

Toponyms of a Colonial City: Street Names of George Town, Malaysia

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To cite this article: Wee-Chuen Pek (2020). Toponyms of a Colonial City: Street Names of George Town, Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 9(2): 15–31.

[http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9\(2\).0002](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9(2).0002)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9\(2\).0002](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9(2).0002)

Abstract

This study investigates changes of street names of George Town, Penang, during the colonial and post-colonial periods. It is concerned with the notion of toponymic hegemony of the colonial authority and the reaction of the local community in the absence of a role in the naming of places. After independence, an issue of concern revolves around how the new authority constructs its own ideologies through the process of renaming places, and how the local community exerts its right to “normalise” street names according to daily usage especially after George Town was listed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site.

Keywords: toponymy, George Town, street naming, colonial and post-colonial periods

Introduction

The place name is an outcome of the local community’s daily life to identify a specific space. This name symbolizes the collective consensus of the community arising from the process of historical and social negotiations. It is through place names that we come to know of the features of the place or the perceptions of the community. The place name reflects the images of a particular landscape that emerges under the prolonged process of man-land interaction. Besides its community-oriented origins, the name of a place is often the “creation” of the ruling class seeking to stamp its authority on the place. The ensuing place name will invariably be devoid of local content as it is tied to the decisions of the ruling authority. Regardless of the manner in which the name of a place is “constructed,” it will become a part of its identity and memory that are meaningful for the local community. However, a given

place may be subjected to different perceptions among sections of the community as well as the ruling authority in the protracted social process of the conflict for control over the means of symbolic production associated with a place (Yeoh, 1992).

The aforementioned issues have always been highlighted in recent toponym studies. From the concept of critical toponym, many studies are concerned with the naming and renaming issues carried out by the colonial and post-colonial societies.

The naming of places was an important element of colonial administration in its attempt to justify the rationale of its existence and to defend its political legitimacy (Yeoh, 1992). In many of the post-colonial countries, place names are not only treated as one of the ideological instruments to divest the notions of its colonial linkage but also as a tool for nation-building (Lewandowski, 1984; Phan & Kang, 2014; Yeoh, 1996; Yeh, 2013a). In some cases, the naming can even reveal the balance and conflict among rival groups within a political party (Yeh, 2013b). Place names may thus become a spatial representation of political ideologies. Besides the contests in naming places between different regimes, the local community too has its alternative system of place names in daily use, as the cultural landscape represents competing images beyond those imposed by the ruling authority (Yeoh, 1992).

From the studies above, the contest in naming places was waged not only between different succeeding regimes but also between both the state authority and the local community. It is worth noting that, the “streets” in urban areas were always the arena of the naming contest, and partly due to the limited number of streets and the value of their locations. Drawing on the past practices of naming places, this study will examine the process of street naming and renaming during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Penang.¹

This study is concerned with the hegemony of the colonial rulers in stamping their authority through the identity of places and the reactions of the local community that was denied the right to name places. After independence, the new central authority imposed its own ideology through changes in place names and the local community’s contest to restore street names based on their real-life experiences and perceptions and made possible by political changes. With changes in the urban landscape, the local appeal of nostalgic street names for the streets becomes an issue of importance. This study will attempt to understand the characteristics of the street names of this major city and the ideology and the conflicts of interest among the colonial authority, post-colonial state, and the local communities.

The Setting

Penang is located in the northern part of Malay Peninsula and consists of the Prince of Wales Island and Province Wellesley on the mainland. Penang was previously part of the sultanate of Kedah until it was ceded to the British in 1786. After becoming a British territory, the authority began to plan a settlement on the north-eastern tip of the island and called it George Town after King George III. Penang soon grew into a commercial hub in the

northern part of Malacca Straits. In 1826, Penang, Malacca and Singapore became the Straits Settlements under the British administration of India and Penang was made the capital of these Settlements. Despite being overshadowed by Singapore, it maintained its dominance at the northern tip of the straits and its population continued to grow. The Chinese community was the largest and the most active economic group. They were the traders, carpenters, masons, smiths, shopkeepers, and followers of a variety of other occupations. Among the Chinese, the Hokkiens (from Fujian province) were most dominant and their dialect became the *lingua franca* of the inhabitants.²

Penang became a state within the Federation Government of Malaya in 1948 and subsequently that of Malaysia in 1963. In view of its large Chinese population, the post of Chief Minister has always been occupied by a Chinese who serves under a Malay *Yang di-Pertua* (Governor) and vested with executive power of the state government.³ In the context of Penang, it is clear that the influence of the Federal authority and that of the local community may be seen as being parallel to each other.

The study is carried out by matching street names with those in old maps. The historical maps of colonial era are from the map collections of National Library of Australia. For the more recent maps, direct access was made to Google Maps and Open Street Maps. The sample of street names is based on those of the urban area dating back to the colonial period. These names are examined to highlight the imageries “constructed” by the colonial authority and the local community during different periods of the past.

