

Festivals and the Theory of Inclusive Development in Malaysia: Perspectives from a Festival Organizer

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Festivals play a vital role in catalyzing inclusive development through their ability to increase social capital. They can enhance social ties through creating shared knowledge, building trust, and forming networks. In the Malaysian context, few studies have been done on how festivals promote inclusive development. Hence, this paper seeks to present a case study on Pangkor Island Festival (PIF), which is a Malaysian arts and culture festival, concerning the process, opportunities, and challenges of inclusive development from the perspectives of the festival organizer. In-depth interviews with the festival organizer and curator and field observations were conducted. Findings show that festivals promote inclusive development through a five-phase process, from establishing relationships with residents and exploring local assets to the sustainability of PIF and inclusive development. This study also suggests three-fold opportunities that include community cohesiveness, revitalization, and cultural value restoration as well as challenges of securing suitable stakeholders.

Keywords: Festivals; Inclusive Development; Malaysia; Participation Typology; Salad Bowl Theory



INTRODUCTION

Festivals are defined as “the celebration of a specific theme to which the public is invited for a limited period of time” (Grappi & Montanari, 2011, p. 1129) and consist of various planned activities for the general public with predefined objectives, themes, and programs within a clearly defined period at a specific location (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Through festivals, social ties within a community are strengthened via shared knowledge, building of trust, and forming of networks and social cohesion (Bakas et al., 2019). In addition, festivals serve their host communities by preserving traditions and cultures that shape community identity (conservation), recontextualizing tradition and habits to suit contemporary times (reinvention), promoting local assets to both locals and visitors (manifestation), attracting tourists to the area (attraction), diversifying

local culture with new values and revolutionizing local businesses (transformation), and creating cohesion among community members (consolidation) (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). Festivals can thus empower and revitalize communities and places (McHenry, 2011), making them a vital catalyst for inclusive development by increasing social capital (Bakas et al., 2019). Extensive studies have been done on festivals and social inclusiveness (Bakas et al., 2019; Finkel, 2010; Kwiatkowski et al., 2020; McHenry, 2011), but such aspects have yet to be explored more widely within the Malaysian context. To date, Malaysian festivals have been studied from the perspective of the visitors' experiences and consumption behavior (Ishak, 2010; Shuib et al., 2013; Ting et al., 2017), and governance (Ng & Rahman, 2021). Utilizing the Theory of Inclusive Development (Gupta et al., 2015), which empowers the marginalized community into place development, and drawing on the Salad Bowl theory (Berray, 2019; Othman et al., 2014), which explains cultural integration, this study seeks to: 1) explore the process of inclusive development among various stakeholders; 2) identify the opportunities for inclusive development; and 3) investigate the challenges towards inclusive development in the context of Pangkor Island Festival (PIF) in Malaysia.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Inclusive Development

Inclusive development is “development that includes marginalized people, sectors, and countries in social, political, and economic processes for increased human well-being, social, and environmental sustainability, and empowerment” (Gupta et al., 2015, p. 546). Its aim goes beyond individual economic performance and wealth, as in inclusive growth (Harberger, 1998), to social and ecological aspects of sustainable development (Gupta et al., 2015). In this context, inclusive development is related to the participatory approach found in the tourism development process (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Musavengane, 2019; Tosun, 1999, 2006) that takes into consideration the knowledge and aspirations of a community to empower local people in the decision-making process. Through empowerment, people gain self-esteem and confidence that they can, either individually or collectively, bring about changes in governance, society, economy, and individual wellbeing, creating new opportunities and benefits for the community (Gupta et al., 2015; Israel et al., 1994). A community's participation in the development process is thus seen as a bottom-up approach (Tosun, 1999; van den Bergh, 2022).

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND STUDY SETTING

The Malaysian Context from a Salad Bowl Perspective

Malaysia is, to a certain extent, a salad bowl (Othman et al., 2014) of several cultures and ethnicities, with its population consisting of 69.6% Bumiputera¹, 22.6% Chinese,

1 Bumiputera includes Malays and indigenous people called *Orang Asli*.

6.8% Indians, and 1% others (Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020). As such, the salad bowl theory has been used to explain the integration of different cultures, stating that in the integration process the individuality and independence of each ethnic group are retained alongside dominant cultures; the theory also considers selective integration of ethnic groups in host societies (Berray, 2019). At the micro level, each ethnicity retains its unique cultural traditions, as is seen in the retainment of the mother tongue among various ethnic groups (e.g., the Chinese retaining the Chinese language as their mother tongue). At the macro level, Malaysia is a melting pot of various cultures that assimilates individualities into a common lifestyle (Advani & Reich, 2015). For instance, *yamcha* (to hang out over drinks), *tapao* (to take away food), and *syok* (superlatively good) are some Malaysian words derived from the mother tongues of various ethnicities. In consideration of the complexity of the Malaysian context based on the salad bowl and melting pot perspectives, this study focuses on a unique setting in Malaysia that constitutes this salad bowl, which is a small Chinese fishing village located in Pangkor Island. The study aims to illustrate how inclusive development within this community can be done through an arts and culture festival.

