

## Discourse on 'Peranakanness' with focus on the Peranakan Chinese community in contemporary Kelantan, Malaysia

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**Abstract.** The issue of 'social organization of difference' in a society has been an integral part of human life as social being. One way to address the issue is by organizing social differences according to ethnicity. When interplay of majority and minority ethnic groups subsequently produces an amalgam, it tend to be referred to in negative manner. However, this is not the case with Peranakan, a concept used in Malay Archipelago to refer to amalgams which consist of local-born of non-indigenous descents and have localized culturally. Instead, it is one of a rare concept that is neutral in nature and embracing differences. Nevertheless, Peranakan is said to be on the verge of extinction. Modernization and the pressing need to re-orient themselves with mainstream ethnic group are seen as main push factors which rendered the 'extinction' of Peranakans inevitable. By analyzing a Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan, Malaysia as a case study, this paper shows that instead of going 'extinct', Peranakanness has instead moved in different 'trajectories' even within the same community.

**Keywords:** Peranakan, Peranakanness, Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan

### 1. Introduction

The issue of 'social organization of difference' in a society has been an integral part of human life as social being. One way to address the issue is by organizing social differences according to ethnicity. This is common in plural societies where its members tend to be 'sorted out' into different ethnic categories according to the authority-defined lens. Long-term and intense interplay of different ethnic groups may subsequently produce a new amalgam whose characteristics are similar yet different than that of mainstream ethnic groups'. Thus, this warrants the new group an ethnic category of its own. History has shown that such ethnic category tend to be referred to in negative manner either pejoratively or even down right derogatorily by society. This trend usually involves amalgams which were resulted from interplay of ethnic groups with uneven relationship such as majority-minority in the society. These, for example, include categories such as '*mulatto*' and '*mestizo*' in the West and '*zainichi*' in Japan.

Such amalgams are referred by societies in Malay archipelago as 'Peranakan'. A term in Malay/Indonesian language, it is derived from the root word '*anak*' which means child. When circumfixed with '*per-* ... '*an*', *peranakan* originally refers to womb which is part of female's reproduction system. Eventually, the term evolved into a metaphor that refers to local-born of non-indigenous descents. This term is particularly used in Malay Archipelago to refer to a specific type of sub-ethnic group, *viz.*, Peranakan. In this context, Peranakan can be defined as an ethnic group whose members are believed to be offsprings of ethnic/race-mixing due to practice of interethnic marriages between non-indigenous minority group and indigenous majority groups. By using Peranakan as an ethnic category, societies in Malay Archipelago are seen as openly accepting the amalgam as part of their own 'flesh and blood'. It is such a rare case to find a concept that is as neutral in nature and embracing differences such as Peranakan.

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Influenced by predominant local environment, the Peranakans became indigenized or localized culturally in many aspects, from their everyday lifestyle and behaviour to customs, norms and values adhered to. In Malaysia today, there are various types of Peranakan groups as well as degree of acceptance in Malaysia on the authority-level. Some Peranakan groups such as Peranakan Jawi have been 'ascended' and accepted as part of the Malays. As part of the dominant ethnic group in the society, Peranakan Jawi enjoys special benefits as well as privileges exclusively associated with the 'son of the soil' status. Some other Peranakan groups such as Eurasian-Portuguese (the Cristang) and Peranakan Chinese of Kelantan are still considered as non-Bumiputera. Nevertheless, they enjoy to a limited degree, privileges associated with the native status on the state level. There are also other Peranakan groups that have highly assimilated with native group, but are considered as no different with non-Peranakan of the same ethnic group, such as Peranakan Indian.

As an amalgam, Peranakan has its own distinct ethnic identity. However, it has been eclipsed by mainstream ethnic group's identity. This could be contributed to three overlapping factors namely generalization, stereotype and ignorance (Pue 2009). Generalization emerged from the practice of compartmentalization or categorization of various ethnic groups into limited categories on the authority-level solely for the purpose of convenience. Such practice which started during colonialism has been inherited with little or no change even after the country gained its independence 54 years ago. Stereotype feeds on such generalization. Without first-hand experience or knowledge of the group, stereotype may result in blindly accepting such generalization as 'correct facts' which tend to be applied generally to an ethnic group. Ignorance, on the other hand, is due to lack of enlightenment by the fact that such sub-ethnic group exists at all. Hence, each ethnic group is naively presumed as homogeneous.

