

Exploring the Values of Chinese New Year Celebration in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

As an important element of Chinese culture in Malaysia, the Penang Chinese New Year celebration has economic, cultural and educational values. Historically, the Penang Chinese New Year is rooted in the tradition of Chinese immigrants. While retaining the core customs of the Chinese New Year, it integrates local characteristics to form a unique form of celebration. At present, the Chinese New Year celebration has become a driving force for Penang's tourism economy, attracting tourists from all over the world and promoting the dissemination of George Town's world cultural heritage. In terms of cultural value, the Chinese New Year not only strengthens the Chinese identity, but also promotes cultural exchanges through multi-ethnic participation, such as the Nyonya cuisine. In terms of educational value, the celebration activities rely on clan associations to strengthen intergenerational inheritance and maintain the cohesion of the Chinese community. This study explores its historical development, current situation and multiple values through library research and participant observation. The research conclusion points out that the Penang Chinese New Year is a model of cultural protection, and its living inheritance model provides a reference for the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage. It is recommended to further consolidate its social influence through policy support and cross-ethnic collaboration.

Key Words: Chinese New Year, intangible cultural heritage, Penang, Chinese immigrants



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Introduction

The origins of the Chinese New Year festival remain unclear, but historians link it to ancient year-end rituals for gods and ancestors during the Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE), based on archaeological evidence (Yuan, H. 2016). Although there is no clear view of its origin, the Chinese New Year festival does have a long history and has evolved from ancient nature worship and royal rituals into a deeply rooted folk tradition. For thousands of years, it has endured as a cornerstone of Chinese culture and the most significant festival for Chinese

communities worldwide. During the later part of the 19th century, large-scale immigration first took place in Peninsular Malaysia, religious and cultural institutions were brought to these new settlements by Chinese and non-Muslim Indians (Kim, K. K. 1998). The Chinese people in Penang have preserved and expanded the traditions and rituals that the early Chinese immigrants brought with them, and they have come to represent their distinct identity (Seong, G. S. 2015). When Chinese immigrants arrived in Penang, they brought their festival customs with them, not only maintaining traditional rituals and beliefs, but also adapting the festivals to fit local conditions, resulting in distinct local variations.

Although the Penang Chinese New Year Celebration, as an important intangible cultural heritage, has rich cultural, economic and educational values, its development still faces many challenges. First, the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is slow, and it is threatened by factors such as modernization, globalization and the weakening interest of the younger generation, resulting in the gradual marginalization or even disappearance of some traditional customs. Secondly, many potential values of the Chinese New Year Celebration, such as promoting cross-ethnic harmony, enhancing community cohesion, and promoting the development of creative industries, have not been fully explored and utilized, limiting its extensive influence in contemporary society. Therefore, in-depth research on the current situation, challenges and potential value of the Penang Chinese New Year Celebration is of great significance for formulating effective protection strategies and promoting cultural sustainable development.

This study takes the Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang as the research object and examines its historical evolution, contemporary practices and multiple value connotations as an intangible cultural heritage. At first, by combing the historical context and contemporary practice of Penang's Chinese New Year celebration, the paper analyzes the development difficulties it faces in the context of globalization and modernization, such as the weakening of traditional customs and the reduced participation of the younger generation, in order to reveal the common challenges in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. Secondly, from the perspectives of economy, culture and education, the paper systematically examines the multi-dimensional value of Penang's Chinese New Year celebrations, including its role in promoting the tourism economy, its social function in promoting multicultural integration, and its educational significance in strengthening Chinese identity through community organizations, so as to provide a theoretical basis and practical reference for the sustainable inheritance and innovative use of intangible cultural heritage.

Literature Review

Historical development analysis

The formation of the Chinese community in Penang can be traced back to the early 15th century and developed significantly during the British colonial period in the late 18th century (Zakaria,

M. F., & Ibrahim, A. 2022). Since Penang was occupied by Light in 1786, as a major trading port (Bonney, R. 1965), it had attracted many immigrants from Fujian, Guangdong and other places in China. These immigrants not only brought labor but also brought cultural customs and festival traditions from their hometowns. Although the Chinese are often seen as a homogeneous group with common cultural values, this cultural consistency does help to establish a close business and community network in a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia (Tuan, W. Y. 2015). However, in Penang, the development of Chinese cultural heritage presents both unified and diverse characteristics. Activities like the Chinese New Year celebrations largely adhere to traditional Chinese customs. Some clan organizations (spontaneously organized by Penang Chinese, whose members usually have the same surname) that became wealthy through economic development in the early stage, such as Penang Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi, used to send money to their members' ancestral hometown fellow villagers in Fujian Province, China (Pan Jie, 2012). These clan organizations are not only social units for immigrants to help each other, but also the main organizers and inheritors of traditional festivals. The economic connection generated by the money-sending activities also strengthened the identification of the Chinese in Penang with Chinese culture, allowing the New Year tradition to be preserved relatively intact.

