

Cultivating Respect and Trust: The Inclusive Coexistence Between Peranakan Indians and Chinese in Malaysia – Exploring the Organization, Living Space, and Religion

(Memupuk Rasa Hormat dan Kepercayaan: Kehidupan Bersama yang Inklusif antara Peranakan India dan Cina di Malaysia – Meneroka Organisasi, Ruang Hidup, dan Agama)

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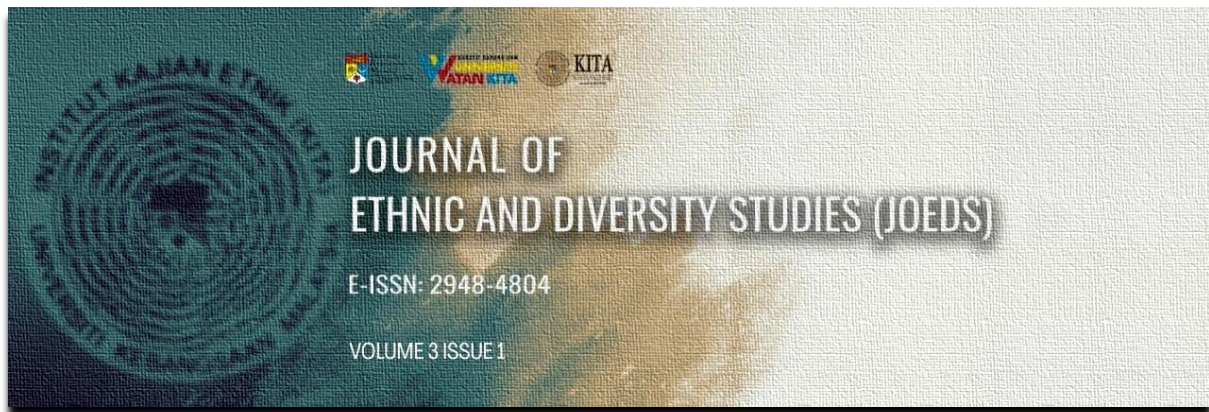
ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between Peranakan Indians and Chinese living in Malaysia, clarifying how they have built a unique community while fostering harmonious relationships with different ethnic groups. India is the world's largest emigrant country with many naturalising in Malaysia. This study focuses on Peranakan Indians who have been indigenised through intermarriage. They form a distinct community amid three major ethnic groups. Studies on Malaysian society based on nationally designated ethnic categories have often marginalised mixed-ethnicity individuals and exacerbated social divisions. This study examines the relationship between Peranakan Indians and Chinese by focusing on the committee, living space, and religion. The Peranakan Indian committee consisted of Chinese with kinship ties while fostering mutual understanding through daily interaction with Chinese outside their kinship, cooperating in religious festivals, and building a sense of unity. Through this process, they have nurtured respect, trust, and an inclusive, harmonious coexistence, flexibly embracing and incorporating each other's differences while mutually benefiting from their relationship. This study relativizes essentialist discussions on Malaysia's three major ethnic groups and presents a case demonstrating ethnogenesis and the dynamic plasticity of ethnicity. It contributes to theories of ethnicity and national integration while offering insights into improving interethnic relations worldwide.

Keywords: *Interethnic coexistence; social integration of immigrants; ethnogenesis; syncretism, spirit possession*

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka hubungan antara Peranakan India dan Cina yang tinggal di Malaysia, menjelaskan bagaimana mereka membina komuniti unik sambil memupuk hubungan harmoni dengan kumpulan etnik yang berbeza. India adalah negara emigran terbesar di dunia dengan ramai yang menjadi warganegara Malaysia. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada Peranakan India yang telah diterima oleh masyarakat tempatan melalui perkahwinan campur. Mereka membentuk komuniti yang tersendiri di tengah-tengah tiga kumpulan etnik utama. Analisis



masyarakat Malaysia berdasarkan kategori etnik yang ditetapkan sering kali mengabaikan individu campuran etnik dan memperburuk perpecahan sosial. Kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara Peranakan India dan Cina dengan memberi tumpuan kepada jawatankuasa, ruang kediaman, dan agama. Peranakan India menerima individu keturunan Cina dalam jawatankuasa mereka dan memupuk pemahaman bersama melalui interaksi harian, kerjasama dalam perayaan agama, dan pembangunan rasa perpaduan. Melalui proses ini, mereka membina rasa hormat, kepercayaan, dan hidup bersama yang inklusif serta harmoni, dengan menerima dan menggabungkan perbezaan masing-masing. Kajian ini merelatifkan perbincangan esensialis mengenai tiga kumpulan etnik utama di Malaysia dan menunjukkan pembentukan etnik serta plastisitas etnik yang dinamik. Ia menyumbang kepada teori etnik dan integrasi nasional sambil memberikan pandangan untuk memperbaiki hubungan antara etnik di seluruh dunia.

Kata kunci: Kehidupan Bersama Pelbagai Etnik; Integrasi Sosial Migran; Etnogenesis; Sinkretisme; Rasukan

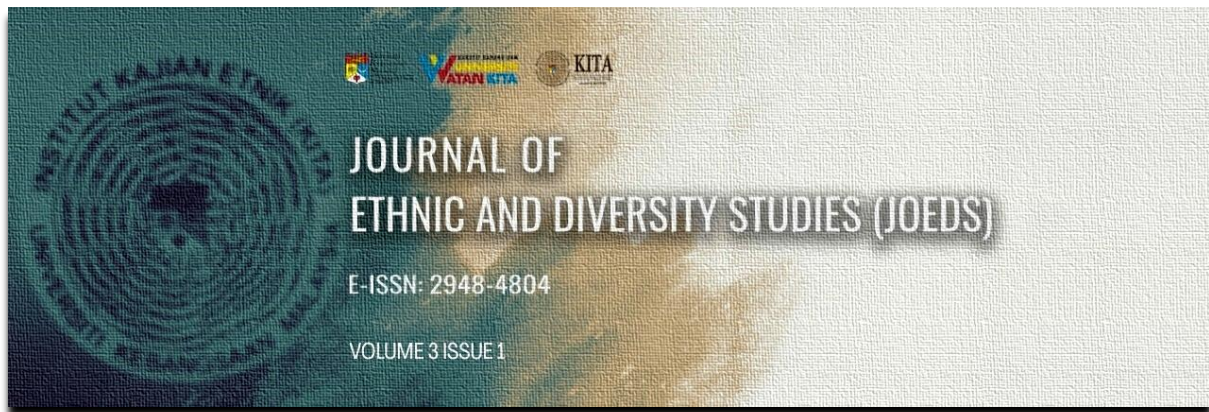
INTRODUCTION

The social integration of immigrants has become a pressing issue worldwide. The Malaysian government has sought national integration by classifying its citizens into *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil; indigenous peoples, primarily Malays), Chinese, and Indians. This classification was formed under the influence of colonial rulers. Soda (2020) has pointed out that colonial rulers introduced a new concept of Malay identity to Malaya, which was later reinterpreted, transformed, and adapted to the local context.

Shamsul (1996) proposed a distinction between ‘authority-defined social reality,’ shaped by those in power, and ‘everyday-defined social reality,’ experienced by individuals in their daily lives. Regarding the former, he highlighted the complexities arising from differing perspectives, even among those in power, as well as the challenge for Malaysian scholars to maintain an unbiased viewpoint because of their own ethnic affiliations. Furthermore, Shamsul (1996) noted that although Vision 2020 set the goal of building a unified Malaysian nation, ethnic conflict persists; moreover, the concept of a *Bangsa* Malaysia (Malaysian nation) should not be imposed by authorities but rather shaped through dialogue among the people.