The Colonial Period

Penang Island was blanketed in thick jungle and swamps prior to British rule. One of the first acts of the British was to plan for the needs of commercial activities. George Town was conceived of as a British style modern city planned according the ideas of the colonial authority in the Malay world, including the naming of streets and other features.

According to the town plan of 1944, the types of streets in George Town may be divided into different categories as follows:

- (1) Roads: The roads are wide transport routes and generally built after the town streets were laid out. The roads are located at the outer fringe of the city core and the major ones were Penang Road, Transfer Road, Burmah Road, Prangin Road, Maxwell Road, Magazine Road, and Macalister Road. In all, there were 43 roads in George Town in 1943, many serving as connecting links between suburban areas of the town.
- (2) Streets: The streets are much narrower than roads and constitute the basic feature that formed the grid pattern of the town centre. In all, 42 streets were identified in George Town in 1943, bearing such names as King Street, Leith Street, China Street, or Market Street.
- (3) Street ghauts: The street ghaut is part of a street which refers to the beginning of the street located beside the coastline or river. The term “Ghaut” is derived from Tamil and refers to

an open space by the water. There were nine street ghauts in 1943 aligned perpendicularly to the beach, and with such names as Church St. Ghaut, China St. Ghaut, Chulia St. Ghaut, or Armenian St. Ghaut.

- (4) Lanes: The lane is a narrow street linking the shophouses and relatively secluded places. The 19 lanes 1943 bore such names as Pragin Lane, Toh Aka Lane, Fish Lane, Prangin Lane, Carnarvon Lane, and Chulia Lane.
- (5) *Lorong*: The *Lorong* is a Malay word for lane. The term was used for lanes along which Malay families are settled. There were only three *Lorong* in the town in 1943, namely *Lorong Selamat*, *Lorong Susu*, and *Lorong Seratus Tahun*.
- (6) Avenues: The avenue is a public way that has trees or buildings on both side of it. There were only two avenue in the town in 1943, namely *Codrington Avenue* and *Peel Anenue*.

Street Naming by the Colonial Authority

There are 111 street names which bear their colonial origins. The general basis of street naming may be divided into seven categories:

Table 1

Determinants of Street Names during the Colonial Period

Categories of Names	Number	%
People	46	41.1
Places	31	27.7
Landmarks	14	12.5
Ethnic Communities	11	9.8
Occupations	3	2.7
Commemorative Events	3	2.7
Miscellaneous	4	3.6
Total	112	100.0

As evident in Table 1, the largest number of streets was based on the official status or names of persons, followed by the names of places. Together these account for two-thirds of the total colonial-era street names. Landmarks or certain features and ethnic communities were also important determinants of placenames during the colonial period. Other determinants include occupations, commemorative events and miscellaneous considerations.

Streets Named after People

The naming of streets as an honour to persons of by reference to their status or names was reminiscent of the practice in many Western countries. In George Town, the most common names were British, numbering 30 in all, with the remaining 16 after local personalities. The British names were largely the nobility or high-ranking administrators. These names include

those of the King (1), Queen (2), Duke (1), Prime Minister (2), Governor (3), Acting Governor (2), Lieutenant Governor (3), Resident (1), Resident Councilor (1), Acting Resident Councilor (3), Superintendent (1), Colonial Secretary (3), and Superintendent (1) (Table 2). Others honoured included traders (2), lawyer (1), engineer (1), physician (1), and bishop (1). Apart from the King, Queen and Duke, the others were remembered for rendering valuable service to Penang.

Table 2

Streets Named after the British by Status or Names of Persons

Type	Name of Person	Title
Street	King George III	King
Street	Queen Charlotte	Queen
Street	Queen Victoria	
Street	Duke of Edinburgh	Duke
Road	William Ewart Gladstone	Prime Minister
Street	William Pitt the Younger	
-	Frederick Weld	Governor
Street Ghaut	Sir Cecil Clementi Smith	
Street	Sir Cecil Clementi Smith	
Road	Archibald Edward Harbord Anson	Acting Governor
Road	Sir William Edward Maxwell	
Street	George Leith	Lieutenant Governor
Street	John Frederick Adolphus McNair	
Road	Norman Macalister	
Lane	Norman Macalister	
Street	William Farquhar	Resident
Road	Charles John Irving	Resident Counsellor
Road	Samuel Dunlop	Acting Resident
Avenue	William Peel	Counsellor
Avenue	Stewart Codrington	Counsellor
Street	Francis Light	Superintendent
Lane	Henry Howard Molyneux Herbert	Colonial Secretary
Street	Henry Howard Molyneux Herbert	Colonial Secretary
Street	John Wodehouse	
Street	G. M. Sandilands	Trader
Street	Stuart Herriot	
Street	Edward Presgrave	Lawyer
Street	Sir Henry McCallum	Engineer
Lane	Hutton	Physician
Street	Garnault	Bishop

A select group of Chinese, Malays and Indians were commemorated in the street names. Despite their immigrant origins, they had settled in George Town and were acknowledged for their social standing among their communities. They were also substantial contributors to the revenue of the colonial government. The revenue farmer and social leader of the Canton-Hakka community in the late 19th century, Chung Keng Kwee (郑景贵), had two streets named after him, namely, Ah Quee Street and Keng Kwee Street. In a practice to differentiate by class, the names of high officials were generally used for the main streets while those of lesser rank would grace the names of lanes.

