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(RE)PLACING THE TERENGGANU PERANAKAN CHINESE AS "*MEK AWANG*": MAKING CHINATOWN AND HERITAGISING THE PERANAKAN IDENTITIES IN KUALA TERENGGANU

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ABSTRACT

In 2017, the Terengganu Chinese Peranakan Association (TCPA) withdrew its participation in the 4th Annual Terengganu Peranakan Festival (TPF) organised by the Terengganu Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCCI) because of a dispute over the combined term "Mek Awang". To TCPA members, Mek Awang is a derogatory term, which the Malays used to refer to someone as being "soft", effeminate, or a cross-dresser. However, TCCCI has appropriated the term Mek Awang and used it as a brand name to promote the festival, and to highlight the "uniqueness" of the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese community. This case is an example of how local cultural terms or practices have been readapted to suit tourism interests. Tourism is often accused of reinventing culture for capital ventures. Consequently, many academics and social critics have come to regard official national heritage sites and heritage tourism with scepticism and disdain. Combining ethnographic data from our in-depth interviews with the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese and our participant observation during the festival, we argue that the dispute over Mek Awang is not only a simple change in reference, but is also an indication of a deeper contemporary global process that affects ethnic minorities and their identities. We conclude that various attempts to commodify

the peranakan experiences and culture in Terengganu as well as the intention to place the peranakan as a marketable heritage in Chinatown can be interpreted as attempts to replace a heterogeneous community with a homogeneous, uniform, genetic and identifiable ethnic category with a Peranakan[1] (with capital "P") identity.

Keywords: Peranakan, heritage tourism, Chinatown, ethnicity, Terengganu

INTRODUCTION

An estimated 300,000 domestic and international tourists visited Kampung Cina, Kuala Terengganu in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia during the 4th Annual Terengganu Peranakan Festival (TPF) from 25 to 30 August 2017. Organised by the Terengganu Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCCI) since 2014, this particular festival, officially referred to as the "Terengganu Peranakan Festival 4.0", was an important state-level tourist event in 2017. However, the Terengganu Chinese Peranakan Association (TCPA), formally launched in 2016 to revive the *peranakan's* way of life, withdrew its participation because of an escalated dispute over the label "*Mek Awang*". About two months prior to the festival, TCPA members formally objected to the use of *Mek Awang* in a press conference. The association's representatives told a reporter that the terms "*Mek*" and "*Awang*", "when used separately were fine as they referred to a pet or colloquial names given by the local community" (David 2017). However, when combined, *Mek Awang* becomes a derogatory term which the local Malay and Peranakan communities use in reference to men with effeminate characteristics or who are cross-dressers. Oddly, TCCCI branded the term to promote the annual festival and to highlight the "uniqueness" of the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese community. The association's reaction is, therefore, not unwarranted.

In the following pages, we will first discuss how developments in heritage tourism in Malaysia and the TCCCI have come together to reproduce Kampung Cina and Terengganu Peranakan Chinese as two marketable heritage and cultural resources for Terengganu before examining the plural, fluid and situational conditions of the *peranakan* identities. The dispute between TCCCI and TCPA reflects a lack of understanding between non-*peranakan* Chinese and *peranakan* Chinese in terms of cultural practices, language, way of life and identities. As a result, the various attempts of "heritagising" the Peranakan experiences in Kuala Terengganu, we conclude, may have contributed to the homogenisation of their culture and plural identities. Replacing the *peranakan* Chinese community in Terengganu as

Mek Awang further displaces them, their unique and fluid cultural coordinates formed from years of integration with local cultural practices and continuous engagement with the local communities.

REDISCOVERING THE PERANAKAN: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

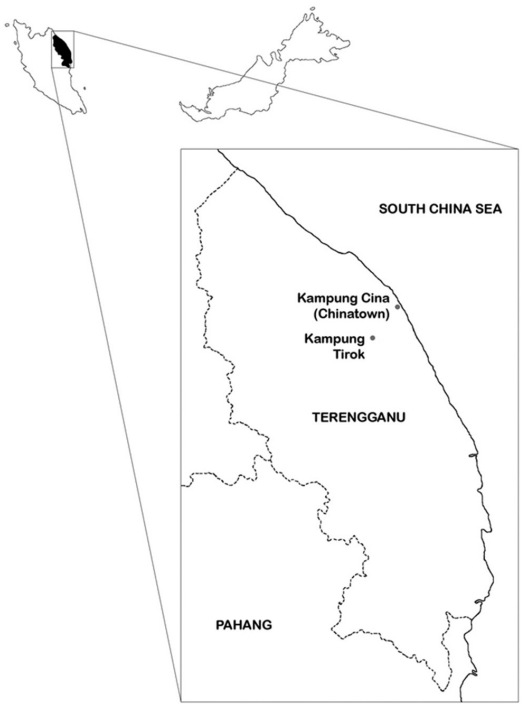

Figure 1: Kampung Cina and Kampung Tirok in Terengganu.