Kartini and Shamsul (2020: 316) identified the role of the federal constitution, food, and religious tourism as key mechanisms for managing diversity, differences, and conflicting interests. Additionally, Lyu, Chan, and Olmedo highlighted an example where the Chinese community has fostered ethnic consciousness and national identity through lion dance activities (Lyu et al. 2024: 16).

What trajectories have those positioned between the three major ethnic groups, such as people of mixed marriage, followed? This paper examines Peranakan as a representative case. The term *Peranakan* comes from the Malay word *anak*, meaning ‘child’. It has been used metaphorically to refer to locally born individuals of non-indigenous ancestry. Initially, the concept referred only to ancestral lineage (Pue & Shamsul 2012: 39-44). Over time, Peranakan



came to refer to a group of locally born people of mixed indigenous and non-indigenous descent who practiced a hybrid culture, assimilating aspects of Malay culture (Teo 2008: 357).

In 'everyday-defined social reality' (Shamsul 1996), a Peranakan identity enables connections with other ethnic groups (Pue 2016: 88). While inter-ethnic marriage may promote social cohesion, it can also pose significant challenges (Pue & Sulaiman 2013: 275). In Malaysia, categorising people along ethnic lines has led to a disregard for the interwoven interactions between ethnic groups in everyday life. This lack of awareness has resulted in the marginalisation of people involved in interethnic marriages, such as the Peranakan, reinforcing their social isolation (Pue 2015: 41).

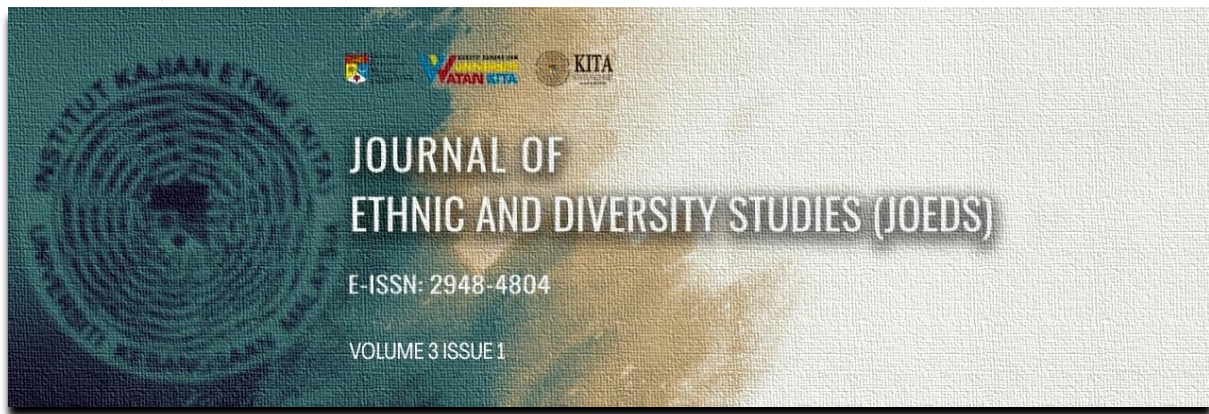
Research on Peranakan has predominantly focused on Peranakan Chinese, but other Peranakan also exist. The following section provides an overview of these groups. The Peranakan Chinese in Malacca have localised their language and culture, but they do not assimilate into the Malay category unless they convert to Islam (Tan 2021: 251,252). While culturally localised to integrate into local society, they have maintained intrinsic elements related to their group's identity, such as marriage and funerary rites, either in their original form or with slight modifications (Pue & Shamsul 2012: 44,45). They have largely preserved their community through endogamy (Clammer 1980). Following decolonisation, they lost British protection but attempted to revive their community by emphasising cultural aspects (Lee 2009: 169-171).

Meanwhile, the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan have intermarried with Siamese and Thais, blending Taoism and Confucianism with Thai *Theravāda* Buddhism, Malay animistic beliefs, and other influences. They are distinguished by the local Chinese community; in 1987, established *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Kelantan* (Peranakan Chinese Kelantan Association) at the *Kulim* Buddhist Temple (Teo 2008: 229).

Eurasians, who trace their ancestry to Portuguese and Dutch settlers, were granted partial Bumiputera rights in 1984, and in 1990, the government designated their settlement area as a heritage site. These state-led efforts have contributed to the community's preservation (Pillai 2015: 99). *Jawi* Peranakan are descendants of localised Indian Muslims who, by promoting Malay nationalism, were absorbed into the Malay category (Roff 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper focuses on Peranakan Indians, a group that has actively constructed their community while embracing diversity. They are considered descendants of Tamil Hindu merchants who arrived in Malacca in the 15th century and assimilated into the local culture. Their actual identity varies by region and individual and has also transformed depending on the social context, making it difficult to provide a clear definition. Furthermore, in discussing their position within the 'authorised category' (Shamsul 1996), this study seeks to avoid 'distinguishing the culture and history of people who fall outside ethnographic legitimacy and creating new boundaries within ethnic categories' (Ishikawa 1997: 159). As part of this effort, the study explores the inclusion and exclusion surrounding the category 'Peranakan Indian' and aims to capture their identity flexibly.



This paper begins by examining the definition of Peranakan Indians as stipulated in the rules of the Peranakan Indian Committee in Malacca and its evolution. In 1940, they were defined as ‘the Malayan-born Tamil Community resident within the settlement of Malacca’ (Temple Members’ Society 1940: 4). This definition was later revised to include individuals who met the following three criteria (Melaka Chetti Community: 4):

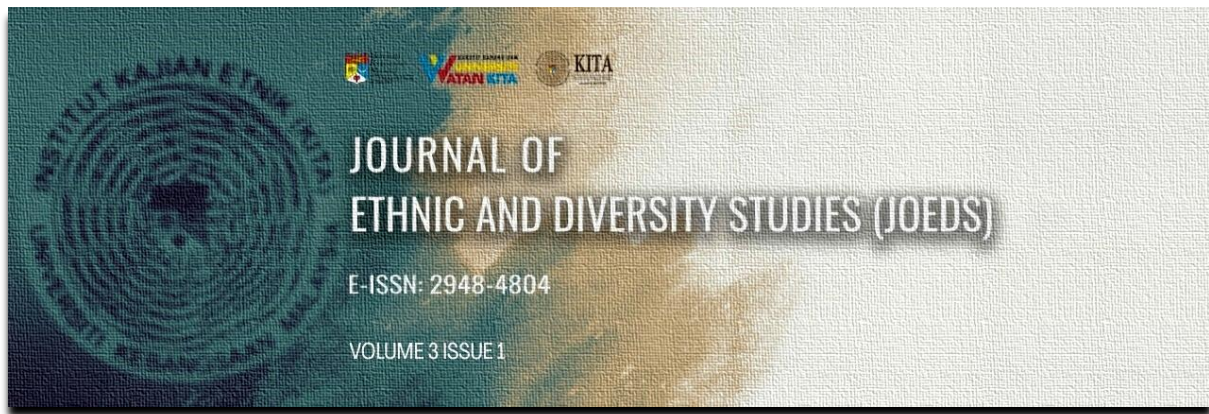
- (i) Male or female descendants of early settlers in Melaka of Tamil extraction from India either through father’s or mother’s lineage;
- (ii) Practising a few of the Peranakan Indian customs and traditions such as creole language, attire and traditional rites;
- (iii) A Hindu of Saiva faith.

