenerational Transmission of Heritage

Limitations

The findings are context-specific to Chew Jetty and not intended for broad generalisation, though they offer theoretical insights relevant to other inhabited heritage sites in Southeast Asia. While temporal limitations constrained the longitudinal scope of fieldwork, the triangulation of interview data with observation and policy analysis provides a robust and credible foundation for the study's conclusions.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that the reshaping of Chew Jetty is not a unilateral process of external displacement, but a complex internal negotiation. While tourism has introduced significant structural pressures, manifesting as overcrowding and the commodification of daily routines, it has also triggered active adaptive responses from the community. The findings are discussed across three interrelated themes: (1) the spatial dynamics of 'commercial gentrification from below', (2) the negotiation of identity through ritual adaptation, and (3) community agency in sustaining intangible heritage. Together, these sections illustrate that cultural resilience acts as a dynamic mediating force, allowing residents to navigate the friction between economic opportunism and the continuity of living heritage.

The Economics of Space: Rent Gaps and Commercial Gentrification from Below

The transformation of everyday life in Chew Jetty offers a distinct localised iteration of N. Smith (1987) Rent Gap Theory. While Smith conceptualised the rent gap as a driver for external capital reinvestment, findings in Chew Jetty indicate an internalised process. Here, the disparity between the 'use value' of the property (as a residence) and its potential 'exchange value' (as a commercial tourism outlet) has driven residents themselves to capitalise on their spatial assets.

This creates a paradox of 'commercial gentrification from below', where residents are not displaced by developers but are spatially displaced within their own homes. Observations revealed that households frequently reorganise interior layouts, compressing private living areas into marginal zones such as upper floors or rear kitchen extensions to surrender prime frontage to souvenir shops and cafes. As shown in Figure 3, the narrowing of walkways by

merchandise displays physically manifests this encroachment of the commercial upon the domestic.

These spatial reconfigurations empirically validate the concept of ‘self-gentrification’ proposed in the framework. The displacement observed is *phenomenological* rather than physical: residents remain on-site, but the meaning of ‘home’ is fundamentally altered by the intrusion of the tourist gaze. Consequently, the threat to heritage sustainability arises not from eviction, but from the internal commodification of space for economic survival.



Figure 3: Visual Evidence of Spatial and Commercial Transformation in Chew Jetty
Source: Field Photo by Researcher, 2025

Negotiating Identity: Rituals, Festivals, and the Performative Turn

Residents’ perceptions of cultural change reveal a complex psychological landscape that aligns with the ‘negotiated response’ described by Wilson (2014). This is most visible in the community’s management of temple ceremonies and religious festivals.

Observations during major events, such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, indicate that these rituals have become sites of contestation and adaptation. Residents noted that the scale and timing of certain ceremonies are frequently adjusted to accommodate tourist flows, leading to concerns that rituals are becoming ‘performative’ spectacles rather than purely spiritual acts. This aligns with the risk of ‘museumification’ warned of by Pendlebury (2012), where cultural forms are preserved but emptied of social meaning.

However, a critical analysis suggests this is not a simple erosion of authenticity. Participants emphasised a clear distinction between the “outward performance” for visitors and the “inward devotion” for the clan. This bifurcation of ritual space exemplifies Wilson (2014) negotiated resilience, where the community strategically curates a ‘front-stage’ for tourists to protect the sanctity of the ‘back-stage’ for themselves. Thus, the Hungry Ghost Festival serves a dual function: it is an economic asset that attracts visitors but simultaneously remains the primary vehicle for reinforcing communal bonds in the face of external change.



Figure 4: Signboard Displaying Public Behaviour Restrictions at Chew Jetty
Source: Field Photo by Researcher, 2025

Community-Based Resilience Strategies

The specific strategies employed by Chew Jetty residents in boundary-making, governance, and intergenerational transfer demonstrate that they are active agents rather than passive victims of gentrification.

Spatial Regulation as Relational Place-Making: The erection of signboards (see Figure 4) and the enforcement of ‘no-entry’ zones represent a reclaiming of territory. This aligns with Pierce et al. (2011) concept of ‘relational place-making’, where the community actively regulates the flow of bodies to protect their social reproduction. By enforcing these boundaries, residents disrupt the tourist gaze and reassert the jetty as a living space rather than a theme park.

Institutional Resilience: The role of the Chew Clan Association in mediating conflicts and organising rituals is pivotal. This governance structure provides the collective efficacy required for social resilience, ensuring that individual economic pursuits do not completely fracture community cohesion.