Streets Named after Places

The second most popular category of street names are those derived from the names of localities, a practice similar to that of colonial Singapore (Yeoh, 1992). As the first capital of the Straits Settlements and the regional hub of the northern Malaya, it was befitting that the streets of Penang carried the names associated with imperial grandeur such as Downing Street, Buckingham Street, and Northam Road. The names of British possessions such as Burma, Rangoon, Ceylon, Hong Kong and selected places in British India were generously displayed to showcase British imperial influence.

The position of Penang as a commercial centre and regional hub was reflected in the names of surrounding states or districts such as Kedah, Larut, Kinta, Krian, Perak, and neighbouring Siam and Aceh of North Sumatra. Penang was also an international port dealing with a variety of commodities and bustling with transnational business and investment activities. A class of merchants from adjacent states were actively contributing to the prosperity of Penang. Among them were Lim Leng Cheak (林宁绰) who invested in planting and revenue farms in Kedah; Chung Keng Kwee was a major tin miner in Larut and the Kinta Valley of Perak; Khaw Soo Cheang (许泗章) was a shipping magnet and had extensive trading networks in southern Siam and Burma; Thio Tiau Siat (张肇燮), who was originally from Netherland Indies, established a base in Penang and extended his business tentacles to Aceh, Perak, Pahang and eventually to China. These regional economic interactions integrated Penang into the trade and development of its surrounding territories to form an economic region. This regional influence of Penang was not lost to the authorities in the naming of streets and places.

Streets Named after Landmarks

Selected landmarks and local features were incorporated into the names of 13 streets. Some were natural and other cultural. The natural features included a waterway (Pragin canal) and the beach, while the cultural ones were the market, esplanade, bridge, church, and Indian temple (Sri Kunj Bihari Temple). Among them were three churches, namely the Catholic Church, the Portuguese Eurasian Church, and Armenian Church. However, the numerous temples and shrines of the dominant Chinese community never featured in the names of streets. One may

interpret this peculiarity as an indication of the control of the ruling minority in using their rights to choose their favourite landmark in their perception of selected places.

Table 3

Names Associated with Places and Territories

Street Names	Type	Places and Territories
Downing St.	St.	Britain
Buckingham St.	St.	Britain
Northam Rd.	Rd.	Britain
Halfway Rd.	Rd.	British
Burmah Rd.	Rd.	British Burma
Rangoon Rd.	Rd.	British Burma
Ceylon Lane	L	British Ceylon
Hong Kong St.	St.	British Hong Kong
Kampong Malabar	-	British India
Nagore Rd.	Rd.	British India
Madras Lane	L	British India
Amoy Lane	L	China
Acheen St. Gat.	St. G.	Dutch East Indies
Penang St.	St.	Local
Penang Rd.	Rd.	Local
Sungei Ujong Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Kuala Kangsar Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Kedah Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Larut Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Kinta Lane	L	Malay Peninsula
Nanning St.	St.	Malay Peninsula
Krian Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Selangor Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Perlis Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Malacca St.	St.	Malay Peninsula
Pahang Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Johor Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Perak Rd.	Rd.	Malay Peninsula
Cintra St.	St.	Portugal
Siam Rd.	Rd.	Siam (Thailand)

Note: Rd.=Road. , St. =Street, St. G.= Street Ghaut, L=Lane

Streets Named after Ethnic Communities

A total of ten streets were named after ethnic communities found in George Town. Ethnic diversity was and still is a point of pride of the town in fostering a harmonious society to work for the prosperity of all. The ethnic communities in the colonial period were the Chinese, Malays, Chulia, Armenian, Tamils, Jews and others. Certain streets where particular groups resided were identified with their ethnicity to reflect the multi-ethnic landscapes of the town.

Streets Named after Miscellaneous Factors

Three other factors were featured in street names. These refer to different occupations, commemorative events and miscellaneous considerations, which make up for the names of ten streets. Names referring to occupations were few in number and were associated with the selling of dried salted fish, rope and brick making, and milk production. Hence the presence of Fish Lane, Rope Walk, Brickkiln Road, and Lorong Susu (Milk Lane). A street, a road and a place also carry the names of Union, Transfer, and Claimant respectively. These were meant to commemorate the union of Great Britain and Ireland from 1801, the transfer of the Straits Settlements from British Indian to be answerable directly to the Colonial Office in London in 1867, and the Tichborne Case in the 1870s that featured the failure of the claim filed by the “Claimant” to the Tichborne baronetcy and fortune (Ooi, 2019). The miscellaneous names are seen in Love Lane, New Lane, Lorong Selamat (Safety Lane), and Lorong Seratus Tahun (100-year Lane). Their origins are uncertain. The Malay term Lorong is equivalent to that of the lane, and used in recognition of the long association of the community with the locality.