Regional Context – Pangkor Island

The regional context of this study is Pangkor Island in Malaysia. It is located in the Straits of Malacca, and is reached by traveling three hours by car from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, followed by a 30-minute ferry ride. The total area of the island is approximately 2,200 ha (Tanzizi, 2020) and is inhabited by 11,500 islanders (Abdullah, 2021), consisting mainly of Bumiputeras, followed by Chinese, Indians, and non-citizens², who form many small villages. Fishing is the major industry in Pangkor. Immigrants from the coastal provinces of China (e.g., Hainan), who were mostly fishermen, brought along traditional fishing techniques to Pangkor when they settled on the island in the late 19th century. The 1950s to 60s saw a major growth in Pangkor fisheries due to technological advancements, and these remain as a major pillar in the economic structure of Pangkor. Besides fisheries, Pangkor is also a tourist destination due to its scenic beaches and has been since it was a British colony in the early 20th century.

In recent decades, Pangkor has been experiencing out-migration of the younger generation, particularly in Chinese villages such as Sungai Pinang Kecil village. These villages were not developed into tourist destinations, relying mainly on fishing as the main economic activity. The community structure in these Chinese villages focuses strongly on clan associations, which, along with their respective buildings (i.e., centers, temples, and ancestral shrines), acted as a social structure that provided a diverse range of services to immigrants from their respective provinces of China and served as a social setting for people from the same hometown. The services provided include temporary accommodation, job placement, and even places for holding wake services and funerals. These associations remain as significant social institutions on the island today, albeit weaker when compared to that of the past.

2 Non-citizens include foreign workers and immigrants.

Inhabitants in these villages have unique ties within the community where almost everyone knows each other. However, each family places greater emphasis on the household rather than the community. Thus, social cohesion is low. Residents hold a rather passive and reserved attitude towards changes for the common good of the village. The mindset of volunteering for the benefit of the community as a whole is weak. Hence, there is a need for a catalyst to bring the inhabitants together to address the challenges faced by the community. To this end, a successful Pangkorian businessman commissioned a seasoned art director, who has a strong background in community art festivals, to organize Pangkor Island Festival (PIF) as a means of promoting inclusive development.

Study Setting – Pangkor Island Festival (PIF)

PIF is the first island-based Chinese community arts and culture festival in Malaysia, and was first held in 2013. Since then, it was held annually for three years before being held biennially. The goal of PIF is to encourage and foster interactions among the residents themselves as well as between the residents and artists via arts and culture (Pangkor Island Festival, 2022), with the hope of setting an example for other places in Malaysia to emulate. PIF is held in Sungai Pinang Kecil village, with various activities including performances, exhibitions, forums, workshops, tours, bazaars, parades, film screenings, beach cleaning, etc., surrounding culture, arts, and the environment, targeting a Malaysian and international audience.

METHODOLOGY

This case study is part of an ongoing project by the authors called “The Place Making of Fishing Villages in Malaysia”. Data was collected from interviews and site observations. Two separate, two-hour, in-depth interviews were conducted virtually in 2021 with two key interviewees who were the PIF organizer and curator, both of whom played vital roles in the PIF. For confidential reasons, both interviewees are anonymously tagged as Respondent 1 (R1) and Respondent 2 (R2) in the quotations that appear in the findings section. Content analysis was carried out independently by the two authors and findings were then cross-checked to ensure validity and consistency. Transcripts and findings were then sent to the respective participants for validation, and to raise research ethics concerns, if there were any. Furthermore, observations on the PIF were conducted by one of the authors in 2019 as a participant throughout the three-days festival. Additionally, site visitations, hand-note recordings and short stays were carried out since 2018 in various fishing villages to gain a better understanding of the local contexts (e.g., culture, lifestyle, beliefs, etc.). The entire data collection procedure was conducted using the common dialects of the local community, namely Hokkien, Mandarin, and Cantonese. The credibility of the researchers is ensured, as they are qualitative researchers who are experts in the field of social sciences, and are capable of communicating in the mentioned dialects.

FINDINGS

The preliminary findings are organized based on three main themes, highlighting the festival organizers' perspectives on the process of inclusive development, opportunities, and challenges.