After Malaysia's independence in 1957, Penang's Chinese New Year celebrations entered a new stage of development. After racial riots broke out in Malaysia in 1969, affirmative action measures were implemented across the country to support the poorer “bumiputera” (mainly Malays) who made up most of the population (Ravallion, M. 2019). Faced with the official Malay priority policy and cultural assimilation pressure, the Chinese community maintains ethnic identity and cultural boundaries by strengthening traditional festivals.

Chinese New Year celebrations during this phase began to incorporate more local elements, such as the acrobatic cultural event called Chingay (Ishak, M. S. 2010), using local ingredients to prepare the Spring Festival reunion dinner, but they still adhered to Chinese traditions in terms of core rituals and symbolism. The new celebrations emerging in Malaysia do not oppose traditional culture; instead, they exist in a symbiotic and complementary relationship. These contemporary cultural practices are rooted in tradition, while traditional culture itself is revitalized and evolves through innovation. Together, they contribute to the development of a distinctive overseas Chinese cultural identity.

Since the 1990s, with the rapid economic growth and accelerated globalization in Malaysia, Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang have become more diversified. On the one hand, the rise of China's economy has given Chinese culture a new international status, and Penang Chinese are more confident in showing their cultural traditions, on the other hand, the development of tourism has gradually made New Year celebrations a cultural resource to attract tourists. The highlighting of economic value has transformed New Year celebrations from simple internal rituals of ethnic groups to public cultural performances. For example, the George Town Chinese New Year Miaohui has become an important tourism brand in Penang.

Current Situation Analysis

The Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang present a distinctive blend of tradition and modernity. Traditional elements such as ancestor worship ceremonies and family reunions still occupy a core position, but the specific practices have changed significantly. Take food culture as an example. The New Year's Eve dinner can also be called a reunion dinner, where family members gather to enjoy a sumptuous meal. New Year's Eve dinner is an important ritual in Chinese New Year culture. It is held at the end of the year and the beginning of the next year, symbolizing the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year (Sia, B. C. 2012). Nyonya cuisine is a fusion cuisine that resulted from the interracial marriages between Chinese immigrants and the local Malays (Oh, Y., Razak, N. F. A. H. A., Wee, D. H. T., Ching, E. L., & Rahman, Z. 2019). The Chinese New Year's Eve dinner in Penang not only has symbolic foods such as Chinese traditional rice cakes, but also incorporates elements of Penang's unique Nyonya cuisine, such as curry fish, forming a unique "Penang flavor" New Year banquet. This culinary fusion phenomenon reflects the creative process of cultural localization.

In the realm of public celebrations, Penang has cultivated a series of New Year traditions that reflect distinct local characteristics. Notably, the annual "New Year Miaohui" held in George Town exemplifies this development by integrating traditional Chinese cultural performances—such as lion dances and Chinese opera—with contemporary artistic expressions. This event draws significant participation from both residents and international tourists. Based on a field study conducted by the author in George Town, Malaysia, on 18 January 2024, it was observed that these public festivities frequently exhibit a synthesis of Chinese and Western cultural elements in their spatial configurations. For instance, explanations of Spring Festival customs were provided in English, and traditional Chinese decorations were infused with Penang's iconic street art (Wang Yuyao, 2024, participant observation notes). Such practices underscore the cultural hybridity that characterizes Penang's identity as a former British colonial port and contemporary multicultural society.