Thus, it can be inferred that the original intent was to differentiate Peranakan Indians from transient residents born in India; however, as more individuals were born and settled in Malaya, a new set of criteria was introduced to differentiate them. Simultaneously, the definition retained a degree of ambiguity, allowing for the inclusion of more diverse individuals. For example, an additional provision specified that descendants include both biological and legally adopted children. This suggests that the Peranakan Indians, who have increasingly adopted children, also incorporated them into their community. Furthermore, although non-Hindus were officially excluded from the definition, the actual acceptance varied by individual and circumstance.

Previous studies have noted that Peranakan Indians have historically congregated in Malacca (Narinasamy 1983: 244) and that religious festivals held at multiple Hindu temples in the area play a crucial role in maintaining their community (Kandasamy and Rajantheran 2019: 1).

However, due to financial difficulties, they have been forced not only to sell portions of their property (Narinasamy 1983: 263) but also transfer ownership of temples essential for

religious festivals (Raghavan 1977: 450). As nuclear families became more common, and people sought better education and employment opportunities, migration from Malacca to Kuala Lumpur and other urban areas increased, further fragmenting the community (Wong, Neo & Wan 2023: 11). The rising number of inter-marriages with non-Peranakan Indians has made it more difficult to sustain the group (Raghavan 1977: 455). One Peranakan Indian expressed concerns that inter-ethnic marriage and migration could lead to their assimilation into dominant cultures (Wong et al. 2023: 7). Narinasamy (1983: 261) has pointed out that economically empowered Peranakan Indians who migrated to urban areas might neglect the maintenance of the Peranakan Indians’ numerous Hindu temples left behind; moreover, unless the government grant Bumiputera rights and provide educational and employment support, the Peranakan Indian community would eventually disappear. However, due to their mixed heritage and the difficulty of defining them, there is little prospect of them obtaining such rights (Pillai 2015: 67). Nevertheless, the group that identifies or is identified as ‘Peranakan Indian’, is distinct from the three major ethnic groups, continues to exist. They maintain and manage communal land (referred to hereafter as Area A) and temples while striving to improve their sociocultural status. This raises the question: How has the Peranakan Indian community persisted?



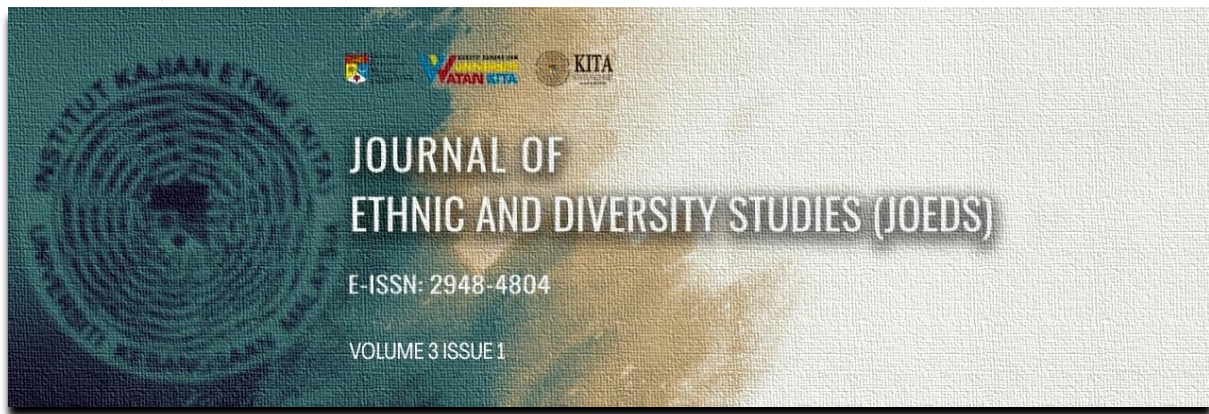
Kashiwa (2025) identified several factors that enabled Peranakan Indians to sustain their land and temples despite economic challenges and changes such as exogamy and urban migration. When the Peranakan Indian Committee began leasing its communal land to other ethnic groups, it not only gained rental income from them but also individuals from more diverse backgrounds who came to be elected as committee representatives. Furthermore, the religious festivals held at the temples attracted Peranakan Indians who had moved away from Malacca, leading them to support the community by serving as committee representatives or making donations (Kashiwa 2025).

Furthermore, Peranakan Indian temples have attracted and incorporated people of other ethnicities, including Chinese, who have contributed financially through cooperation. However, the reasons for this inclusivity have not yet been thoroughly examined. Beyond Peranakan Indian temples, there are other instances of interactions between Hindus and Chinese. In Malaysia and Singapore, the annual *Thaipusam* festival, a major Tamil Hindu festival, sees enthusiastic participation from many Chinese worshippers. Additionally, during the *Masimagam* festival at the *Arulmigu Sannasimalai Andavar* Temple in Cheng, Malacca, a temple owned and managed by *Chettiar* Hindus, the chariot procession stops not only at Indian Hindu houses but also the houses of Chinese devotees. In Jasin, Malacca, the *Sri Mathurai Veeran Raja Karumariamman Tuah Pek Kong* Temple, established in the 1970s, is a fusion of Hinduism and Chinese religious practices (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association 2022: 287). Similarly, in Yishun, Singapore, the *Hock Huat Keng* Temple and *Sree Veeramuthu Muneeswarar* Temple merged in 1996 due to redevelopment and became a tourist attraction.

In contrast to these hybrid religious sites, Peranakan Indian temples are historically significant, dating back to the 18th century. They attract thousands of people from around the world during festivals and serve as places of daily worship for diverse communities, including Chinese devotees. Thus, Peranakan Indian temples provide an example of long-term multi-ethnic inclusion. This study seeks to clarify why this has been possible by examining the relationship between the Peranakan Indians and Chinese from a committee, living space, and religious perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This study's research methods include participant observations, interviews, and a literature review. The primary research periods covered multiple phases, including July to October 2022, January 2023, July to September 2023, May to August 2024, and December 2024 to January 2025. The main research locations were Malacca, Malaysia, where the Peranakan Indian community is concentrated in Area A (approximately 7 acres), and their primary migration destinations, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. The main research subjects were the chairman and committee members who jointly own and manage Area A, the residents of Area A, those who gather at Hindu temples owned by the committee, and individuals who have migrated outside Area A. Information sources are disclosed in a manner that ensures privacy protection. Unless otherwise noted, the data are based on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2025.