Terengganu is a Malay-Muslim majority state located on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Figure 1). According to the 2010 Census, of its 1.04 million population, 96.9% are Muslim (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). The Chinese community is the largest minority ethnic group, however, they comprise only 2.5% of the total population. Almost half of the Chinese residents (44%) live in Kuala Terengganu, the capital city of Terengganu (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). With a contribution of about 10% to 15% to the state's economy in 2017, Terengganu relies heavily on tourism revenues leading the state government to set a target of attracting 5.5 million

tourists in 2018 (*The Sun Daily* 2017; 2018). In recent years, tourism in Terengganu has expanded from focusing exclusively on natural attractions to include promoting its culture and heritage. One of the heritage areas is Kampung Cina in Kuala Terengganu. The Kampung Cina River Frontage was placed on the World Monuments Watch list in 1998, 2000 and 2002 to "advocate for the preservation of Malaysia's historic waterfront district" (World Monument Fund n.d.).

The 4th Terengganu Peranakan Festival

On 25 August 2017, a major section of Jalan Kampung Cina, a 600-metre one-way street that runs through Kampung Cina from the Pasar Payang to the Hotel Seri Malaysia, was closed to vehicles from 2:00 p.m. Stalls were set up along both sides of the street by vendors selling a variety of local food, merchandise and international snacks such as churros, Sarawakian layered cakes, popcorn chicken, *takoyaki*, Vietnamese and Mexican foods. A small vacant land before a tiny bridge that connects the lower and upper side of Kampung Cina was shaded with a canopy for food tasting, cooking demonstrations, workshops, gaming and stalls selling more merchandise such as *batik* shirts, *nyonya kebaya* and *peranakan*-themed socks. At the entrance of the canopy, stood an approximately three-metre tall metal Ironman and Bumblebee from Transformers franchise together with several five-metre inflatable cartoon figures from popular movies such as Po from Kungfu Panda and Kevin, one of the principal minions from the Despicable Me animation series.

After the bridge, a recently closed down cafe was temporarily turned into an exhibition showcasing the evolution of the *kebaya* – the figure-fitting embroidered blouses paired with *batik sarong*. A festooned vehicle was placed in the middle of the road underneath the Kampung Cina arch. Further up the road, a car park on the right before the end of Jalan Kampung Cina became a location with more than 20 food stalls selling Taiwanese night markets' foods. When the festival finally started, Jalan Kampung Cina was filled not only with visitors but also with participants who were wearing *kebaya sarong*. Images and videos of the festival, especially of the *kebaya*-clad individuals, were uploaded to the Terengganu Peranakan Festival official Facebook page. After sunset, a Disney-like East-Meets-West parade started with individuals wearing full body costumes and characters comprising Mickey Mouse, a polar bear, a group of Minions, Pikachu, Doraemon as well as the four main characters from the Journey to the West (Figure 2). In short, the Terengganu Peranakan Festival 4.0 was a multicultural carnival and family friendly event offering visitors sights, sounds and culinary indulgence. Food vendors came from different parts of Malaysia and a well-known *kebaya*

tailor was flown in for exclusive and by-appointment only clients. Largely, the festival attempted to place the *peranakan* in Kampung Cina and also among all the foreign and local cultures as a marketable heritage.

Figure 2: Minnie Mouse and the four main characters from the Journey to the West at the festival (August 2017).

Ethnography as a research methodology is described as a toolbox of methods that enables researchers to collect data in naturalistic social settings. As social settings change and ethnography is applied by researchers across different disciplines to gain holistic insights into peoples' world views and actions, ethnographic strategies evolve (Pink et al. 2015). Our fieldwork to explore the relationship between local knowledge in Peranakan heritage in Terengganu and Kelantan began in October 2016. Since then, we have made several field visits to both states as well as a special field trip to attend the Terengganu Peranakan Festival in August 2017. These field visits, which combined person-centric ethnographic data from in-depth interviews and participant observation, are part of a Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) project titled "Peranakan as an Analytical Concept for Ethnic Identity: Embodiment of Local Knowledge in Malaysian Heritage". This article focuses only on the Terengganu Peranakan Festival in Kuala Terengganu. We adopted an ethnographic reconnaissance approach and used participant observation as a preliminary survey to get an overview of the festival and to develop a strategy for further investigation. It is a strategy that encourages researchers "to take advantage of any and every opportunity to have

a look around" (Wolcott 1999, 208). Data from participant observation came from multiple field trips to Kuala Terengganu since 2016 and the three-day observation visit and documentation of the festival from 25 to 27 August 2017. We observed the setting up, participated in the activities, visited the galleries, followed the festival's Facebook page, collected promotional materials and also met with members from TCPA. Field notes together with photographic evidence were kept and coded for analysis. Two months after the festival, we returned to Kuala Terengganu on 30 October and through the help of TCPA, we conducted four follow-up in-depth interview sessions with six community members. The five male and one female community members have been our key informants since we started the pilot study of our fieldwork in 2016. With their consent, all interview sessions were recorded and the audio files were subsequently transcribed.

HERITAGE TOURISM, PERANAKAN IDENTITIES AND "CHINATOWN"

Tourism is the second biggest contributor to Terengganu's economy after the oil and gas industry. In 2017, five million tourists visited Terengganu, contributing an estimate of 10% to 15% to the state's economy. To reduce dependency on the oil and gas sector, the state government set a target to attract 5.5 million tourists in 2018, and the tourism industry's contribution was expected to increase to 30% within the next two years (*The Sun Daily* 2017; 2018). One of the targeted sectors was heritage tourism.