(Wang Yuyao, 2024, a makeshift stage at the George Town World Heritage Site for Chinese New Year Celebrations)

During the observation of the 2024 “New Year Miaohui” , Indian students participated in the promotion of calligraphy culture as volunteers, and halal food stalls operated by Malay vendors were set up in the dining area. This phenomenon shows that the participants of the Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang have gradually changed from a single structure dominated by the Chinese community in the early days to a cross-cultural participation model covering multiple ethnic groups. Compared with the ethnic boundaries during the first generation of Malaysian Chinese immigrants, contemporary Chinese New Year celebrations have shown a trend of ethnic interaction and cultural sharing. Although the Spring Festival is essentially still a traditional Chinese festival, in the multicultural social context of Penang, other ethnic groups have also actively participated in it in a variety of ways, highlighting Malaysia's unique cultural integration characteristics.





(Wang Yuyao, 2024, Indian ladies also attended the event in traditional gorgeous attire)

Methodologies

Library research techniques establish a basis for academic investigation across various fields. By following this structured approach, high-quality information can be gathered efficiently to support the research (Hart, C. 2018). To ensure the accuracy of the review, high-quality original research is more vital than the interpretation of findings (Fink, A. 2019). Using the library research method, this research examines the cultural practices of Chinese New Year celebrations by analyzing academic journals, historical records, and books available in university libraries and digital archives. Using traditional Chinese written records as reference, Eberhard (2013) used different criteria to divide the origins of Chinese history into two types. The first is that it originated in 4000 BC, and the second is based on the creation of civilization by ancient Chinese emperors as the origin of 2700 BC (Eberhard, W.2013). Chinese civilization began with prehistoric culture more than 4,000 years ago. After a long process of integration, it gradually expanded to the scale of late imperial rule such as the Ming and Qing dynasties (Bo Yin. 2019). Festivals and celebrations are also an integral part of history and culture. Especially after the Chinese immigrants came to Malaysia, traditional Chinese festivals have been developed based on inheritance and derived their own uniqueness. This study demonstrates how library resources, ranging from historical festival records to current academic assessments, may

offer a thorough grasp of the development, modification, and international dissemination of Chinese New Year customs.

Developing a rapport with research participants is the method used in qualitative research. It helps connect individuals to the tasks they perform, giving researchers the opportunity to understand the significance of these activities from the perspective of those involved (Ezzy, D. 2013). The core of this article is exploring the value of Chinese New Year celebration in Penang, mainly based on the qualitative analysis methodology. The participant observation is proposed for the survey related to the 2024 Chinese New Year celebration. The continuity and richness of Chinese history not only attracts domestic scholars to conduct research but also attracts the attention of many scholars around the world. Through direct on-site observation and participation, the participant observation method can collect details that are difficult to obtain through questionnaires or interviews and intuitively present the various activities of the Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang, enabling the research to gain an in-depth understanding of the real lives of the research group and conduct more detailed and extensive analysis. On 18th February 2024, one participant observation activity was conducted in George Town, Penang. the Chinese New Year celebration organized by a non-governmental organization. The local Chinese community organized this event, raised funds through donations, and opened many stalls, including handicrafts, traditional musical instruments, calligraphy and other festival traditions, as well as brochures of various Chinese folk groups. Many Chinese surname associations were also open to the public. The curatorial plan is divided into three parts: 20 treasure curations, 11 stage curations, and 14 street curations. Apart from the Chinese majority, some Malays and Indians also participate in the celebrations, such as playing musical instruments or performing on stage.

Research results and discussion

A comprehensive in-depth analysis of the multi-dimensional values of traditional overseas Chinese festivals is crucial for fully understanding their contemporary significance and social functions. By examining these values from various perspectives, we can gain insights into how these festivals continue to shape cultural identity and community cohesion in modern society. Moreover, such an analysis provides a valuable theoretical framework for the sustainable utilization of cultural resources, ensuring that these traditions are preserved and adapted in a way that respects their historical roots while remaining relevant to future generations. This approach will contribute to the continued vitality and relevance of these festivals in an increasingly globalized world.