RESULTS

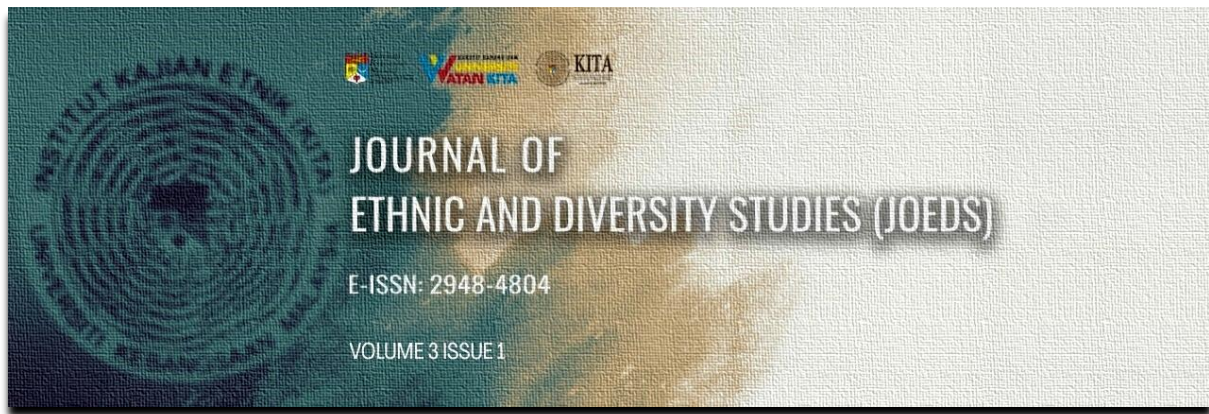
COMMITTEE AND LIVING SPACE

This section examines the relationship between Peranakan Indians and Chinese by focusing on the Peranakan Indian Committee and their shared land. The Peranakan Indian Committee jointly owned and managed ten Hindu temples, including one established in 1781 and Area A (Narinasamy 1983: 240,241). The committee leased the shared land to Peranakan Indians; however, as more Peranakan Indians migrated to urban areas, the amount of vacant land increased. In response, the committee began leasing land to non-Peranakan Indians in the 1950s, triggered by increased taxation on vacant land. The rent was set at 25 ringgit per household per month, regardless of ethnicity, which was relatively low compared to the rates for surrounding areas. By 1976, Area A had 98 households, consisting of 27 Peranakan Indian households, 52 Chinese households, 17 Indian households, and 2 Malay households (Narinasamy 1983: 253). The committee not only avoided taxation on vacant land but also generated rental income, which accounted for 56.2% of the committee's revenue from 2017 to 2021 (Melaka Chetti Community 2019: 44-46; 2022a: 44-65).

Residents lived together without dividing their residential areas by ethnicity, deepening their relationships through daily interactions of shared joys and sorrows. Inter-ethnic marriages also occurred, with exogamy surpassing endogamy. As marriages with Chinese individuals increased, more Peranakan Indians have lighter skin and Chinese features. When Chinese women married Peranakan Indians, many adopted Hindu names, converted to Hinduism, and actively engaged in learning Peranakan Indian culture to pass on to the next generation. However, if they wished, they retained the names given by their Chinese parents on their identification cards and continued to practice their previous religion alongside Hinduism.

Regarding language, many Peranakan Indians use a creole language based on Malay in daily conversations, incorporating Chinese words. Some are multilingual, switching between Malay, English, Hokkien, Mandarin, and other languages depending on the situation. While some have expressed concern about the shortage of residential areas for Peranakan Indians within Area A, the sharing of living spaces has fostered close relationships regardless of ethnicity. Additionally, Chinese residents tend to pay rent on time, which is appreciated. As a result, the committee has not expelled non-Peranakan Indian residents from Area A but instead prioritised Peranakan Indians when leasing newly available land.

Only Peranakan Indians can join the committee; however, it began to include women, members of various castes, descendants of inter-marriages with Chinese and residents outside Area A. The committee also differentiates associate members, including those who converted to religions other than Hinduism and the spouses of regular members, while still relying on their expertise and financial support. Additionally, individuals connected to Chinese through blood relations or adoption are now elected as committee representatives. One of the committee's objectives is to promote and maintain good relationships among people, regardless



of ethnicity or religion (Melaka Chetti Community: 5). For example, it promotes interaction between Indian Peranakan and Buddhist temples in the vicinity of Area A. As discussed in later sections, the worshippers of these temples not only participate in each other's religious festivals but also regularly visit and pray at both temples.

To summarise, Peranakan Indians and Chinese shared living spaces and deepened their interactions in daily life. As their relationships strengthened, intermarriage and adoption created familial ties. Rather than assimilating, both groups have shown respect and developed overlapping identities. This is reflected in the Peranakan Indian approach to respecting the cultural and religious backgrounds of those who marry into their community and their flexible use of multiple languages. Additionally, they built long-term relationships that benefit both. The committee of the Peranakan Indians began to include various people such as individuals of mixed Chinese descent, which shows that the community is becoming more inclusive.

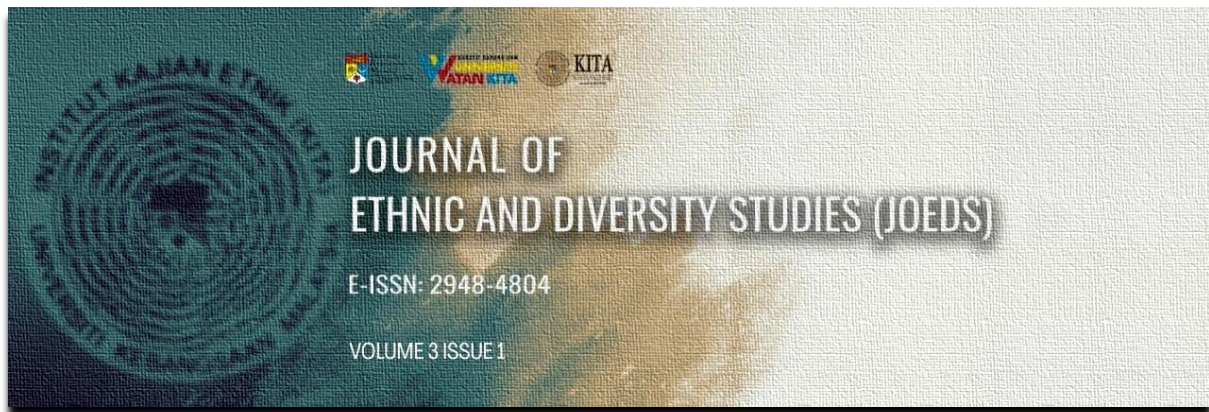
ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

While cremation is common among Hindus, many Peranakan Indians practice burial and have family graves. The Peranakan Indian committee owns a communal cemetery on the outskirts of Malacca. During the first week of January, Peranakan Indians visit this cemetery and conduct a ritual called *Naik Bukit*, which has been influenced by Chinese *Cheng Beng*. Relatives who have migrated to different areas gather to clean their ancestors' graves, decorate them with flowers, and offer the deceased's favourite foods, such as *nasi lemak*, sweets, and Indian dishes, placed on banana leaves.

Furthermore, Peranakan Indians hold a ritual called *Parchu* twice a year, during which food is offered to the deceased. The first *Parchu* takes place one week after *Naik bukit*, while the second occurs between June and July. During *Parchu*, approximately 16 different dishes are prepared in addition to *nasi lemak*. The preparation requires a significant amount of time, effort, and money. Peranakan Indians who migrated to other areas return home to assist.

In the household of S, who has no children, G, a Chinese, comes with his Chinese wife and child twice a year to help S prepare for the ancestral worship. Since S and his wife have cared for G as if he were their own child while his parents were busy with work, G has a strong bond with them. G states, 'I am a Buddhist, but I see Hindu Gods and *Buddha* as the same' as he explains the Hindu deities enshrined in S's house. S's wife praises G's wife, saying, 'She is such a hard worker and has a great personality' – making G's wife blush. In S's living room, deities, such as *Tua Pek Kong*, commonly worshipped by Chinese, are also enshrined.

On 13 January 2025, I observed the following ritual in the home of family F in Area A. Several banana leaves were placed on the floor, each carrying sixteen different dishes. After about an hour, one of the women who had prepared the food took two 20-cent coins and tossed them. If they landed head and tail, it was a sign that the deceased had accepted the offerings. However, each time she tossed the coins, they landed either head or tail. After nearly 10 minutes, they finally landed head and tail. Excitedly, the woman who had thrown the coins exclaimed, 'Look! The cigarette we offered has just burned out completely'. Others nodded in agreement,



saying, ‘Ancesters were heavy smokers, after all!’ A Chinese woman who had married into the Peranakan Indian community turned to me and said, ‘This coin ritual and even the large red candles placed beside the offerings are Chinese influences’. Those who had been waiting hungrily gathered around the banana leaves and ate the offerings together, using their hands to mix the food. Among those sharing the meal and chatting happily were Chinese neighbours and friends.