Like nationhood and history, heritage is contested and heritage sites are often considered to be a tool for nation building. Malaysia is no exception. As a growing trend in the tourism industry, heritage tourism is defined as "travelling to experience places, artefacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present" (The National Trust for Historic Preservation 2015). Focusing on experiences, tourists who are interested in heritage tend to stay longer and spend more money. Heritage tourists are believed to have greater engagement with local communities and sites they are visiting compared to other types of tourists. As a result, being labelled as cultural heritage or listed as a heritage site often helps boost tourism. One of the best examples in Malaysia is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) official listing of the historical centres of Melaka City and Georgetown, the capital of the state of Pulau Pinang, as World Heritage Cities on 7 July 2008. Because such international recognition of the country's national heritage bodes well for the Malaysian tourism sector, which celebrates diversity and thrives

on its multicultural inheritance, total tourist arrivals to Melaka increased from 7.2 million to 8.9 million in 2008, and to about 17 million in 2018 (Tourism Malaysia 2015; *The Star* 2019). Similarly, tourist arrivals to Pulau Pinang rose from less than 4 million in early to mid-2000 to 6.4 million in 2016 (Penang Institute 2018; Ng 2018). Upon realising the economic benefits of heritage tourism, other state governments also started to diversify their tourism market. Tourism in Terengganu, for example, expanded from focusing exclusively on natural attractions to include promoting its culture and heritage. When the Kampung Cina River Frontage made it to the World Monuments Watch list in 1998, 2000 and 2002, Kampung Cina became an important heritage site in Kuala Terengganu (World Monument Fund n.d.). This marked the rapid transformation of Kampung Cina in the 21st century, including gradually being referred to as "Chinatown" and the exploration to discover more local heritage for tourism.

Making "Chinatown" as a Marketable Heritage

Located at the southern estuary of the Terengganu River, Kampung Cina in Kuala Terengganu is a historic settlement developed through trading activities. It was believed that because of an established friendly relationship with China from the 1st to 7th century, a number of coastal towns along the 225 kilometres coastline in Terengganu such as Jerteh, Besut, Paka, Kuala Terengganu, Dungun and Kemaman became maritime pit stops for traders between China and India (Liu 2012). A noticeable number of Chinese merchants started to arrive in Kuala Terengganu and in different parts of Southeast Asia during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). However, it was only in the early 18th century that ethnic Chinese formed a sizeable settlement in Kuala Terengganu. These Chinese merchants, who later settled and congregated in Kampung Cina, contributed to the prosperity of the state and were part of the economic transformation of Terengganu (Tan and Kamarudin 2013a; 2013b). With the independence of Malaya in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, these settlers became Malaysian citizens. Despite being the minority, the strong presence of the Chinese in Kampung Cina remains until today.

Presently, there are about 170 shophouses remaining on both sides of Jalan Kampung Cina that runs through the settlement. According to Tan and Kamarudin (2013b), the upper Kampung Cina, near present day Seri Malaysia Hotel, was known as the town area or *phor* in the local Hokkien dialect and the lower Kampung Cina was known as Jalan Kedai Payang before the 1950s. Even though commonly known by the locals as *Tangrenpho*, the Chinese quarter is now informally referred to as "Chinatown", especially after an archway was erected in the 1990s (Tan and Kamarudin 2013b). Such a change in reference,

although informally, is significant because it coincided with a shift in global trends recognising the value of cultural diversity in multi-ethnic societies, and thus alluding to the growing importance of an inclusive national heritage as cultural commodities (Loo and Muller 2016). In the case of Kampung Cina, the emergence of Chinatown preceded the heritagising of the Terengganu Peranakan culture.

Chinatowns are socio-culturally constructed spaces that continue to experience rapid transformation in the 21st century. First, there are different types of Chinatowns because not all urban ethnic Chinese enclaves become known as Chinatowns, and not all Chinatowns are settlements of minority Chinese in foreign countries. For example, in the ethnic Chinese majority Singapore, there is a Chinatown (Tan 2013). In North American and European cities, Chinatowns were once synonymous with exclusive neighbourhoods of Chinese migrant communities segregated from the host societies till the mid-20th century. Often negatively referred to as "ethnic ghettos", these types of Chinatowns were direct results of racial discrimination (Loo 2012; Wong 2013). Writing retrospectively about Sydney's Chinatown in Australia, Ang (2016, 260) observes, "from the dominant white Australian point of view these spaces were long despised as 'ethnic ghettos', but for the Chinese themselves these concentrated urban localities have long functioned as a refuge from the hostile environment of white hegemony". Nevertheless, the characteristics and functions of all these Chinatowns vary. As Wong (2013, 3) puts it,

> Most of the European and Australian types of Chinatowns do not have hierarchical, interlocking associational structures like those in Lima, Havana, New York, Vancouver, Chicago, and San Francisco. However, contemporary Chinatowns (established after 1960s) in North America are not always segregated communities either.