Cultural and Educational Value

Culture refers to the intricate and multifaceted system of shared meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values that shape the behaviors, identities, and interactions of individuals within a society. It encompasses the customs, traditions, and social conventions that guide day-to-day life, influencing everything from communication and social roles to moral and ethical standards (Schwartz, S. 2006). Culture is not static; it evolves over time, influenced by historical, social, and economic factors, and can vary significantly across different communities or regions. It plays a fundamental role in forming group identities and in creating cohesion and continuity within a society. Due to cultural influences, different nationalities, occupations, religions and other social groups will have different cultures formed by different value preferences (Schwartz, S. 2008). The core value of Penang's Chinese New Year celebrations lies in its function of inheriting culture. Since the Education Act of 1961 enacted some policies to restrict Chinese education in Malaysia (Chee, T. S. 1979), traditional festivals have become an important informal education channel for the Chinese community to inherit Chinese culture. Through the recurrent enactment of festival rituals, the younger generation of Malaysian Chinese individuals undergoes a gradual process of cultural acquisition that progresses from observation to learning and, ultimately, to active participation within familial and communal contexts. This iterative engagement facilitates the subtle internalization of cultural knowledge and historical memory specific to the ethnic group. Such a process not only exemplifies cultural representation in practice but also functions as a form of informal education, enabling the transmission of traditional values, festive customs, linguistic symbols, and collective historical identity across generations. During festival observances, elder community members serve as cultural transmitters, imparting meaning through embodied practices, such as the pasting of Spring Festival couplets, ancestral rites, and the explanation of symbolic customs. The younger generation, in turn, assimilates these practices through experiential and participatory learning. This mode of cultural socialization, mediated by ritual performance, is critical in reinforcing ethnic identity and sustaining cultural continuity within the broader framework of a multicultural society.

The Spring Festival is widely regarded as an important symbol of Chinese culture, representing deep-rooted traditions, values and history. Whether through its iconic art, philosophical teachings or cultural practices, this symbol embodies the essence of Chinese identity and tradition. Its presence can be seen in all aspects of Chinese life, from literature and language to architecture and festivals. As such, it is not just a visual or conceptual representation, but a living testimony to the enduring influence of Chinese culture both domestically and on the global stage.

Economic value

Although it grew slowly, the tourist industry in Malaysia became one of the new drivers of economic development in the 1960s. However, the tourist sector now accounts for a significant portion of Malaysia's revenue (Ayob, N. M., & Masron, T. 2014). Since the George Town World Heritage Area in Penang was nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site together with Malacca in 2008, Penang has become one of the most important tourist destinations in Malaysia. Culture and history are two main reasons that attract international tourists to Penang (Ab Dulhamid, H., Isa, M. I., Mohamed, B., & Sazali, M. F. 2022). Penang's tourism sector has experienced significant fluctuations in the last five years due to the COVID-19 pandemic but has rebounded strongly since then. By 2023, the state achieved an 84% recovery rate in passenger arrivals compared to pre-pandemic levels. This resurgence has been attributed to the return of international tourists from countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, and China, alongside an increase in domestic tourism. In 2023, Penang International Airport recorded nearly seven million passenger arrivals (source: <https://bit.ly/433GnOh>). Manufacturing and tourism dominate Malaysia's economy, apart from manufacturing, tourism is the second biggest foreign exchange-earning sector nowadays (Mazumder, M. N. H., Ahmed, E. M., & Al-Amin, A. Q. 2009). The theme of the 2024 Penang New Year Celebration is "Our Story". Various methods such as the establishment of stalls and stage performances have attracted many tourists to participate, promoting the sales of festival-related products such as lanterns, spring couplets, and New Year goods, and driving the market demand for local handicrafts and traditional products. These activities not only enriched the experience of tourists, but also directly led to the growth of income in related industries such as hotels, catering, and transportation.

Social value

Malaysia's foundation was a protracted process, beginning with the concept of an archipelago and ending with the establishment of an independent country after breaking free from British colonial power (Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. 2017). As part of Southeast Asia, the geographical location of the Malay Peninsula also shapes the Malay race and culture (Baker, J. 2020). A prominent example of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation is Malaysia. Today, the majority of Malaysia's ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Muhamat, Razaleigh, et al. 2012). The Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year, holds immense cultural significance among the Chinese group (Ibekwe, C. A. 2021). Family reunions, community celebrations, and collective rituals during the Spring Festival play a crucial role in reinforcing family bonds and fostering a sense of community. These traditions offer an opportunity for families to come together, often traveling long distances to be with loved ones, thereby deepening interpersonal connections and preserving cultural heritage. Additionally, the communal activities and shared experiences during the festival promote a spirit of unity and cooperation, strengthening the social fabric. Through these practices, the Spring Festival not

only nurtures individual family relationships but also enhances broader social cohesion, ensuring the continuity of cultural values across generations.

International value

The Chinese New Year celebrations in Penang possess considerable international value within the context of globalization.