During the second *Parchu*, a variety of traditional sweets are offered to the ancestors. These sweets are also distributed to friends and relatives. N, a Peranakan Indian resident of Area A, shared the sweets not only with all the Peranakan Indians living in the Area but also with his Chinese neighbours.

This section demonstrates how Peranakan Indian ancestral worship practices have evolved under the influence of Chinese and others. Ancestral worship serves as an opportunity for Peranakan Indians and their Chinese neighbours and friends to deepen their bonds – not only through the shared effort of preparation but also through communal dining. While participants recognize some customs as being influenced by Chinese, they also internalise and practice them as their own traditions. This process fosters mutual understanding of each other’s deities and religious beliefs, leading to respect, shared worship, and, in some cases, the perception of religious figures as synonymous.

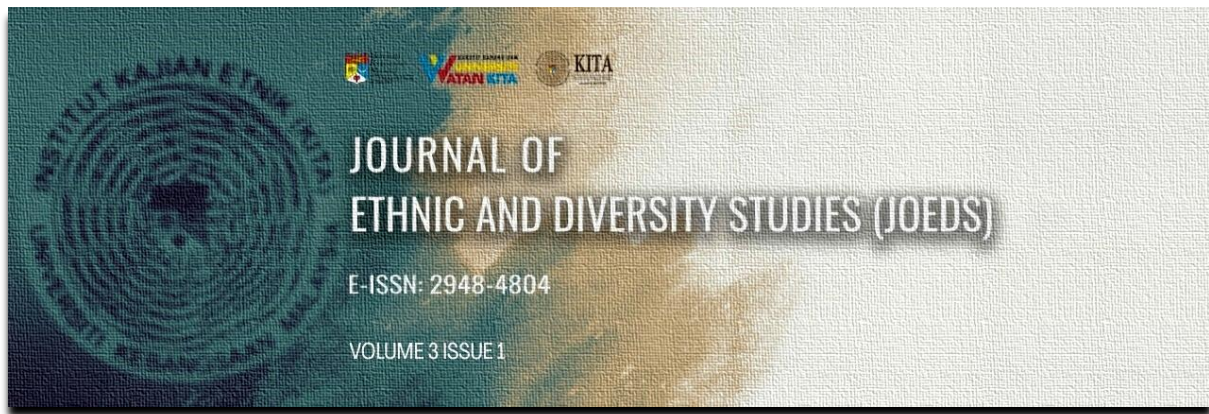
HINDU TEMPLES

In Area A and its surrounding areas, there are ten Hindu temples owned by Peranakan Indians. These temples not only hold daily rituals but also host numerous Hindu festivals. Representative festivals include *Pongal*, *Dato Chachar*, *Aadi pooja*, *Navaratri*, *Deepavali*, and *Shivaratri*. Many Chinese gather at these temples to seek divine blessings. According to a 70-year-old Peranakan Indian, Chinese have frequently visited the temples since childhood. Their participation in temple festivals has increased over time. For example, since 2022, Chinese devotees have also carried milk during *Aadi pooja*.

While Tamil is the predominant language in Malaysia’s Hindu temples, Peranakan Indian temples primarily use Malay, the national language that reduces linguistic barriers for Chinese worshippers. Additionally, one of the Hindu temples owned and managed by Peranakan Indians, the *Sri Kailasanathar* Temple, incorporates Chinese motifs in its interior design, such as bamboo patterns.

To explore the interactions between Chinese and Peranakan Indians in more detail, this section focuses on *Meggamay*, also known as *Dato Chachar* in Malay, which is the largest festival for Peranakan Indians. *Meggamay* has been held annually for ten days since the establishment of the *Mariamman* Temple in 1822. The festival attracts both Peranakan Indians who have migrated to other regions and non-Peranakan Indians. The number of attendees reached several thousand in 2010 (Pillai 2015: 51).

The festival begins early in the morning with a large procession, with many Chinese devotees joining the procession from *Mariamman* Temple to *Vinayagar* Temple. To express



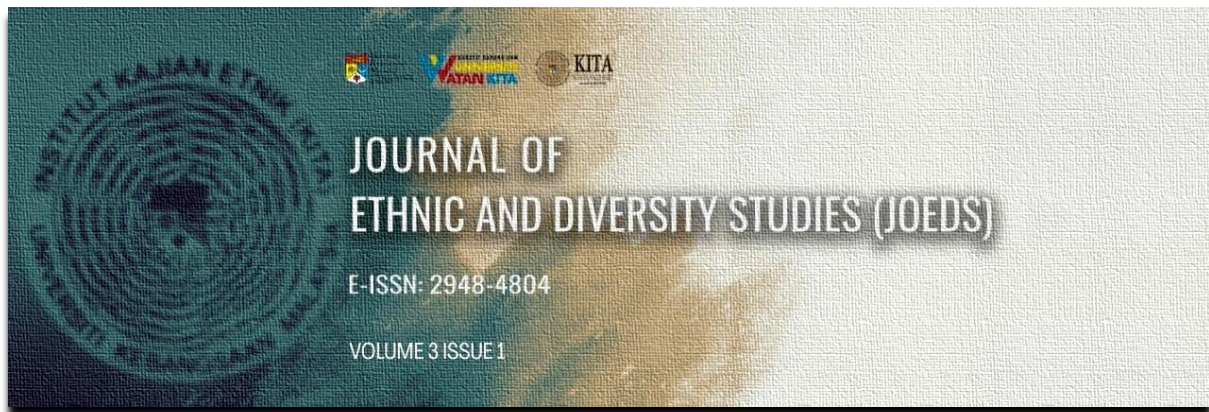
gratitude for their fulfilled vows, devotees engage in acts of extreme devotion, such as piercing their bodies with spears and hooks or carrying pots of milk (*Kavadi*). Anyone can participate in carrying milk upon prior registration. After the procession, a wooden chariot carrying the statue of Goddess *Mariamman* is pulled back to Area A. Along the way, the chariot stops in front of the *Cheng Hoon Teng* Temple, the oldest Chinese religious institution in Malacca, where Peranakan Indians pay respect. Chinese devotees watch with their hands clasped in prayer. The chariot also pauses in front of the houses of Chinese worshippers, where residents make offerings to the deity and distribute drinks to other devotees. Upon returning to *Mariamman* Temple, food is provided free of charge to all attendees regardless of ethnicity.

Throughout the festival, meals are served on multiple occasions and Chinese devotees play a significant role in food preparation. Chinese worshippers donate not only money but also large quantities of rice, cooking oil, and other ingredients to the temple. They also help with the food preparation, such as chopping vegetables, serving meals, distributing free food, and peeling fruit for the rituals. Some devoted individuals arrive early in the morning, even before the crowds, to assist with these tasks.

During the festival, enthusiastic Chinese devotees are often possessed by deities, even more frequently than the Peranakan Indians. The ones most frequently possessed tend to be the same individuals – often middle-aged Chinese women who have been devout worshippers at the temple since their youth. When possessed, they suddenly change their expressions, scream, run, or dance to the rhythm of the music. Their actions vary depending on the deity possessing them – some move like a snake, slithering across the floor. The possessed individuals and those around them interpret these behaviours as divine possession.