There are Chinatowns that are tourist centres such as the two largest Chinatowns in Yokohama and Kobe, Japan and the touristy Chinatown in Singapore that is also where the oldest Hindu temple is located (Tan 2013). These variations are important because, just like ethnic identities, Chinatowns are heterogeneous and continue to evolve. Once as ethnic enclaves periphery to the host societies and were safe havens for ethnic minority and migrants in foreign lands in the last century, the continuous existence of Chinatowns, especially those in Western countries, now carry a transformed symbolic meaning with different political consequences (Eom 2013; Loo 2012). For example, a shift in Australia's policy from placing emphasis on creating an all-white to a multi-ethnic Australia since the 1970s has made Chinatown in Sydney "an icon for Australian multiculturalism"

(Ang 2016, 261). Yet, the shift has a profound impact not only on ethnic minorities, but also impacts the "meaning" of Chinatown. This change, as Ang puts it, "is a morphing of marks of otherness from devalued signs of difference into desirable cultural assets. Ethnic subjects now stand to benefit from their cultural difference by claiming their identity as property and presenting it in self-consciously consumable forms" (2016, 261). She adds that "all around the Western world Chinatowns underwent this transformation, where Chineseness became an object of commodification, which was often self-commodification" (Ang 2016, 261). Equally, the transformation of established Chinese settlements into new Chinatowns, such as Chinatowns in Malaysia, warrants exigent attention because the identities of spaces such as Chinatowns are also increasingly shaped by contemporary global processes.

In postcolonial multi-ethnic Malaysia, the decision to have a Chinatown is a fairly recent state-imposed phenomenon. It began first in 1992 and again in 2003 with two attempts to rename Petaling Street and its surrounding areas of an earlier Chinese settlement in downtown Kuala Lumpur as Chinatown (Loo 2012). Even though the initial idea was first proposed by Mahathir Mohamad, the then fourth and seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia, together with state-funded projects to beautify, modernise and transform Petaling Street into a pedestrian mall, both the first and later attempts of renaming Petaling Street as Chinatown were resisted by the Malaysian Chinese community (Loo 2012). Unlike the creation of Chinatowns in the Western world, imposing a "Chinatown" onto an existing Chinese neighbourhood is seen by the Chinese community as a "treatment of Malaysian Chinese as an immigrant and their status as ethnic minority" (Loo 2012, 859). Hence, turning Petaling Street into a Chinatown is seen as a form of marginalisation of Malaysian Chinese from the mainstream multi-ethnic society. This is problematic because a state-imposed commodification of Chinatown would freeze the Malaysian Chinese "in an image of the past, and hence may reinforce their cultural marginalisation, rather than their empowerment" (Ang 2011, 91). In other words, it is seen as a form of minoritisation of urban Chinese in general, and the Malaysian Chinese in particular.

Redevelopment since then continues to bring changes to Terengganu's Kampung Cina. For example, the lower Kampung Cina area now has a mixture of Chinese and Malay businesses, cafes and a 24-hour convenience store. Sport bars, fusion restaurants, beauty and skin care centres as well as massage services join the traditional Chinese restaurants, *kopitiam* (Chinese coffee shops), bakeries, butchers and sundry shops in the upper Kampung Cina area. Meanwhile, many local residents have moved elsewhere; there are also empty shophouses that

have been transformed into swiftlet houses. Until mid-2016, there was only one guest house in Kampung Cina; currently there are several boutique hotels and guest houses providing accommodations to domestic and international tourists. All these changes are keeping Kampung Cina current in present day Kuala Terengganu but the impact of these socio-cultural changes is very similar to Sydney, Australia that "Chinatown's new significance as marketable heritage simultaneously marks the passing of its role as the homely locus of a tight-knit community life" (Ang 2016, 262). Similarly, as Kampung Cina no longer has a tight-knit community life, Chinese social capital established since the last few centuries is slowly being replaced by a marketable heritage commodified as Chinatown. Given that tourism is often being accused of reinventing and reconstituting culture for capital ventures (Jenkin 2010; Wood 1997), similarly, branding "a living museum" such as the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese community as *Mek Awang* as part of Kampung Cina's marketable Chinatown heritage for tourism purposes have to be carefully unpacked.

Peranakan and Their Identities in Multi-ethnic Malaysia

Identity has become an imperative way for individuals and communities to define not only who they are but also how they want to be seen or, in the words of Anderson (1991), "imagined". Often defined as a group of people who identify with each other based on similarities such as common ancestry, history, language, culture or nation, ethnicity is inherently a social construct (Eriksen 2002). Instead of a "primordial" phenomenon, the formation of ethnic groups is a modern phenomenon and a reaction to processes of modernisation, often as a result of responding to a complex process of historical and political change (Loo 2009). The same notion is also pertinent to the *peranakan*, commonly referring to a number of localised communities that emerged hundreds of years ago because of a long-term assimilation process between foreign and local ethnic groups in the Malay Archipelago (Pue and Shamsul 2012). The Malay word *peranakan* is a complex term carrying multiple and evolving meanings to describe a heterogeneous and localised community of people in Southeast Asia. The *peranakan* communities can be found in present day Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Southern Thailand and Malaysia (Henderson 2003). In present day Peninsular Malaysia alone, Pue (2016) has identified ten different communities of *peranakan* in six states. These include the Samsam Peranakan (Langkawi, Kedah), Jawi Peranakan (Pulau Pinang), Peranakan Indian (Melaka), Arab Peranakan (Kedah), Peranakan Sikh (Perak), Portuguese-Eurasian or Kristang (Melaka) and collectively the Peranakan Chinese could be further distinguished into the Baba Nyonya (Melaka), Straits Chinese (Pulau Pinang), and the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan and Terengganu.