On December 4, 2024, at the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO held in Asuncion, Paraguay, the "Spring Festival" project declared by China was officially included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Penang's Chinese New Year celebrations are deeply linked to the successful implementation of the "Spring Festival" project initiative. Culture in the era of globalization is no longer a static or closed national symbol, but a cultural flow through five dimensions of the global cultural Flow such as ethnoscape, technoscape, finanscape, mediascape, ideoscape. Collectively, they establish the foundation for cultural exchanges in the age of globalization. (Appadurai, A. 1990). The Spring Festival originated in mainland China. With the integration of immigration and multiculturalism, it has been reconstructed into a festival practice with cross-cultural significance in Southeast Asia, America, Europe and other places. The Penang Chinese New Year Celebration is not only a cross-regional inheritance of the Chinese Spring Festival tradition, but also a new festival paradigm generated in a multicultural context. This cultural practice constructs a unique "Penang-style Spring Festival" cultural complex by creatively integrating Chinese traditional festivals with local cultural symbols such as Malay and Indian. Its value is not only reflected in the dynamic adaptability of intangible cultural heritage in a foreign cultural environment, but also highlights the innovative development path of immigrant culture in the era of globalization. As a typical case in the cultural spectrum of Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Penang New Year Celebration demonstrates how festival culture is recreated in the history of immigration and local reality. It also provides an inspiring practical example for the international community to understand cross-cultural exchanges and promote mutual study among civilizations.

Conclusion

Culture is a complex set of symbols humans use to express and convey meaning. Therefore, studying culture is not just about observing external behavior but also about interpreting the meaning behind it (Geertz, C. 2008). As the most important traditional festival among Chinese people, the Spring Festival has profound cultural connotations and extensive social influence. For thousands of years, it has represented the historical memory and cultural traditions of the Chinese nation. It enhances social cohesion, inherits unique artistic skills, represents cultural diversity, and promotes economic and social development. As an intangible cultural heritage, the Spring Festival is not only a treasure of Chinese traditional culture but also a cultural

treasure shared by all mankind. Nowadays, there are many problems with the continuous development of intangible cultural heritage. If we only save the carriers of intangible cultural heritage such as buildings and books on digital recording devices, while ignoring the problem that the people who created these arts and knowledge are disappearing, then the efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage will be judged as failures (Brown, M. F. 2005). Although the Penang Chinese New Year celebrations have shown strong vitality in the context of multiculturalism and tourism commercialization, they also face several challenges and problems, such as the gradual weakening of the younger generation's recognition of traditional customs; the increasing commercialization trend has diluted the cultural connotation of the festivals by consumerism; the sensitivity of the multi-religious society has restricted the form of the celebrations (such as the Muslim group's taboos on certain foods); and the crisis of cultural subjectivity brought about by the continuous decline in the proportion of the Chinese community. How to maintain a balance between cultural adherence and innovative adaptation has become a proposition that the Penang Chinese community needs to solve urgently.

There is a deep and close connection between the Chinese New Year celebrations in Malaysia and the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). As an important element of Chinese immigrant culture, the Chinese New Year celebrations not only demonstrate traditional core values such as ancestor worship, reunion, and blessing, but also develop unique local characteristics in the multicultural soil of Malaysia. These practices have made the Spring Festival in Penang and other places a living example of ICH, which not only continues the Chinese cultural genes, but also promotes cultural dialogue through cross-ethnic participation. After George Town was listed as a World Cultural Heritage site in 2010, its street spring festival couplets art, lantern installations and other festival elements were systematically incorporated into the ICH protection system, highlighting the dual functions of festivals as "social adhesives" and "cultural memory banks". This dynamic inheritance model proves that ICH is not a static heritage, but a cultural resource that is constantly recreated through community practice, providing an important reference for the sustainable cultural development of global immigrant societies.

Intangible cultural heritage is an important part of human history and culture, carrying the collective memory and wisdom of the nation. Recognizing the value and protecting intangible cultural heritage will help preserve these precious cultural resources and prevent them from disappearing in the process of modernization and globalization. Protecting intangible cultural heritage is not only a need for cultural inheritance but also an important means to maintain cultural diversity, promote social harmony, and promote sustainable development. By protecting intangible cultural heritage, we can better understand the past, grasp the present, look forward to the future, and contribute to the continuation and development of human civilization.

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