Due to the intense assimilation process which the Peranakan have gone through, their Peranakan identity is visibly distinct from the non-Peranakan of the same ethnic group. Interethnic marriage which was practiced *en masse*, particularly in the beginning of the emergence of Peranakan communities between its forefathers and native women, have produced offsprings that have different physical characteristics than non-Peranakan. More importantly, their Peranakan cultures are generously peppered with various elements of native culture via acculturation process while still retaining its original ethnic 'mould'. These are visible from their Peranakan identity markers such as clothes, food, leisure and entertainment activities.

Instead of celebrating the richness of culture of Peranakan groups, it is remarkable to find that most writings of the Peranakan sub-ethnic groups tend to end on a sad note. While going through literature review on Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan (PCK) in particular, one can't help but noticing similar patterns emerging from remarks that the sub-ethnic group is doomed to extinction in near future. This is mainly due to two main culprits, viz., modernization/globalization and the domination of ethnic demarcation in Malaysian setting. As a result, Peranakanness in Peranakan Chinese identity is said to have become 'diluted', 'more Chinese' and 'less Malay' (Suryadinata 2007). While some lamented that the Peranakan identity is 'gradually fading from the scene' (Suryadinata 2007: 126), some even more bold as to crudely predict the perishness of 'this unfortunate group' within 30 to 40 years (Mohd Shahrul Imran Lim Abdullah 2010: 343). Thus, this paper explores the dynamics of Peranakanness as exhibited by its members in a Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan as part of the first author's doctoral research.

## **2. Methodology**

A one-year fieldwork was conducted from January 2009 to February 2010 by the first author in one of Peranakan Chinese community in Tumpat district in Kelantan. The community was chosen based on two factors. Firstly, PCK differs from other Peranakan Chinese sub-ethnic groups such as the Baba and Nyonya from Malacca whereby it assimilates with not one, but two native groups (Malay and Thai). Although there are varieties of degree of native influences in Peranakan Chinese communities throughout Kelantan (Teo 2003), the community selected for the fieldwork was it one that exhibits balanced influences of both Malay and Thai cultures for purpose of better representation of the community. Such balanced influences from both Malay and Thai ethnic groups can be seen in Peranakan Chinese communities that exist in places with high percentage of Malays in the population but located near Thai settlements (Teo 2003). With regards of the chosen community for this research, population of the location mirrors the state population in general which is over 90% Malay-Moslem hegemony. Also, the community is located within Tumpat district. Sharing the

international border with Thailand, Tumpat has the highest concentration of Thai population and settlement in the state. It is evident from many of 20 Buddhist temples in Kelantan are located within the 169.5 km<sup>2</sup> district, which is the smallest district in the state. Interestingly, the population of the fieldwork location has very small percentage of ethnic Thai residing there. Thus it is safe to say that any Thai influences in Peranakan culture can be seen as elements which have been long assimilated into the Peranakan culture and not recently induced due to current inter-ethnic relationship with the Thai. Secondly, aside from the Malay-Thai balance within the Peranakan culture, the community was chosen as it also has access to intra-ethnic relationship with non-Peranakan Chinese. Located only 8 kilometres away from the state capital, PCK from this settlement commute to the state capital on daily basis for work and study purposes. Likewise there is increasing number of non-Peranakan Chinese who resides in the locality whilst still work in the state capital.