Those who are possessed sometimes act as mediums, conveying messages from the Gods. One evening, during the 2024 festival at *Mariamman* Temple, I had a conversation with K, a Chinese woman who frequently experiences possession while waiting in line with over 100 people to receive food. K told me, 'I am a Buddhist, but Hinduism is the same. Since childhood, I have prayed at this temple whenever I am troubled, and I never miss a prayer on special occasions, like my birthday'. Although K has since moved away from the temple, she continues to visit regularly, saying, 'Whenever I pray, my wishes come true'. K's son, a student at one of Malaysia's top universities, remarked while peeling fruit for the offerings, 'If you pray here, you'll get good grades'. Although he is now based in the capital, he still visits the temple. His siblings and Chinese fiancé nodded in agreement.

While the food was being served – first banana leaves, then rice, then curry, and finally *appalam* – K's eyes began to wander. I turned around and saw that the idol carried by devotees was approaching. The sound of drums and flutes grew louder. K kept glancing at the idol and gradually began to flail her hands and feet. K desperately tried to compose herself, but suddenly, K slammed the table and let out a loud cry before running towards the idol. I followed K into the temple and found a crowd had gathered. I asked a Peranakan Indian woman nearby, 'What's happening?' She replied, 'Goddess *Mariamman* has possessed her and is delivering a divine message. I want to receive guidance too'. Peering through the crowd, I saw K sitting on the floor, surrounded by a long line of people, regardless of ethnicity, eager to hear the divine message. K



conveyed the message using only gestures, while her children interpreted and relayed it in Malay, English, or Chinese, depending on the listener. As the queue continued, K became drenched in sweat and eventually collapsed from exhaustion. The crowd gradually dispersed. Later, when I asked K about the experience, she said, 'I don't remember anything while I'm possessed'.

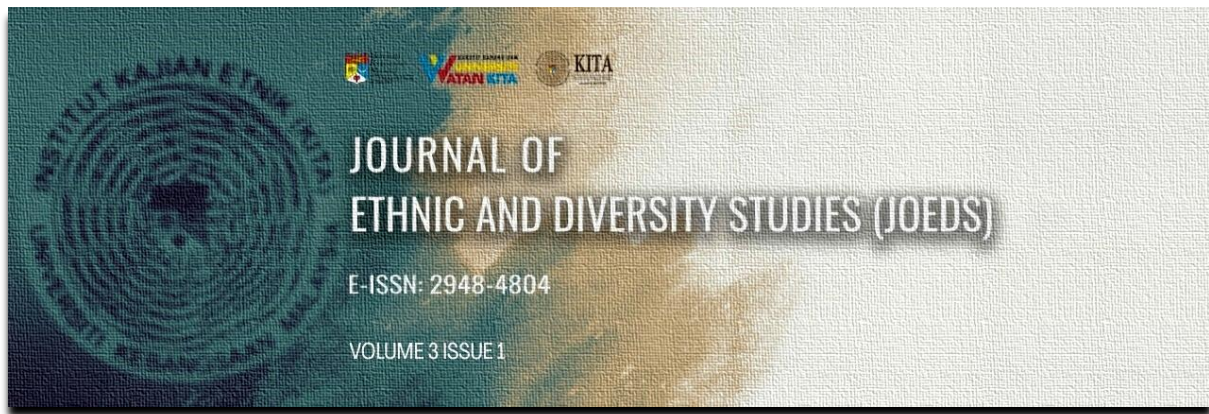
Some Chinese individuals who have experienced possession at this temple have gone on to become religious leaders. Previous studies indicated that a Chinese woman who first visited the *Mariamman* Temple festival at a friend's suggestion became a regular worshipper. During one festival, she felt that Lord *Ganesha* had entered her body, prompting her to walk like an elephant and chant Sanskrit mantras. Under the guidance of a Buddhist religious leader from a temple in Johor, and with the occasional presence of a Hindu priest during festival periods, she now leads both Buddhist and Hindu religious practices within a single building. Buddhist and Hindu worshippers from across the state seek guidance (Malacca Volunteer Social Research Association 2022: 442-444).

Chinese devotees have visited Peranakan Indian temples for at least 60 years. They participate in daily rituals as well as festivals, praying and preparing food. Food is distributed equally to all attendees, regardless of ethnicity, and shared communally. Some devoted Chinese worshippers act as spiritual mediums, and their divine messages are eagerly received by people from all backgrounds. Additionally, there are Chinese individuals who, after experiencing possession at these temples, have gone on to lead religious practices that integrate Buddhism and Hinduism in a single place of worship.

BUDDHIST TEMPLES

Not only do Chinese people visit Hindu temples, but Peranakan Indians also visit Chinese religious institutions. The closest relationship is with the nearby Buddhist temple *Sek Kian Enh*. For example, a woman in her 60s whose father was a Peranakan Indian and whose mother was a Chinese woman was adopted and raised as a Peranakan Indian and has been familiar with Buddhism since childhood. Her father took her to *Sek Kian Enh* every week, where she enjoyed singing and dancing in a language barrier-free environment. A woman in her 50s, an Indian who married into the Peranakan Indian community and resides in Area A, prays at a Hindu temple in Area A on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays but also practices a vegetarian diet on Saturdays so that she can visit *Sek Kian Enh*. A woman in her 20s, whose father is Chinese and whose mother is a Peranakan Indian, visits both *Sek Kian Enh* and Hindu temples.

On *Wesak* Day, a Buddhist festival, many Peranakan Indians visit the Buddhist temple to donate and pray. The Peranakan Indian's committee also takes the lead in carrying fruit and flowers from the *Mariamman* Temple as a gesture of respect. Sweets and rice are distributed during the parade held on the same night. Even for a Peranakan Indian who was too far from the distribution area to receive sweets, someone suddenly appeared to hand some to her. 'I asked for sweets in my heart, *Buddha* always grants wishes like this', she said. Others expressed the belief that 'all religions teach the same values, and regardless of race, all people are the same because



our blood is red'. Some Peranakan Indians view all gods as one and make gestures of prayer whenever they pass by a place of worship.

Donations collected from the many attendees at the *Mariamman* Temple festival accounted for approximately 20% of the committee's revenue between 2016 and 2019 (Melaka Chetti Community 2019: 44-46; 2022: 44-65). Donors included Chinese worshippers, as well as contributions from *Sek Kian Enh* and other Chinese religious institutions.

Peranakan Indians of all ages regularly engage with the local Buddhist temple in their daily lives. During festivals, even more Peranakan Indians visit, pray, and donate, while the committee makes formal gestures of respect. The fact that some practice a vegetarian diet to visit the temple and statements, such as '*Buddha* always grants wishes like this', indicate that Peranakan Indians also seek spiritual blessings from *Buddha*. Furthermore, they receive donations from Buddhist temples and Chinese worshippers, making Buddhist institutions an important part of their religious and communal interactions.