In summary, the colonial administration had a preference for naming streets and roads after the nobility and senior administrators as well as the names of British colonial possessions in the East. Street naming was effectively used as a tool to enhance the legitimacy of British rule and to glorify British imperial influence. It was the ruling minority of the colonial administration, rather than the local communities, who had the control in constructing and creating an image of the landscape according to their perceptions and idiosyncrasies.

Response of the Local Communities

Street names designated by the colonial government carried the weight of legitimacy and all names spatially demarcated are gazetted. These names provide a layer of local history based on colonial interpretation. On the other hand, local communities have their own construction of local history in their collective memory.

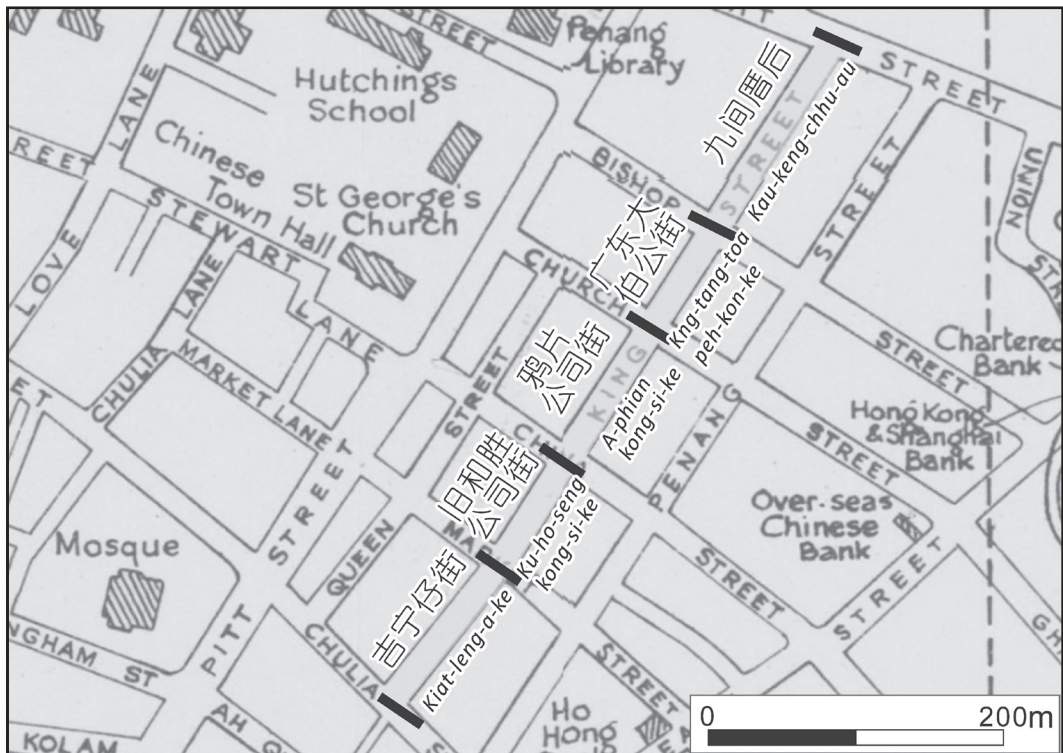
The Chinese community was and still is almost the largest in number and have long settled down in George Town. Many early settlers were illiterates and spoke different Chinese dialects and to whom official street names had little relevance to their local experiences and attachment to their locale.⁴ Many of the street names imposed by the authority have little connection to the local context. The various communities have instead adopted their own systems of identifying their streets and neighbourhoods based on their history and past experiences.

Acceptance of and Objection to Official Street Names

The Chinese settlers resorted to naming different sections of a street according to particular landmarks. King Street, for instance, comprises five sections each with its distinctive placename in the Hokkien dialect, namely, *Káu-keng-chhù-āu* (九间厝后), *Kng-tang-tōa-peh-kong-ke* (广东大伯公街), *A-phian-kong-si-ke* (鸦片公司街), *Kū-hô-seng-kong-si-ke* (旧和胜公司街), and *Kiat-lêng-á-ke* (吉宁仔街) (Figure 1). Similarly, the local residents identify Maxwell Road by its three different sections by way of *Khai-hêng-bí-bí-ká* (开恒美米绞), *Chhâ-tiân* (柴埕), and *Káng-á-kî* (港仔墘) (Figure 2).⁵ These local names are itched into the minds of the local residents as an inherent component of the collective memory of the community. They have no legal status nor do they appear on official maps. These local placenames are therefore expressions of local objections to the official images of the streets or roads in question.