Like all forms of identity, ethnic identity evolves. As a result, the formation, maintenance and reproduction of a collective identity involve a dual process, which consists of "one of inclusion that provides a boundary around 'us', and one of exclusion that distinguishes 'us' from 'them'" (Schlesinger 1991, 300). In other words, differences are equally important to ethnicity, especially in maintaining the constructed ethnic boundary. For the *peranakan*, the contour between and even within each community is diverse and subjected to localised circumstances. For example, besides sharing different patrilineal varieties, the Jawi Peranakan and Arab Peranakan are Muslim while the Peranakan Indian (*Chetti* Melaka) are Hindu (Dhoraisingam 2006). The Peranakan Indian are also known to speak more Malay instead of Tamil. Religious differences further divide the Samsam Peranakan, a localised Siamese and Malay community, into Muslim Samsam and Buddhist Samsam (Pue 2016). The Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia that can be found in Melaka, Pulau Pinang, Kelantan and Terengganu are different from one another. While the Peranakan Chinese in Melaka use more Malay in their daily conversation and the Peranakan Chinese in Pulau Pinang speak Penang Hokkien (Suryadinata 2015), the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan speak Hokkien with a mixture of both Malay and Siamese words and grammar (Pue and Shamsul 2012). The Peranakan Chinese in Terengganu, who we will encounter later in this article, are distinct from other Peranakan communities elsewhere.

The pluralistic nature of the *peranakan* communities is not a coincidence because the formation of these *peranakan* communities actually reflects the various ways in which local communities have responded to the socio-cultural changes in the Malay Archipelago from the era prior to European colonisation to the formation of modern nation-states in Southeast Asia until today. Literally meaning child, *anak* is a Malay word frequently being "interpreted to mean ancestors of these inter-marriages in the Malay Archipelago" (Henderson 2003, 31). It was widely believed that social amalgamation started when sojourners consisted only of men, from China, India and the Arabian Peninsula, who frequented the Malay Archipelago for trade and expansion of religion as well as power, decided for various reasons to stay in the region. Some of these non-native ethnic groups intermarried with local women, began to set up families and later formed communities living closely with the native groups in different pockets of trading ports in the region. Years of frequent social interaction living within the vicinity of local society eventually led not only to their adoption of local lifestyles, languages and customs but also to the formation of various new non-native communities or ethnic groups, who perceived themselves as having closer cultural proximity to the local or "host" society than to their native homelands and cultures. This process of "a formidable hybrid construction"

(Ang 2001, 72) is a necessity that ultimately led to the *peranakan* communities being referred to as "being locally-born of mixed foreign-local parentage, who, in turn, practice localised non-native culture" (Pue 2016, 75).

Except, the foreign-local parentage nexus may not be a definitive or compulsory criterion. The Peranakan Chinese, for example, includes the communities of localised early Chinese migrants who have adopted the native lifestyles, languages and customs, such as speaking the Malay language and adhering to Malay customs and social values. Many see themselves as Chinese but continue to distinguish themselves from the *sinkheh,* literally meaning "new guests" in the Hokkien dialect referring to new Chinese immigrants. These Chinese are *peranakan* primarily due to cultural assimilation, not because of mixed ancestry. As Suryadinata (2015, xii) puts it,

> [I]t is therefore safe to say that there is no typical *peranakan* Chinese. The *peranakan* Chinese are a spectrum that ranges from those who were most integrated, if not assimilated, into the local society, mainly "Malays", to those who were less assimilated.

In short, not only the offspring of mixed marriages are considered *peranakan*. In addition, not all communities with a locally-born of mixed foreign-local parentage see themselves as *peranakan*. According to Carstens (2005), the Hakka Chinese who settled in Pulai, in the isolated rural heartland of Kelantan since mid-1800s, do not see themselves as *peranakan* despite the fact that many intermarried with local women, lived among, as well as had frequent interaction with the locals. One reason for the Chinese cultural maintenance is that the Hakka Chinese, who were relatively poorer because of their continuing sojourning traditions, emphasised education as a means of socioeconomic advancement. The second was because Hakka women in China did not have bound feet which "made it easier for the Hakka to incorporate local women into their visions of a proper Chinese wife in Southeast Asia" (Carstens 2005, 136). For the *peranakan* communities, it is a patrilineal system that provides an anchorage for them to be ethnically identified but "their socialisation process was heavily influenced by the pivotal role of local women" (Pue 2016, 83). It was the unison integration of local cultural practices and continuous engagement with local communities that become the ultimate coordinates that uniquely determine their ethnicity. This dual process of similarities and differences in turn also offers the *peranakan* communities various ways to position themselves in relation to other communities, whether to distinguish themselves from or to gain affinity with them (Loo and Muller 2016). Nevertheless, the boundaries between the *peranakan* and non-*peranakan* remain ambiguous and are never fixed.