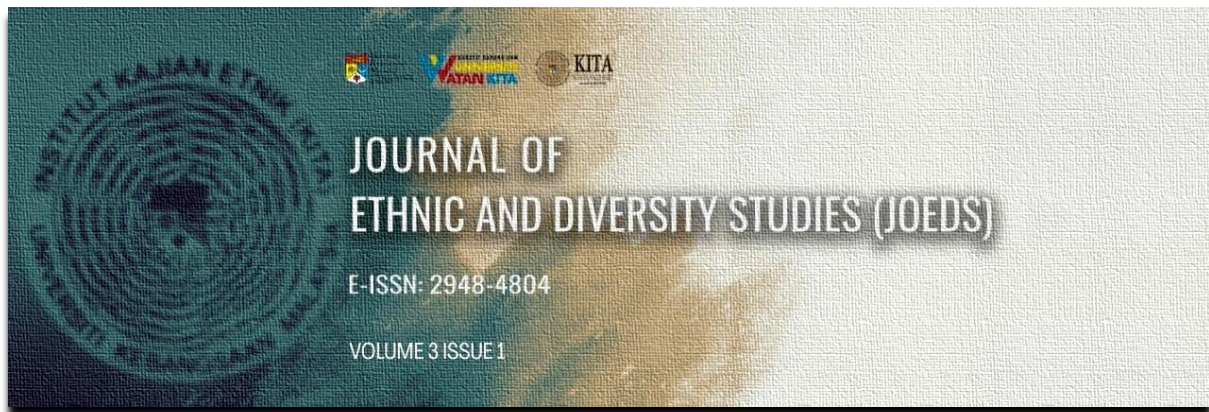
ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

This is one of the few empirical studies to focus on Peranakan Indians, a community that has successfully achieved inter-ethnic and inter-religious coexistence. Exploring how they constructed their unique community while fostering harmonious relationships with others provides insights into mitigating ethnic conflicts in Malaysia and how citizens can realise the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia*.

A distinctive feature of this study is its empirical and dynamic approach to understanding Peranakan Indians through interviews and participant observation. This allows for an analysis that captures their '*everyday-defined social reality*' (Shamsul 1996), which often falls outside the scope of the '*authorized category*' (Shamsul 1996), and provides a more comprehensive understanding, including the transformations they undergo. This study contributes by addressing the issue in Malaysian society, where categorising people along ethnic lines has overlooked fluid inter-ethnic relationships in everyday life, leading to the stigmatisation of inter-ethnic marriages.

Furthermore, as a Japanese researcher who does not belong to any of Malaysia's three major ethnic groups, I approached Malaysian society from a relative perspective, overcoming the conventional challenge of maintaining an impartial viewpoint. In doing so, this study relativises the essentialist discourse on Malaysia's three major ethnic groups and presents a case illustrating ethnogenesis as well as the ever-changing and plastic nature of ethnicity. Ultimately, this study contributes to theories of ethnicity and national integration while offering valuable insights into improving interethnic relations worldwide.

Specifically, this study demonstrates the following: Peranakan Indians have fostered mutual respect and trust with other ethnic groups through daily interactions facilitated by shared living spaces and language, as well as through collaboration in festivals that cultivate a sense of unity. Based on this foundation, they have built a tolerant and inclusive coexistence, and flexibly embraced differences while mutually benefiting from economic and other advantages. Given the prevalence of intermarriage among Peranakan Indians, even religious elements have been



influenced and transformed by other cultures. Yet, they have continued to develop as a distinct community without assimilating into any of Malaysia's three major ethnic groups. Shamsul (1996) noted that the concept of a *Bangsa Malaysia* should not be imposed by authorities but rather shaped through dialogue among the people. This case serves as an exemplary *bottom-up* model of integration.

CONCLUSION

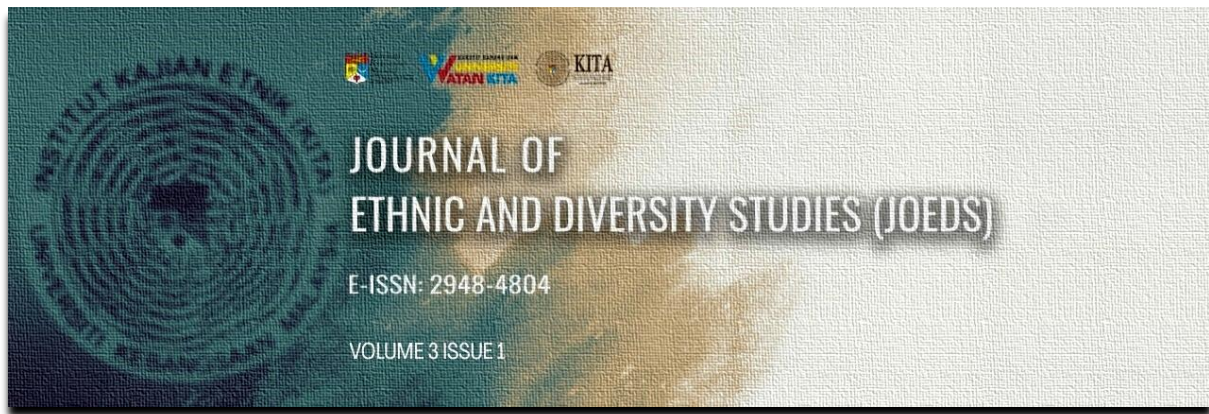
The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between Peranakan Indians and Chinese, as well as the background of their interactions, by focusing on land, the committee, ancestral rituals, and temples. Through this analysis, the study attempts to clarify how it is possible to construct a distinct community while fostering harmonious relationships with other ethnic groups.

The committee leased the communal land surrounding the Hindu temples to Chinese. As a result, Peranakan Indians and Chinese started to share a living space and their cultural and religious understanding deepened through daily interactions. As their relationships strengthened, intermarriage and adoption created ties between them. Rather than assimilating, both sides developed mutual respect, merged, and layered their identities. This inclusivity is reflected in the way Peranakan Indians honour the cultural and religious backgrounds of those who marry into their community as well as in their language practices.

The low linguistic barrier between Peranakan Indians and Chinese facilitates smooth communication. Specifically, Peranakan Indians primarily use Malay in their daily lives, while Chinese have also acquired Malay, the national language. Peranakan Indians have also incorporated Chinese words into their daily conversations. The shared language has functioned as a lubricant, reducing misunderstandings and prejudices while promoting smoother exchanges.

Many Peranakan Indians do not understand Tamil and predominantly use Malay, even in Hindu temples. One of the Hindu temples owned by Peranakan Indians incorporates Chinese architectural elements, which may have contributed to making the temple more familiar to Chinese than other Hindu temples in the area that primarily use Tamil. Practices commonly observed in Chinese religious traditions, such as spirit possession and incense offerings, are also practiced in Hindu temples. Familiar rituals may lower psychological barriers for worshippers.

Among Chinese who visit Hindu temples, some actively engage in cooking and other services alongside Peranakan Indians. Since the food provided in Hindu temples is vegetarian, it is accessible to Chinese, including those who follow a vegetarian diet, some of whom visit the temples for this reason. Ancestral rituals also serve as opportunities to deepen relationships, as not only kin but also Chinese neighbours and friends participate in the preparation and share meals with Peranakan Indians. Arata (2017: 127-143) pointed out that, in the Sundanese society of Indonesia, preparing and eating meals together fosters relationships, with greater participation leading to deeper connections. This study suggests that joint cooking and shared meals strengthen the relationship between Chinese and Peranakan Indians.