Intergenerational Transmission: The deliberate involvement of youth in ritual preparation serves as a countermeasure to the ‘generational disconnect’ identified in the literature. This strategy moves beyond physical conservation to safeguard the ‘intangible heritage’ defined by UNESCO (2011), ensuring that the settlement retains its socio-cultural DNA even as its physical skin changes.

The Uneven Burden of Resilience and Internal Inequality: While the community demonstrates significant adaptive capacity, it is crucial to avoid romanticising this resilience as a universally positive, egalitarian, or uniform experience. The internal commodification of Chew Jetty has inadvertently generated socio-economic stratification among its residents. Those strategically positioned to capitalise on the ‘rent gap’ typically residents who own property in high-footfall areas and possess the capital to convert their frontages into tourist-oriented businesses reap substantial economic benefits.

Conversely, the burden of this spatial transformation disproportionately falls upon the elderly, renters, and those who remain engaged in traditional, non-

tourist-facing livelihoods. For these individuals, the influx of tourism offers little to no financial gain, yet they are forced to endure the negative externalities of commercial gentrification, including severe overcrowding, noise pollution, and a profound loss of domestic privacy. Consequently, cultural resilience in Chew Jetty is a highly uneven and stratified process. For a subset of the community, resilience is a form of lucrative economic opportunism; however, for others, it merely represents an exhausting, daily struggle to tolerate the disruptions of living on display within a heavily commodified environment.

Implications for Heritage Sustainability

The case of Chew Jetty challenges the predominantly 'facade-oriented' approach of current planning instruments, such as the George Town Special Area Plan. The findings suggest that true heritage sustainability depends less on preserving timber structures and more on supporting the adaptive capacity and social welfare of the living community. If planning frameworks continue to prioritise visual coherence over social vitality, they risk accelerating the 'zombification' or 'museumification' of the site.

To mitigate this trajectory, local management authorities specifically George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) and the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) must pivot towards actionable, community-centric policy interventions. Firstly, official governance frameworks must formally legitimise the residents' rights to regulate tourism flows. This could be achieved by institutionalising community-led spatial boundaries, legally backing resident-enforced 'no-entry' private zones, and implementing strict, city-endorsed visiting hours to protect residential privacy.

Secondly, management bodies must directly address the uneven economic impacts of tourism-driven gentrification. GTWHI and MBPP should introduce targeted support mechanisms such as utility subsidies, heritage maintenance grants, or tax relief, specifically for households that sustain traditional maritime livelihoods and do not profit from commercial tourism. By providing a financial safety net for non-commercial residents, the state can prevent the complete monoculture of souvenir shops. Ultimately, a sustainable heritage framework must integrate community agency into the official management apparatus, ensuring that living heritage sites are protected as dynamic, equitable social systems rather than merely architectural backdrops for aesthetic consumption.

CONCLUSION

This study challenges the binary narrative of gentrification as solely an external imposition, revealing instead a complex internal dynamic within Chew Jetty. The findings demonstrate that tourism-driven pressure has triggered a form of

‘commercial gentrification from below’, where residents themselves act as agents of spatial transformation. Motivated by the ‘rent gap’ between residential use and commercial potential, households have reorganised their domestic spheres, leading to a ‘symbolic displacement’ where private life is increasingly pushed to the margins of the home.

However, the study also establishes that this commodification does not equate to a total erasure of identity, nor is it a uniformly positive experience. While the community exhibits ‘negotiated adaptation’ through spatial regulation, ritual bifurcation, and intergenerational transfer, this resilience is unevenly distributed. The internal commodification of space has stratified the community, disproportionately burdening traditional and elderly residents who endure the loss of privacy without the economic benefits of the tourism rent gap.

From a planning perspective, the case of Chew Jetty underscores the critical limitations of ‘facade-oriented’ conservation frameworks like the George Town Special Area Plan. Protecting physical structures is insufficient if the social systems within them are allowed to fracture under the weight of uneven gentrification. Sustainable heritage management must therefore pivot towards recognising community agency and addressing socio-economic inequalities. Local authorities, notably GTWHI and MBPP, must legitimise residents’ rights to regulate tourism flows and provide targeted socio-economic support to those sustaining traditional livelihoods. Ultimately, the long-term sustainability of UNESCO living heritage sites depends on governance frameworks that protect not just the architectural shell, but the social equity and adaptive capacities of the communities residing within.

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