Data was collected during the fieldwork using Wolcott's (1999) 'experiencing, enquiring and examining' trilogy technique. To obtain 'first-hand experience in naturally occurring events' (Wolcott 1999: 46), the first author participated everyday-life activities of PCK communities in various levels. This included communal-level religious events, weddings and funerals; family-oriented events such as visiting newborn babies and their mothers during post-partum period, visiting sick family members, tomb sweeping month, as well as mundane parts of everyday-life activities such as going to the market, cooking and shopping. Participation in such activities allowed the first author to grasp general description of everyday life in PCK community. Then and there, the first author engaged in the process of enquiring data from community members formally via interviews as well as informally such as via chatting and discussion. For both techniques, all community members were treated as general informants before the first author zeroed in to 63 members of 6 extended families whose matriarch/patriarch and majority of family members resided in the community. Also, three expert laymen were chosen as key informants in giving the author expert's point of view and explanations detailing highly ritual events in PCK life such as marriage and wedding, funeral and death anniversaries, as well as birth and post-partum care and rites as practised within the community. The third leg of the trilogy technique consisted of examining secondary data which were obtained from two main sources, viz., researches conducted previously from various social researchers as well as documentation in various forms within private collections of PCK members themselves. Documentations existed in various forms such as photos, home video footages, dress collection as well as home decorations.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1. Generation profiles**

Based from profiles of 63 informants collected, a line was identified to differentiate informants into two generations. 'Older Generation' consisted of ten informants. These included patriarch/matriarch of each extended family as well as their offsprings who were born by 1950 in Kelantan. In regards of the patriarch/matriarch, his or her parents were also Kelantanese. This generation went through a time when access to proper education system was considered as luxurious and a privilege beyond their reach. As such, they generally had little or no formal education. This in turn affectively limited their choice of employment to various odd job (*kerja kampung*) or ran small businesses. With the community and its immediate surrounding as the axis of their world, it was not surprising that every informant in this generation speaks fluent Kelantanese Malay apart from their own version of Hokkien as well as local Thai dialect. This generation is also unable to converse in Mandarin. However, due to little or no interaction with non-Peranakan Chinese during their heyday, such lack of skill is not seen as an issue for them.

The rest of the informants formed the younger generation of PCK community. This could be further divided into two. The main focus of this generation was the first group which the first author dubbed as the 'Younger Generation' which consisted of 38 informants. They were offspring of Older Generation, born in Tumpat District from 1960s to 1990s. Generally, this group had formal education at least on high school level. This level of education facilitated their upward social mobility whereby they could secure blue- or white-collar jobs in private and government sectors. Some opted in establishing their own business other than taking over their family business. Relative to Older Generation, there was some transition within Younger Generation where they began to be more exposed to non-Peranakan group via education system or working world. Within this generation, PCK community began to learn and grasping Mandarin language.

The second group of younger generation, whom we referred to as Millennium Generation, consisted of 15 children. Offspring of Younger Generation, they were born in the year 2000 onwards in Kelantan. Due to their young age, these children were not interviewed directly. Instead, questions were directed to their parents. Millennium Generation was seen as generally able to converse in Mandarin as well as Hokkien. They were exposed to Mandarin at school as early as kindergarten level. Older children were sent to Chinese school in Tumpat town or in Kota Bharu. According to their parents, the main reason for them to send the children there was to enable them to learn the language. Cultural differences between Peranakan and non-Peranakan was non-issue for them. However for the purpose of this paper, the focus would be comparison between Older Generation and Younger Generation only.

### **3.2. Changes in Peranakan Chinese identity markers**

Consequently, Peranakan Chinese identity among Older Generation was seen different than those of Younger Generation's, particularly in terms of cultural markers. Among often-cited Peranakan Chinese cultural markers were clothes, language, food and leisure activities. With regards of clothes, Older Generation's romantic Peranakan image of tight, long kebaya worn with sarong for the females, and shirtless males wearing only sarong and *semutar*, have been long immortalised in various literature review. Younger Generation did no longer adapt these style in favor of Westernized clothes such as T-shirt and jeans or Bermuda pants for both genders. Language-wise, both generations were seen to be fluent in Kelantanese Malay. However in Younger Generation, particularly those in their late 20s or younger, their grasp of the language was 'less rich' *vis-a-vis* those of Older Generation's, particularly in terms of usage of Kelantanese Malay vocabularies. This in turn affected the degree of Malay influences in their Peranakan Hokkien. At the same time, Younger Generation's Peranakan Hokkien differ than those of Older Generation's. The former's Hokkien was seen to have its usage of Malay words been replaced with proper Hokkien words. Nevertheless, their command of Malay language was still relatively superior than that of non-Peranakan Chinese's. As for food, both generations still identify to local dishes as part of their Peranakan Chinese identity. From *nasi lemak* and *nasi kerabu* to *pulut kuning*, even to *budu* consumption, have been virtually unchanged. Such local dishes were even given priorities during celebrations or big events such as wedding, newborn's full moon celebration and to pay deed (*bayar nazar*). What have changed was mainly the preference of using spoon and fork for eating instead of hands. Although they still use *budu* as condiment in their dishes, Younger Generation tend to purchase it instead of making it themselves as practised by Older Generation as it is readily available in the market. Lastly, Older Generation's participation in traditional leisure activities whereby *wayang kulit*, *menora* and *mak yong* as main sources of entertainment was not shared by Younger Generation. Instead, the latter found solace in common modern activities such as watching television and listening to the radio. This activities by no means were exclusive to the Younger Generation. Both generations seemed to enjoy watching or listening to programmes from Thailand television and radio stations while sharing common view that local programmes were boring and too Malay-oriented.