Process of Inclusive Development

The following section explores the process of inclusive development within the community through PIF across the years. Based on the research findings, the process can be broken down into five phases, beginning from inception and ending with sustainability.

Phase 1: Establishing Relationships with Residents and Exploring Local Assets

Understanding the local power structure helps to facilitate relationship building with the locals (i.e., villagers, clan associations). The PIF committees visited each clan association to explain the idea of the festival and to solicit collaboration through emphasizing that they are much needed. Gift giving is relatively important in enhancing the relationship between the organizer and residents, particularly in cultural festivals. Frequent casual meetings with the clan associations are also another way to strengthen bonding. These relationship-building activities took place when R1 visited the village every month prior to PIF.

Before you enter a place, you need to know the power structure. When we first entered Pangkor, there was no village head. Clan associations were the most powerful institutions. We had to visit each of them and tell them what we want to do and tell them what they could assist. I kept telling them that this is our (Pangkor's and my team's) festival and we do this together. During festivals like ghost festival, we send gifts and visit each other to show our support. (R1)

Besides establishing relationships with the residents, exploration of local assets (i.e., cultural assets such as history and myths) is also an important first step. Festivals can play the role of promoting rural assets, habits, and myths (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020). For instance, an old well and archway with Jawi writing were found by the organizer during the festival planning, both of which were neglected by locals far before the festival was held. The organizer thus had the opportunity to re-present and promote the values and history of these artefacts through storytelling in the festival programme. These sites would then eventually receive favorable traction from residents and tourists, as explained by R1:

We explored many historic sites, like the hundred years old well. At the beginning the locals didn't think this well has any value. Through PIF, we introduced stories behind the well; how it had benefited the immigrants who came from Hainan, and showed its relationship with the Hainanese homestay beside it and the archway that is written in Jawi. Many tourists will go to visit and then

the locals realized the value of preserving their historic sites because outsiders appreciate them. (R1)

Phase 2: Involving Residents in Art Creation and Performances

Phase 2 is the transitional phase where residents became co-creators of artworks. Art can serve as a means for social and civic participation, which contributes to community empowerment (McHenry, 2009). At the beginning of the PIF preparations, the locals behaved as bystanders. After a period of observation, they started to offer suggestions to the organizer and artists through hands-on demonstrations on how things could be done better based on their experiences. This empowered them to be involved in the creation, as well as to take pride in and have a sense of ownership of the artwork. For instance, there were a few, huge art pieces that were supposed to be destroyed after PIF, but were instead eventually kept in one of the homestays after much pleading from the residents. According to R1:

You know... the residents, they went to beg the fish farm owner to keep the puff fish [installation artwork]. However, the size is too big to keep. Because they spent two months of hard work to create the piece... At the end, there was no choice but to destroy a few big artworks. The creators of these artwork were crying while destroying it. Finally, a homestay owner agreed to keep the puff fish, so the creators were so happy that they shouted to me “someone keeps my fish!”

The stage show was another way of involving villagers in PIF. According to the organizer, watching television dramas and singing karaoke every evening is part of the villagers' lifestyle, indicating a hidden desire to perform. Capitalizing on this, PIF provides a stage for them to show off their talents in stage shows. This direct involvement in stage performances increased the sense of ownership of the festival:

It is a progress, the villagers started from seeing what you are doing, to knowing what you are doing, and thinking they can do better than you, then they get involved in doing it. At the end, they feel the resulted artwork is theirs. (R1)

Phase 3: Promoting Understanding Between Disparate Groups

PIF brought together artists from outside Pangkor via their artist-in-residence program, utilizing art as a means for facilitating understanding between disparate groups (McHenry, 2011). They brought in artists from West Malaysia, East Malaysia, and even other Asian countries. The interactions and exchanges of arts and cultural experiences bring about a sense of connection to other parts of the world. The differences brought forward through these disparate groups shed light on the uniqueness of local culture, and the appreciation from outsiders towards the local cultural heritage in turn helps cultivate appreciation of cultural heritage among locals. The interviewee (R1) mentioned that an indigenous group from Sarawak was invited to join the PIF and was thus brought in to Pangkor Island. R1 further elaborated that when two

distinct cultural groups meet, it helps in enhancing understanding between the two groups in terms of social, cultural, and spiritual aspects. Furthermore, through interactions with a different cultural group, residents feel connected to another part of the country that they may not have been familiar with prior to meeting this group:

I invited five 75-year-old Kelabit (an indigenous tribe from the Sarawak highlands in East Malaysia) artists to PIF. It was their first time to travel out of their village, and to the senior villagers in Pangkor, it was also their first time to see a performance by elongated earlobes tribe. It opened up both parties' minds. To some extent, this is cultural exchange. So, the residents don't feel they live on this island alone... they can get in touch with others. (R1)

Phase 4: Cultivating Awareness of Social Issues

PIF extended its focus from culture and heritage to social issues, further exemplifying inclusiveness of the locals' needs. Through art performances, local issues such as ocean waste and environmental hygiene were brought into the spotlight, with hopes of raising awareness and motivating change towards better living conditions:

Through the artist's sharing session, the villagers were shocked to see that the ocean has three islands made up of rubbish. We had to keep telling them not to throw rubbish into the sea anymore. (R1)

Besides issues of trash laying around, PIF also sparked initiatives from the residents to create their own festival based on their cultural assets. "A group of residents started Mazu Festival in recent years. Since the Hainan association worships Mazu, Goddess of the ocean, they decided to come up with this festival. Fishermen supported them," said R2. This shows that, from the experiences gained surrounding PIF, residents have learned of the power that festivals hold. Such experiences, paired with the heightened awareness of their cultural assets due to PIF, have encouraged them to start their own festival celebrating their goddess.

Phase 5: Sustainability of PIF and Inclusive Development

PIF started locally before expanding to an international network in 2019, forming an alliance with Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Macao. The alliance aims to foster collaboration among its members in order to ensure the sustainability of PIF and develop its potentials (including social inclusion and sustainability of heritage and traditional skills):

We formed an island alliance with Mokpo-si (Korea), Okinawa (Japan), Taiwan, and Macao. Through art and cultural exchange, we want to discuss, for example, how we can sustain our traditional wooden boat building technology. (R1)

Young generations came back to start café business because of PIF. Now, they have evolved. Their business no longer depends on PIF... have developed into something I would say more 'local', which can sustain itself in Pangkor. We also

have a 'Hello Pangkor' organization focusing on environmental preservation, run by this young generation. (R2)

As can be seen from the quotations above, the aspect of sustainability extends beyond the longevity of the festival itself. The organizer allied with other island-countries to elevate the content showcased and presented in the festival so as to further enhance cultural preservation. Social inclusion also further extends to the returning young villagers who moved back from big cities to start their businesses. These young villagers even started a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on environmental preservation such as beach cleaning.

The Opportunities of Inclusive Development

This section explains the impacts of PIF to the community, which include three social inclusiveness potentials as observed by the festival organizer across the years.

Community Cohesiveness and Sense of Belonging

Festivals are able to foster community identity and togetherness from a social capital point of view (Finkel, 2010; Richards et al., 2013). This study further discusses social inclusiveness to develop community cohesiveness and a sense of belonging within the community. Despite the festival being initially initiated by an outsider (festival organizer), it eventually brought the locals to work together, such that they became active participants (e.g., performers) and not mere bystanders (as described in Phase 2).

According to R1, one of the social inclusiveness potentials of PIF is the cultivation of a sense of belonging. To illustrate this, taking the ocean waste issue mentioned in Phase 4 as an example, this issue, despite being prevalent, had always been ignored by the villagers, such that daily trash and plastic waste were not well managed via a proper sewage system, contributing to sea pollution. Moreover, throwing trash into the sea had also been a daily practice. Wanting to bring about awareness to the issue, an artist in PIF waded down into the sea to clean up the floating trash. According to R1, the sheer amount of trash gathered had shocked the residents, which caused them to be enlightened on the severity of this socio-environmental issue. Since then, the villagers have gradually improved their daily habits. More importantly, R2 emphasized that residents have started to feel that the island belongs to them and it is their responsibility to protect and preserve the place. For instance, the locals initiated a project called 'Hello Pangkor' to conserve the environment and protect sea turtles post-PIF. According to R1, the key for success in the PIFs is in getting the right people, which leads to the next point concerning attracting young villagers to move back to Pangkor Island.

Revitalization of the Island

Another impact of PIF is in its ability to attract young villagers to move back to the island. Since the festival first started in 2013, the island has gradually revived in terms

of its social structure and local economy, which addresses the community's concern that one of the reasons for young villagers leaving the island was due to the island's stagnant development. The snowball effects of this reverse brain drain are not only in the revitalization of social structure (rejuvenation of the aging community), but also the diversification of the local economy (from the singular fishing industry to other businesses). These returning young villagers bring in novel and innovative ideas from outside the island to the local community, such as homestays and bakery shops; some have even been involved in the festival, which has been helpful for tourism development, and subsequently in increasing the quality of life of the community, giving rise to a livelier society.