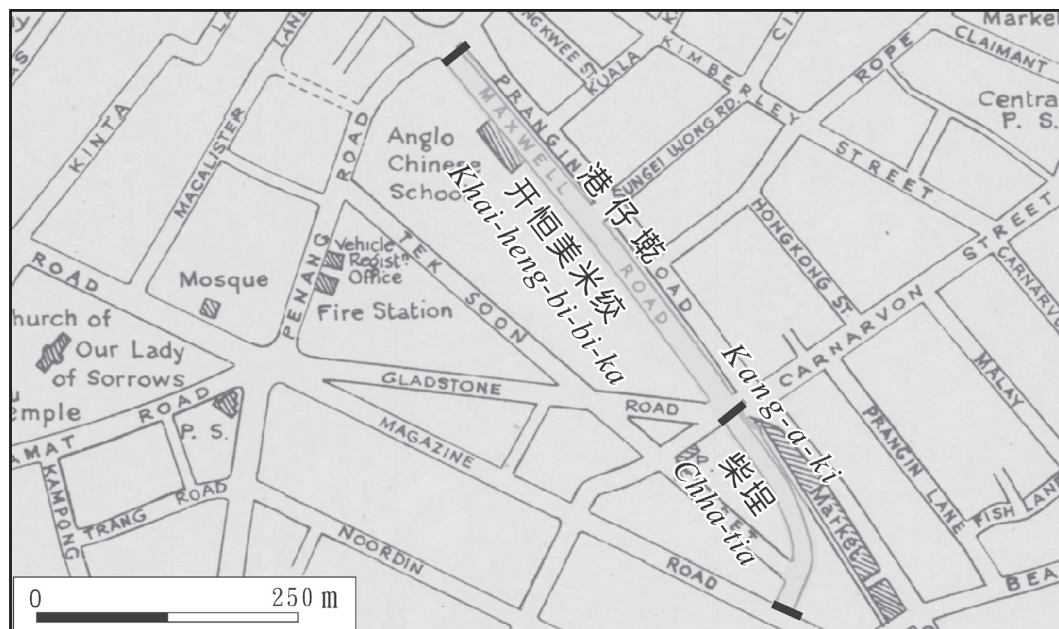
Figure 1

The Local Placenames of King Street



Source of base map: Inter-service Topographical Department. 1944. *Penang (Georgetown)*. London: War Office.

Figure 2

The Local Placenames of Maxwell Road

Source of base map: Inter-service Topographical Department. 1944. *Penang (Georgetown)*. London: War Office.

Of the 141 out of the 155 collected samples of local street names, 14 or 8.8% are identical with the official version, the remainder being the transliterations or literal meanings of the official names. Many of these too refer to the economic activities carried out by the Chinese. Examples include Market St. or Lebuah Pasar, Fish Lane, Rope Walk, and streets or roads named after Chung Keng Kwee, Lee Phee Choon, Cheah Tek Soon, Koh Seang Tek, Lim Kek Chuan, and Foo Tye Sin. Other examples include Hong Kong Lane, Love Lane, and Lorong Selamat or Safety Lane.

In some cases, the Chinese transliterated the official British street names into Chinese characters, such as Green Hall to *kî-lîn-hó* (麒麟虎) and Hutton Lane to *jiá-lân-a-teng* (惹兰亚丁). Some other names associated with the landmarks of the streets were borrowed from Malay or English names, such as *tōa-bâ-lâi* (大峇唛) and *po-lî-kháu* (玻璃口), in the Hokkien dialect, to signify respectively the police station and police. Table 4 shows some examples of these street names.

Table 4

Local Placenames of George Town

Place Name	Meaning	Origin
<i>Toān-lô-sin-ke</i> (緞羅申街)	Tuan Losin	Aceh Merchant
<i>Po-lí-āu</i> (玻理后)	Police	Back of Police Station
<i>Pa-sat-ke</i> (巴虱街)	Pasar	Market
<i>Má-kau-ke</i> (马交街)	Macao	Macao
<i>Chê-ti-ke</i> (齐知街)	Chitty	An Indian Community
<i>Kiat-lêng-á-ke</i> (吉宁仔街)	Keling	The Tamil Community
<i>Toān-pa-ní</i> (緞巴尼)	Tuan Paddy	Name of Landowner
<i>Kî-lîn-hó'</i> (麒麟虎)	Green Hall	-
<i>Po-lí-kháu</i> (玻理口)	Police	Front of Police Station
<i>Tōa-bâ-lâi</i> (大峇唛)	Balai	Police Headquarters
<i>Gû-kan-tang</i> (牛干冬)	Kandang lembu	Cowshed
<i>Lô-lêng-ke</i> (罗隣街)	Noordin	Indian Muslim Merchant
<i>Kiat-lêng-á-ke</i> (吉灵仔街)	Keling	The Tamil Community
<i>Kiat-lêng-á-bân-san</i> (吉宁仔万山)	Pasar Keling	Indian Market
<i>Bân-kat-lí-hāng</i> (万葛里巷)	Bengali lane	Punjabi or Bengali
<i>Jiá-lân-a-teng</i> (惹兰亚丁)	Hutton	Name of a British Physician

Naming Principles of the Local Community

From the names of the 155 streets and roads in the sample of Chinese origins, the major determinants were similar to those adopted in the official names (Table 5).