As a brief account of the different communities of *peranakan* and identities have illustrated, ethnic identity is complex, plural, and "is also increasingly recognised as shaped by contemporary global processes, rather than by residue from parochial pasts" (Wood 1997, 2). In Java during the 20th century, for example, the local-born Chinese who were descendants of earlier intermarriage between Chinese and local women were called *peranakan*. Yet in the 19th century, the term was used only to refer to Muslim Chinese (Suryadinata 2015). Religious association as a reference to the *peranakan* communities in Indonesia disappeared in the 20th century. This changing reference also occurred in the Malay Peninsula. Similarly, to the *peranakan* communities in Indonesia, the reference to the *peranakan* as a heterogeneous community changed in the 20th century because of the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants to Melaka in the mid-1900s during the period of British colonial rule that prompted the emergence of a distinctive *peranakan* identity originating in Melaka (Worden 2010). As a result, the reference subsequently becomes Peranakan (with capital "P"), an ethnic group that is "neither foreign, yet neither indigenous" (Pue and Shamsul 2012, 41). Colonial ethnic classification through population census, adopted by the administration of the new nation state after independence, eventually sorted many diverse ethnic groups into a single ethnic category. As a result, different communities of *peranakan* Chinese in Malaya become "Chinese" in Malaysia.

International maritime migration has fostered different ways of ethnic association at different historical junctures. Social amalgamation is a significant component to understand not only the emergence but also the continuous changing natures and meanings of the *peranakan* communities until today. The Peranakan Indians in modern day Malaysia are not only Hindu; there are those who are Muslim or Christian because of intermarriage. Urban migration, English-language education and other processes of modernisation create internal diversity amidst the community (Ravichandran 2009). Social anthropologist Thomas H. Eriksen (2002, 12) rightly reminds that,

> Cultural difference between two groups is not the decisive feature of ethnicity… For ethnicity to come about, the groups must have a minimum of contact with each other, and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is no ethnicity, for ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group.

Despite being a socially constructed term referring to a heterogeneous community, *peranakan* remains a contested concept. While it is still often mistakenly perceived to be an exclusive reference to *peranakan* Chinese because of the socioeconomic status of the *peranakan* Chinese relative to other *peranakan*

communities, a multitudinous fascination with the *peranakan* culture recently has not only made the *peranakan*-themed commodities trendy and marketable, but it has also initiated a search for a Peranakan (with capital "P") identity (Pue, Ong and Loo 2018). One of the driving forces of this fascination is tourism, especially heritage tourism. As we will demonstrate in the next section, tourism has become one of the "contemporary global processes" and it has a far-reaching implication on the "aspect of a relationship" that is essential to the identity of *peranakan* Chinese in Terengganu.

(RE)PLACING THE PERANAKAN CHINESE IN TERENGGANU AS "MEK AWANG"

Writings and documentation about the *peranakan* Chinese in Terengganu are scarce and most of the time, the focus is on the *peranakan* Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, an upriver Chinese settlement among Malay villages about half an hour away from Kampung Cina (Pue, Ong and Loo 2018). Known as the Tirok Peranakan Chinese, the community's "localised non-native" (Pue 2016, 75) cultural markers are recognisable. Members of the community speak fluent Terengganu Malay, converse among themselves in a version of Hokkien that is interspersed with Terengganu Malay, live in wooden houses similar to the Malay community, wear *sarong* and adopt the Malay habit of eating and mannerism (Tan and Kamarudin 2013a). These localised cultural markers are particularly evident among the older generations. Tan and Kamarudin (2015) wrote that Kampung Tirok developed because of earlier Chinese migration from Kuala Terengganu. In recent years, younger generations of Tirok Peranakan Chinese have either moved to and settled in Kuala Terengganu or elsewhere, sparking concerns that "the community will slowly diminish" (Tan and Kamarudin 2015, 60).

When we first arrived in Kuala Terengganu in 2016, a small group of enthusiastic local residents we contacted earlier connected us to a few members of the community. These individuals, who live in Kuala Terengganu, identified themselves as *peranakan* Chinese in Terengganu. During our visit to Kampung Tirok, it was apparent that the Tirok community we met are *peranakan* Chinese because of cultural assimilation and they fit comfortably into a range in the "spectrum" of locally-born and yet practice a localised new culture because of social interactions with the local Malay community. As a result, their identifiable cultural markers are closer to the local Malays. In addition, we met another group of individuals who grew up in Kampung Cina. They see themselves and are seen by others as *peranakan* Chinese despite displaying cultural markers that are

closer to urban Chinese elsewhere in Malaysia. Some of these individuals are fluent in Mandarin, they speak good English and Terengganu Malay, and they also use relatively less acculturated Terengganu Hokkien dialect. In addition, their modern attire, material culture and lifestyle were very similar to the urban Chinese, who are not considered as *peranakan* in Kelantan or elsewhere in Malaysia (Pue, Ong and Loo 2018). In existing literature about the *peranakan* Chinese community in Terengganu, there are no direct references or any specific mentions about a *peranakan* Chinese community in Kampung Cina (see Tan and Kamarudin 2013b, 53; Tan 2002). We discovered the main reason from the community's association leaders a year later during our last research trip to Kuala Terengganu in 2017, especially after the community became uncomfortable being labelled as *Mek Awang.*