Restoration of Cultural Values

Social inclusiveness, fostered by PIF, also promotes restoration of socio-cultural values that the island's inhabitants hold. Through the festival, locals are made aware of the importance of the island's historical values and now gradually present them as tourist attractions. For instance, an old well, which had been long abandoned by the locals, is now being re-presented to tourists with stories of its past and how the place evolved:

In the past few years, I have discovered some historical spots on the island, for examples an old well that was being abandoned by the locals because they found it not important at all! Once I made the locals understand the value of it, they voluntarily told me about the history of the spots or artefacts. And then I re-presented all the stories in the festival to let visitors understand the past of this place. (R1)

In short, the findings have demonstrated the importance of social inclusiveness on the development of a place. Without the collaboration of both parties (i.e., residents and organizers), the restoration work may not have been realized. Festivals thus play an important role in serving as platforms to showcase various cultures to the public.

The Challenges of Inclusive Development

The major challenge in conducting PIF at the initial stage was the lack of interest from the local community, which was due to two factors: First, a sense of belonging and cohesion within the community, which might be related to the aging society of the community. As mentioned, most young villagers have relocated to urban areas for career opportunities. Furthermore, at the start of the festival planning, there was an absence of a village council or officer that could be approached by the organizer. Second, the top-down participation approach – the event is initiated by the PIF organizer, who is perceived as an outsider by the community at the initial stage; locals were thus seen as mere bystanders. These factors could be largely associated to rural-urban interaction gaps, such as the movement of people, telecommunications, and commodities (Thompson, 2015). Cultural and communication differences

between Pangkor islanders and outsiders, such as between the local community members and the PIF organizer, may have resulted from many factors. These include the Malaysian context of a salad bowl and Pangkor's geography (its distance from the mainland) and history (the rise of the island as a popular tourist destination and its subsequent fall, where it was 'replaced' by other emerging destinations in the late 20th century (Tan, 2010). However, the community's input, decision-making, and provision of equal opportunities for participation are important components of inclusive development (Gupta et al., 2015). To ensure a community's active involvement in a festival, approaching the right stakeholders is important.

In this study, two critical stakeholders were found – the clan associations and the community of returning young villagers. Interestingly, instead of official authorities, Chinese clan associations are the right stakeholders to approach in encouraging the locals to participate in the festival. As mentioned earlier, associations serve as the symbol of unity between Chinese migrants and their descendants (Yan et al., 2020). Over time, this symbol remained crucial in most rural areas. In this island context, these trusted associations serve as the medium to facilitate acceptance of the festival organizer (the outsider) by the local community (the insider). Hence, associations are important for persuading the insiders to open their 'doors' to welcome the outsiders in organizing the festival together. As such, the PIF organizer was able to establish a good rapport with the locals after almost a decade:

The successfulness of a community festival is mainly because of these local authorities [temples and clan associations]. It took me seven to eight years to approach the right authorities and then to be accepted by the community.

Besides the associations, the community of returning young villagers is also a vital stakeholder in the PIF. They catalyzed the inclusiveness developmental process, which gradually influenced the elderly in their families to get involved in the festival, forming a cohesiveness within the community. One significant example of such involvement can be seen in the 2019 PIF, where the elderly performed a short play (see Figure 1). Needless to say, the returning young villagers might have been more convincing than outsiders when it came to persuading the elderly to be a part of the festival.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the socially inclusive development of a Chinese fishing community in Malaysia from the perspective of a festival organizer. The findings show that through a 5-phase process, festivals help to strengthen community cohesiveness, revitalize economy, and restore cultural values while preserving the unique identities of the community, as described in the salad bowl perspective. Notably, the group of returning young villagers had played a vital role in the inclusiveness process; their innovative business ideas and incorporation of these ideas into the PIF have expanded the community's economic structure to include tourism-related income. This bottom-up participation has been shown to facilitate an inclusive development process, in spite of the top-down participation challenges that came up during the



Figure 1. Stage Performance by the Elderly Community in PIF 2019. (PIF organizer)

initial stages of the festival. To sustain inclusive development, participation of the local community should be spontaneous, with autonomy given to handle problems and implement solutions (Tosun, 1999). Without this level of participation, the sustainability of inclusive development could be a challenge. As a limitation, this study looked at inclusive development from only the perspective of the festival organizer; findings should therefore be treated as preliminary. PIF, as presented in this research workshop paper, is one of the case studies of *The Place Making of Fishing Villages in Malaysia* project. Further fieldwork with key stakeholders from other fishing villages will be conducted. Future studies are needed to investigate the local community's perspectives on the needs and benefits of inclusive development.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