Table 5

Major Determinants of Local Placenames

Determinants of Street Names	Quantity	%
Local Features	63	40.6
Occupations	27	17.4
Ethnicity	16	10.3
Community Organization	15	9.7
People	9	5.8
Clusters of Buildings	9	5.8
Location and Sites	6	3.9
Others	10	6.4
Total	155	100

The most common determinant of community-based placenames were landmarks and accounted for 63 or two-fifths of the sample. This was in sharp contrast to the 12.6% in the official list. These landmarks refer to certain local sites and surroundings, religious beliefs, public facilities, clusters of shops, and orientations with respect to buildings.

Reminders to certain traditional economic pursuits of the past were etched into the collective memory of the Chinese community of George Town. These pursuits were important occupations of early settlers and their shops were patronised by the local inhabitants for essential goods and services. The streets where the blacksmith shops, the local market, or salted fish outlets were found were identified as such in the local placenames. These street names are reminders of the traditional life of commerce and trade of George Town.

The local Chinese were skillful in associating certain places with specific ethnic communities which have congregated in the port town. Hence several street names are unmistakably tied to the presence of the Indian, Chitty, and Aceh and European settlers.

Interestingly, nine streets bear the names of Chinese companies and clan associations. Their headquarters were located in George Town and many occupied distinctive buildings that stamped their presence on the locality. Nine streets were named after Chinese associations or companies including the Yeoh Kongs, Ghi-Hin Kongs, Opium Syndicate, Ho-Seng Kongs, Ho-Hup Siah, and Ghi-Hock.

The local community generally adopt the official street names connected with community leaders of the past. There were three streets that were named after prominent individuals of other ethnic groups. These were H. M. Noordin, Mr. Paddy, and Tungku Syed Hussain (see Table 4). A network of roads in an outer zone of George Town were named according to a set of ordinal numbers from the first to the ninth roads. A total of 16 streets are known by their colloquial names instead of their official ones. These are either the transliteration or direct translations of the official names. These places include Muda Lane, Love Lane, Leith Street, Lorong Selamat, Aboo Sitee Lane, Jalan Seratus Lane, Hong Kong Street, Kedah Road, China Street Ghaut, Beach Street, Prangin Road, Maxwell Road, Macalister Lane, China Street, Buckingham Street, and Cintra Street.

The street names of George Town in effect portray two different layers of history according to official perceptions and those of the local community. Both have their ideas on the representation and organisation of space. The official names are sanctioned by legal authority and represents the “official” and colonial version while the colloquial names are embedded in the collective memory of the pioneers and passed down the generations. The official names project the far-reaching influence of British imperial power. At the community level, the colloquial place names do not exist on official documents but are born out of their connection to the local context, are part of the daily life of the local community, and inseparable from their “history” and experiences.

Renaming of Streets after Independence

After independence, Malaysia like many Southeast Asian countries, experienced an unstoppable decolonisation process. The new governments of post-colonial Southeast Asia were keen to erase the political connotations of many colonial placenames. A popular move was to replace colonial placenames with indigenous ones to construct a new nationalistic identity and ideology as they embark on the process of decolonisation and nation-building (Yeoh, 1996; Yeh, 2013a).

The street names of George Town were not spared the effect of the nationalistic fervour as many street names were erased and replaced by new ones. The round of renaming places may reveal the basis on which the new governing authorities behave.

The most logical act of localisation of street names was changing the colonial era names of roads, streets, and lanes into the Malay terms of *jalan*, *lebu* and *lorong* to comply with the National Language Policy under Article 152 of the Constitution. In reality, nine out of ten of the pre-existing street names were retained after independence. Interestingly, many of the names reflecting British influence such as Bishop, King, Queen, Buckingham, Cecil, Gereja (Church), and Transfer had been retained. As these names did not connote Western ideology, their continued use did not raise any objection. However, Janudi Road or the Jewish Street was the only one targeted for renaming out of political considerations.

The names of roads and streets that were subjected to change were the major avenues (Figure 3). The guideline on renaming was the priority to commemorate the services of senior administrators, politicians and individuals.