For community members in both Kampung Tirok and Kampung Cina who continue to see themselves as distinct from the local "*sinkheh*" Chinese, it was fairly recent that they started referring to themselves as *peranakan*. In early 2010, they were encouraged to conduct extensive research of their own and found similarities with *peranakan* Chinese communities in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia that prompted members of the TCPA to select "Peranakan" to be included in their autonym.[2] Peranakan itself was not a familiar term to them. Prior to that, they called themselves and were referred to by the *sinkheh* as *Cheng Mua* or *Cheng Mua Lang.* Literally translated, the label means "*sarong*-clad people". We discovered this on 30 October 2017 during an afternoon conversation with one of the association members discussing how different scholars have referred to the *peranakan* communities in Terengganu, Kelantan and elsewhere in Malaysia in the following sequence:

[Researcher A] During that time, you don't use the word *peranakan* right?

[Respondent] We never even thought of the word as *peranakan*. We never thought, except, we know, we know we're different from the *sinkheh* [sic].

[Researcher A] So you call yourself, like, *teng lang nia* (Chinese only)?

[Respondent] We, we call... *wa lang kiu wa e lang ah, wa lang kio Cheng Mua e.* (We call the people who are like us, we call the *sarong*-wearing type)

[Researcher B] *Cheng Mua si oh?* (*sarong*-wearing, is that right?)

[Respondent] Aa. *Cheng Mua*, and then the-

[Researcher A] *Cheng Mua Lang* (*sarong*-wearing people).

[Respondent] The non-*Cheng Mua* one, *cheng* the samfu type one ah- (The non-*Cheng Mua* people, they were those who wore the samfu – a light top consisting of a plain high-necked jacket and loose trousers, worn by men and women from China)

This self-identification as *Cheng Mua Lang* has never been mentioned in any previous research and existing literature about the community (Pue, Ong and Loo 2018). Instead, the community in Terengganu were referred to by scholars in previous literature variously, for example, as "Baba" (Gosling 1964), "rural Chinese" (Teo 2002), "*teng lang*" and "Peranakan-type" (Tan 2002) and only rather recently as "Peranakan Chinese" (Tan and Kamarudin 2013b). Most importantly, the local Malay has never referred to them as *peranakan*. Instead, the Terengganu Malay community uses gender specific labels to refer to others: "*Mek*" for female and "*Awang*" for male (Pue, Ong and Loo 2018). As a newly adopted self-reference, the inclusion of Peranakan has replaced the phrase *Cheng Mua Lang* and when TCCCI combined the term *Mek Awang* for the festival, it further distorted how the community wanted to be seen.

Confronted with ambiguous cultural markers of the *peranakan* Chinese in Kampung Cina, we found that selected elements of identifiable cultural markers from the Tirok Peranakan Chinese and *peranakan* Chinese communities in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia were combined and exaggerated for the festival in Kampung Cina without consulting the TCPA, the representative of Terengganu Peranakan Chinese community. One of the ways to leverage on the different ambiguity and some distinct cultural markers of *peranakan* identities is by placing the combined and mixed-and-matched *peranakan* elements in Kampung Cina through the illustrious *kebaya*. The best example of this is illustrated in the exhibition that aimed to showcase the evolution of a singular and unified Peranakan culture through, surprisingly, tracing changes of the *kebaya* named "Unfolding Mek Awang: The Dynamic Culture and Beyond". In the exhibition that also paid tribute to two local seamstresses, mannequins dressed in *kebaya* from different eras were presented chronologically according to trends and popularity in the past years accompanied with English and Mandarin wall texts (Figure 3). Among these variations were *potong kot, kebaya biku* (1930s), and *kebaya sulam* (1950s). Without any specific references to *Mek* and *Awang* or to the *peranakan* Chinese community in Kuala Terengganu, *potong kot*, a local phrase said to be used for *kebaya*, was described as "unique

to Terengganu as *pua th'ng tay* in Hokkien" and "is only understood in north west Peninsular Malaysia by this dialect speaking community". The combination of a Malay word *potong* (cut) with *kot* (coat, an English loanword) was said to be coined by the Kuala Terengganu Chinese community, "influenced by the language of the state and the British Colonials". The wall text further informed that "the choice of attire for ladies whether described as *potong kot, pua th'ng tay, kebaya enchim* by the Indonesian, *nyonya kebaya* to the Singaporeans and Malaccans, is similar to *kebaya pendek* for the Malays or *yaya/nyonya* to the Thais".

Figure 3: Mannequins dressed in *kebaya* at the "Unfolding Mek Awang: The Dynamic Culture and Beyond" exhibition (August 2017).