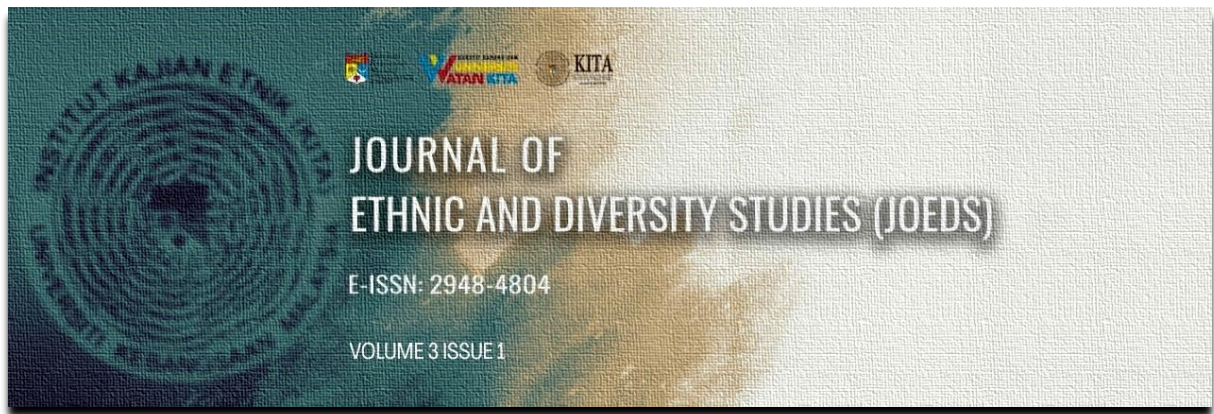
Both groups have built mutually beneficial relationships, engage proactively, and form long-term connections. For Peranakan Indians, Chinese provide financial support through rent and donations, while also serving as essential labour during major festivals. Chinese participate in rituals and festivals not only to seek spiritual efficacy but also to fulfil a sense of self-worth, enjoy various performances, and partake in meals. Additionally, Chinese residents in Area A benefit from affordable rent. Many Chinese have been visiting Peranakan Indian temples for at least 60 years, and some continue to do so even after relocating from the temple's vicinity.

Chinese generally identify as Buddhists, whereas Peranakan Indians consider themselves Hindus; however, both groups often state that Hinduism and Buddhism are essentially the same. Some individuals expressed beliefs such as, 'all religions teach the same principles, all humans have red blood, and race does not matter', while others recognise a singular divine presence and clasp their hands in prayer whenever they pass a place of worship. The oracles of Chinese spirit mediums are taken seriously by people regardless of their ethnicity or religion. In ancestral rituals, although certain customs have been influenced by Chinese traditions, participants embrace these practices as their own and follow them accordingly.

These findings indicate that the relationship between Chinese and Peranakan Indians is deeply embedded in everyday interactions and sustained through long-term engagement, rather than being limited to occasional participation in religious festivals. The process through which they have built this relationship does not rely on theoretical explanations, such as '*Buddha* is an incarnation of a Hindu deity' or 'Both are polytheistic religions'. Instead, their close proximity in a shared living space and the use of a common language allowed them to understand each other as fellow humans facing similar challenges. Over time, they incorporated each other's deities as objects of worship visited both temples, and enshrined statues in their homes. By praying together, engaging in religious offerings, and sharing meals, they deepened their bonds. While acknowledging and respecting religious differences, shared experiences—such as spirit possession—have played a role in blurring rigid boundaries and fostering a greater sense of unity. Through these multilayered interactions, they cultivated a foundation for mutual respect and trust, leading to the formation of an inclusive and harmonious coexistence.

The two groups have not assimilated; rather, they have respected their differences, sometimes merged traditions, and developed overlapping identities. They maintain long-term relationships based on mutual benefits, and embrace each other with flexibility and tolerance.

In the case of the Peranakan Chinese, core life cycle events, such as funerals have been maintained in their original form or with slight modifications, as they constitute an essential part of group identity (Pue and Shamsul 2012: 45). This study's findings suggest that in the case of Peranakan Indians, their religious system has evolved under the influence of Chinese, as exemplified by changes in ancestral worship practices. Despite these transformations, Peranakan Indians have continued to exist as a distinct community without assimilating into any of Malaysia's three major ethnic groups. Their distinctiveness is not characterized by homogeneity but rather by an identity shaped through the respect and inclusion of diversity. This construction is supported by the communal living space, committee, and temples that incorporate multiple influences.



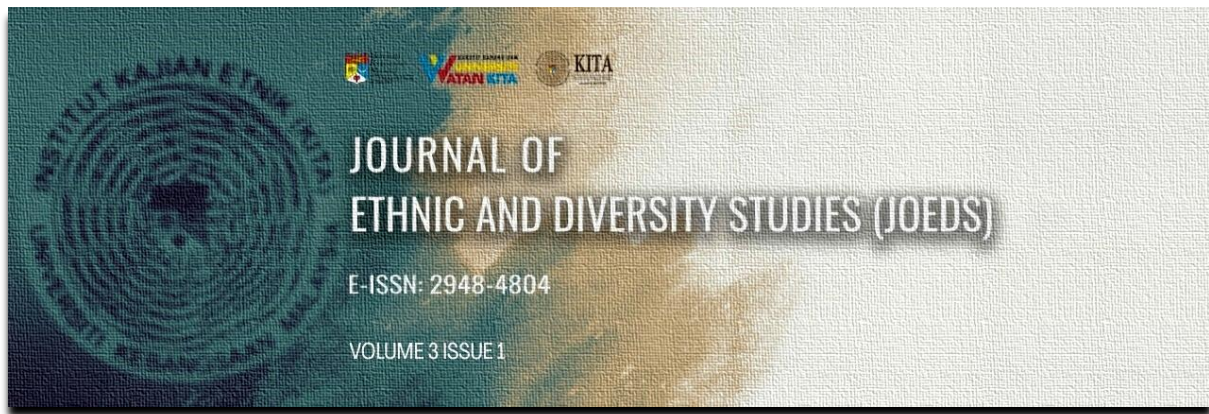
However, this study has primarily focused on the relationship between Chinese and Peranakan Indians. Future research should also explore interactions with other ethnic groups to deepen the analysis further. In particular, attention should be given to the relationship with the Malay, as it presents complex developments influenced by factors such as the New Economic Policy and fundamentalism. This will be the focus of further investigation in subsequent studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

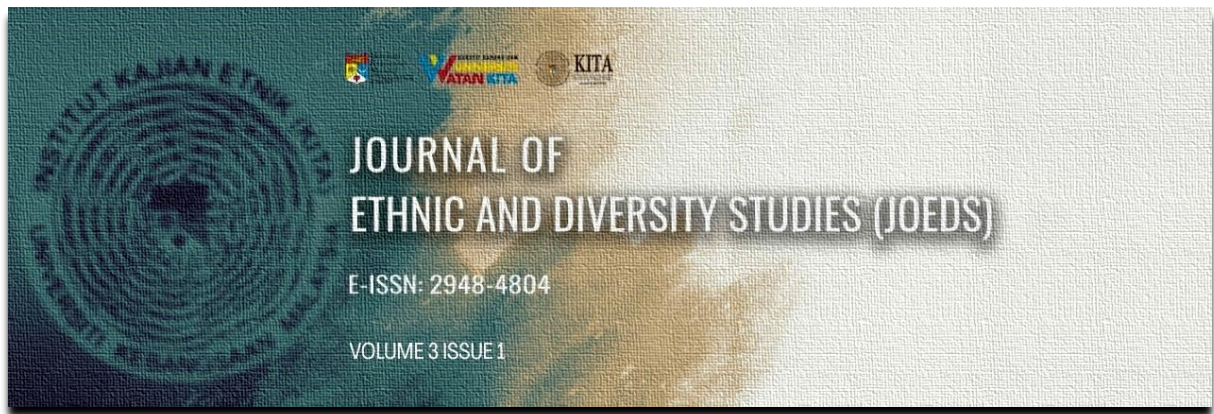
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