During the colonial period, the Chinese street names did not appear on the signs of street names though there was a set of Chinese and English parallel street names recorded in colonial documents (Haughton, 1891; Lo, 1900; Firmstone, 1905). This practice was meant to facilitate communication between the colonial administrators and the local inhabitants. Certain official notices were printed in English and Chinese in which colloquial street names were regularly mentioned.⁶

In order to project the special position of the national language the central government began to impose the use of language in sign boards and placenames. Street names in Romanised Malay replaced those in the English language. The use of Chinese characters on commercial signboards was allowed but the font size was strictly regulated.

Chinese street names, as in the past, did not enjoy any official status and the occasional Chinese placenames were eventually abandoned. Chinese street names have no legal standing and cannot be registered to claim property rights and eventually in mailing. This limitation has led to two undesirable results. The first is that while Malay street names are accepted as the official version, and the tradition of using Chinese terms for street names has diminished. Together with official priority for indigenous names, many Chinese street names of the colonial period have gradually been forgotten.

The second factor is the local-central contest in the use of bilingual road signages. The State government is helmed by Chinese-based political party and a rival of the central government. That Penang is a large urban centre imbued with a rich history and had succeeded in becoming a World Cultural Heritage site in 2008 have prompted the State government to legalise the use of bilingual street names. The Chinese version was to be displayed in traditional Chinese characters according to the Hokkien pronunciation (Toh, 2009, 2011). The streets involved were limited to Lebu Keng Kwee, Lebu Armenian, Lebu Campell, and Jalan Pintal Tali. The installation of bilingual street signs caused a stir not in the Malay-dominated central government but in the Malay press⁷ and a graduate union.⁸ Amidst this uproar, some of the bilingual street name plates were removed and others featured only the Malay language.