None of the wall texts made a direct connection between *kebaya* and the *peranakan* Chinese in Terengganu. Because the emphasis was on *kebaya* and the Chinese community, the unfolding stories had nothing to do with the *peranakan* community in Kuala Terengganu. This was in stark contrast to the celebration outside of the gallery where the street was infused with constructed and carefully placed *peranakan* elements from socks to food, singing and beauty contests as well as photography competitions. Except, all these activities were under the branding of *Mek Awang.* As *potong kot* is being placed among all other types of, and as a local reference to *kebaya*, creating a mosaic of diversity and trends, the *peranakan* Chinese in Terengganu, especially those in Kampung Cina, are being displaced. Conflating ethnic Chinese with *peranakan* Chinese and later

rebranded as *Mek Awang* erases the distinction between the *peranakan* and the *sinkheh*. This replacement is significant because it affects one of the dual processes in defining the *peranakan* and their identities. As a result, it is as if now anyone, especially any Chinese in Kuala Terengganu, can be a *peranakan* at the multicultural festival because cultural difference is being made into "the decisive feature of ethnicity" to distinguish the ethnic Chinese in Kampung Cina with other ethnic communities, not between the ethnic Chinese and the *peranakan* Chinese communities. Among all the *kebaya*, there is the *potong kot*, a term coined by the Kuala Terengganu Chinese community and among all the *peranakan* communities is the Chinese community in Kuala Terengganu.

Overemphasising the exotic and body-fitting *kebaya* as the token cultural marker of the *peranakan* communities is not new (Henderson 2003) but what was interesting in the festival is the presence of individuals wearing *sarong* with a white singlet or white *pagoda* T-shirt and wooden red clogs as a *peranakan* attire for the male counterpart (Figure 4). This ensemble was also popular among boys during the festival as well. Even though the *peranakan* community in Terengganu was known as the *Cheng Mua* or *Cheng Mua Lang* previously, pairing a *sarong* with a T-shirt is not exclusive to any of the *peranakan* communities. In fact, many members of different ethnic communities continue to wear *sarong* with a simple T-shirt at home today because of the hot tropical climate. In addition, available old photographs showed that many *peranakan* men adopted western apparel or were said to wear *batik* shirts in public. The combination of a *sarong* and white T-shirt is usually for the comfort of private spaces such as homes. When seen on the street of Kampung Cina and also posted on the festival's official Facebook page, casual attire for private spaces is now being made into a cultural marker for the *peranakan* and the festival in Kuala Terengganu. Except, there is an inverse correlation along gender lines between this male and female *peranakan* cultural marker. Overstressing the *kebaya* often creates a misconception that female members of the *peranakan* communities wear the outfit every day, including in the comfort of home and while doing daily chores. In addition, the emphasis is always on the *nyonya kebaya*, known for its embroidered transparent blouses. In contrast, making a casual outfit strictly worn in private spaces public and as a cultural marker seems to suggest that *peranakan* men do not know or do not follow societal etiquette. When seen together side by side at the festival, women and girls in elaborate and well-tailored *kebaya* stood next to exposed and underdressed men. All these are attempts to commodify cultural markers of the diverse *peranakan* communities to properties of a group and into the heritage of Kampung Cina in Kuala Terengganu. In this instance, rebranding the *peranakan* in Kuala Terengganu as *Mek Awang* is not only a simple change in reference, but it is also an indication of a deeper

contemporary global process that affects ethnic minorities and their identities. As our analysis has demonstrated, efforts to salvage and preserve the *peranakan* Chinese community in Terengganu from diminishing by turning selected components of their cultural markers into a marketable heritage may have contributed to the homogenisation of their culture and plural identities. Replacing the *peranakan* Chinese community in Terengganu as *Mek Awang* further displaced them and their unique but fluid cultural coordinates formed from years of unison integration of local cultural practices and continuous engagement with the local communities. It is, therefore, worth noting that the festival is officially called the Terengganu Peranakan Festival, not Terengganu Peranakan Chinese Festival.

Figure 4: A festival attendee wearing *sarong* with white singlet or white *pagoda* T-shirt and wooden red clogs (August 2017).

CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of international, regional and domestic tourist flows to and within Asia not only complicates our contemporary understanding of the nature of the host-guest relationship, it also directs our attention to the cultural implications of tourism, especially the commodification of cultures and cultural identities. Like the making of a Chinatown, heritage tourism involves activities that commercialise the past, and thus transform tourism into a "history-making

business". Even though tourism activities related to heritage are lucrative in both Terengganu and Malaysia but without direct involvement from the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese community, the Terengganu Peranakan Festival 4.0 was a perfect example of cultural reinvention. It is worth noting that the dispute over the combined term *Mek Awang* has triggered the Peranakan Chinese community in Terengganu to re-examine their sense of self vis-à-vis their ethnic identities and traditions. Future research could explore and include TCCCI's reasons for branding the community as *Mek Awang* and the dispute could also be further unpacked using the critical gender theory lens.

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NOTES

1. The Malay word *peranakan* carries multiple and evolving meanings. In this article, we use the word Peranakan (with capital "P") for two reasons. The first is sociological because the term revolves around the ethnonym of a group. Linguistically, it is a proper noun. The second reason is because the term is used to refer to Peranakan as a social concept. For further discussion, see Pue and Shamsul (2012) and Pue (2018).
2. Yap Chuan Bin. Personal communication. Kuala Terengganu. 30 October 2017.

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