### **3.3. Adherence to age-old customs and rites**

While visible differences may be found in Peranakan Chinese identities of Older Generation as well as Younger Generation, both generations were seen to adhere to the same age-old customs and rites. Institution such as family and kinship and religion, as well as practices of customs and rituals associated with both institutions such as wedding, funeral and birth remained virtually structurally unchanged. Some changes were detected in terms of simplification of certain parts of a ritual. In a wedding customs for example, tea ceremony may be conducted for the bride's side of the family first instead of groom's, and forgo symbolic gesture of kneeling and bowing to family members whose status are higher than that of the groom or the bride with the exception of their parents and most senior family members. Funeral preparation, too, have experienced some changes. Instead of being managed by the deceased's family members and community, services of 'professional' caretaker was assigned. He would oversee the overall of funeral ceremony, from providing funeral paraphernalia to guiding family members in conducting the ceremony to transporting the deceased with his worldly possessions to burial or cremation site with a truck. Traditional customs and rites were still followed by Younger Generation even with the view of modern technologies, higher education and scientific knowledge as seen in aspect of taking care of newborn and new mothers during post-partum period.

Right after delivery of a newborn until the end of confinement period, the mother followed strict post-partum care which aimed to enable her to fully recuperate physically and spiritually. Such practice usually involve the Malay-influenced customs such as engagement of traditional masseuse (*tukang urut*), avoidance of certain type of food, and the use of herbs for cleansing and together with postpartum girdle, may even used to facilitate mothers getting back in shape. New mothers were seen as spiritually weak, hence help from alternative health provider such as abbot or shaman were sought. Protective charms and magically-charged water (*nammon*) were utilised throughout post-partum period. The same could be applied to the newborn who was viewed as similarly vulnerable. Care of newborn generally involved traditional care as well as conventional care, particularly when facing unexplainable factors or certain urgency such as excessive crying, treating jaundice and colic.

#### 4. Discussion

As a social phenomenon, Peranakan identity and culture are dynamic in nature particularly when changes involved in its surrounding. In terms of Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan, modernization, globalization and nature of ethnic demarcation that persist in the country are seen as some that rendered its 'Peranakanness' unable to prevail any further. Thus, the community is predicted to cease from extinction some time in near future. However, we believe that such is not entirely true. As briefly shown in this paper, changes occurred in Younger Generation's Peranakanness was inevitable due to modernization and globalization. Similar changes have been recorded in young generations of other ethnic groups as well. On another note, this paper also shows that Peranakanness is not static even among Older Generation. They too are not immune to changes faced in the society such as modernization and westernization, and adapt accordingly. As such, it is wrong to claim that Peranakan Chinese has lost its 'Peranakanness'. What they experience, we believe, is better suited to be referred to as 'breaking-out' and not 'breaking-down' (Shamsul 2005). Based on findings discussed above, we found that changes occurred were mainly on the surface, such as change of clothes to western ones and simplification of rites during wedding ceremony due to practical reasons. When probed deeper, we found that albeit undergone some changes, the core of Younger Generation's Peranakanness remained intact. Such examples showed that Peranakanness 'moves' in different 'trajectories' even within the same community.

#### 5. References

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