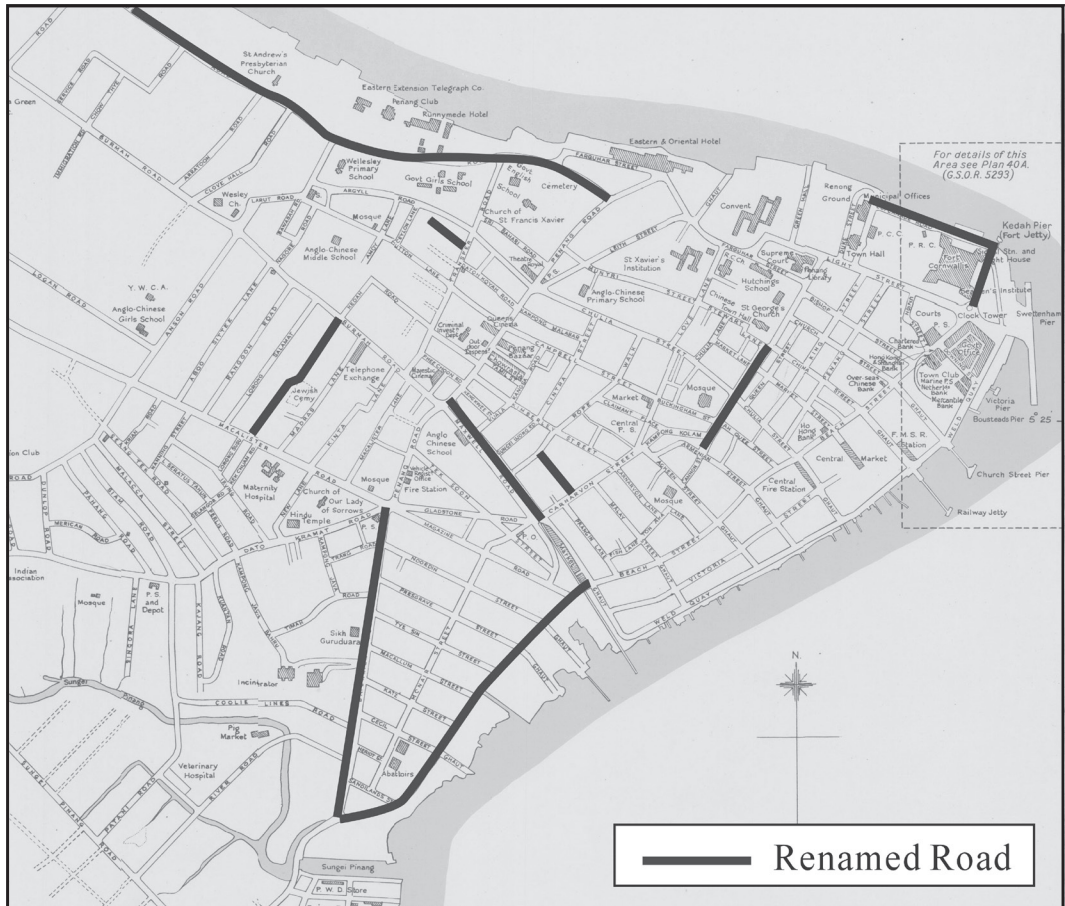
Table 6

The Renaming of Placenames in George Town

Old Street Name	Origin	New Street Name	Origin	Meaning
Esplanade Rd., Fort Rd.	Landmark	Jln. Tun Syed Barakbah	People	Third Governor of Penang (1969-1975)
Pitt St.	People	Jln. Masjid Kapitan Keling	Landmark	Name of the Kapitan Keling (Indian community leader)
Hong Kong St.	Place Name	Jln. Cheong Fatt Tze	People	A Chinese Merchant of the 19th century
Prangin Rd.	Landmark	Jln. Dr. Lim Chwee Leong	People	Medical Doctor, father of Lim Chong Eu (second Chief Minister of Penang)
Northam Rd.	Place Name	Jln. Sultan Ahmad Shah	People	Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) of Malaysia (1979-1984)
Halfway Rd.	Place Name	Jln. Sekerat	Tools	Sliver
Janudi Rd.	People	Jln. Zainal Abidin	People	Zainal Abidin bin Sutan Maidin, retired Inspector of Malay Schools in Penang and Politician. Penang's UMNO Chairman
Bridge St.	Landmark	Jln. C. Y. Choy	People	C.Y. Choy, Third and last Mayor of George Town
Brickkiln Rd.	Industry	Jln. Gurdwara	Landmark	Diamond Jubilee Sikh Gurdwara Temple

Note: Rd.= Road, St. = Street, Jln. = *Jalan* (Road), UMNO = United Malay National Organisation, the Malay political party that ruled Malaysia since independence.

Figure 3
The Renaming of Streets



Source: Inter-service Topographical Department. 1944. *Penang (Georgetown)*. London: War Office.

Conclusion

Street names are more than signs to designate sites and locations but an arena of intense contest for dominance by different interested entities. The British colonial government had almost absolute authority in projecting its power and stamping its imperial influence in far-flung territorial possessions. Places were named after the nobility, senior administrators or influential individuals, and the colonial territories that comprised the regional possessions of the British empire.

With independence, the new authority, in keeping with the general trend of newly independent colonial territories in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, invariably looked upon the replacement of colonial placenames as an easy means of announcing its sovereign control. The Malays who assume a dominant position in national politics attempted to promote a more Malay-oriented

version of history. The immediate heady days of independence would see a spate of new placenames to honour nationalists or historical figures in indigenous history. It is in this context that some street names which projected colonial identities were the first to be replaced. However, externally imposed placenames are often devoid of direct relevance to the local context of the designated sites. Nevertheless, the colonial or the post-independence authorities were in a position to construct their respective versions of local history which eventually enjoy the status of being “official” and authoritative.

It is the history of the local communities that is almost completely subdued and not accorded a proper place in the official versions, whether colonial or post-colonial. The usage of certain official street names does not fully seep into the daily lives of the common people. Instead, they have, since the early days of pioneering, evolved their version of local historical episodes relating to the development and other social events. The memories of this version of local history is more pertinent to their collective memory than the “official” versions. They have hence come up with their own street names that are reminders of the past. It is this version that is embedded in the collective memory of the local people and features in their daily lives and passed down the generations.

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This paper is the revised version of a draft presented at the Workshop on Toponymy, National Taiwan Normal University on January 17, 2015. I am indebted to Professor Peter Kang of the National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan, Professor Phin-Keong Voon and Dr. Yee-Tuan Wong of New Era University College, Malaysia, and Mr. Tan Yeow Wooi of Penang for their valuable comments.

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Notes

- 1 Penang was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 7 July 2008.
- 2 Generations of living among different ethnic communities have led to the borrowing of numerous Malay words by the Chinese in their colloquial speech and vice-versa.
- 3 The population of Penang in 2010 comprised of Chinese (45.6%), Malays (43.6%), Indians (10.4%), and Others (0.4%) (Department of Statistics, 2011). The Yang di-Pertua Negeri appoints the leader of the State Legislative Assembly as the Chief Minister. Since independence in 1957, those appointed as Chief Ministers were Wong Pow Nee (1957–1969, Alliance Party), Lim Chong Eu (1969–1990) and Koh Tsu Koon (1990–2008) both from the National Front, Lim Guan Eng (2008–2018) and Chow Kon Yeow (from 2018), both from the Democratic Action Party.
- 4 Such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hailam, Teochew and Hakka.
- 5 The *káng-á-khî* (rivulet side) often includes Maxwell Road and Prangin Road because of their proximity to the Prangin Ditch (Lo, 1900).
- 6 Such as the *Singapore and Straits Directory* and the *Government Gazette* published by the states of British Malaya.
- 7 A Malay newspaper published an article on October 26, 2008 stating that the Penang State Government violated the spirit of the Malaysian Constitution (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2008, October 26).
- 8 The Gabungan Graduan Melayu Muda (The Malay Youth College Graduate Union) filed a legal action against the Penang State Government on the multilingual street name plates (K. Kasturi Dewi, 2008).