



**Fortune-Telling Practices within the Chinese Ethnic Community during
the Chinese Lunar New Year:
A Review of the Rationality Behind the Actions Based on Bronislaw
Malinowski's Cultural Functionalism Theory**

*(Amalan Tilik Nasib Masyarakat Etnik Cina Menjelang Tahun Baharu Cina: Suatu Tinjauan
Kerasionalan Di Sebalik Tindakan Berdasarkan Teori Fungsionalisme Budaya Bronislaw
Malinowski*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the practice of fortune-telling among the Chinese ethnic community in Ipoh leading up to the Chinese New Year, guided by Bronislaw Malinowski's cultural functionalism theory. Generally, this study aims to provide an overview of fortune-telling practices among the Chinese ethnic community by examining the main motives for the Chinese seeking fortune tellers. Semi-structured qualitative interview methods were used to obtain the data. The study results have elucidated the connection between fortune-telling practices and the celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year. The fortune-telling practice passed down through generations, it reflects a cosmological belief about one's destiny deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese ethnic community. The Chinese ethnic community seek fortune tellers due to the latest trend developments, uncertainties about the future, daily life disruptions, the influence of traditional practices, new beginnings in life, the desire to achieve aspirations, happiness in life, and to take preventive measures in their daily lives. Studies like this can further enrich the discipline of ethnic studies in general and the corpus of Chinese ethnic studies in particular in Malaysia.

Keywords: Fortune-Telling; Chinese Ethnic Community; Chinese Lunar New Year; Culture; Destiny

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji amalan tilik nasib dalam kalangan masyarakat etnik Cina di Ipoh menjelang Tahun Baharu Cina dengan berpandukan Teori Fungsionalisme Budaya Bronislaw Malinowski. Secara umumnya, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mendapat gambaran tentang amalan tilik nasib dalam kalangan masyarakat etnik Cina dengan meninjau motif utama orang Cina mencari tukang tilik nasib. Kaedah kualitatif temu bual separa berstruktur digunakan untuk mendapatkan data kajian ini. Hasil kajian telah menjelaskan hubung kait antara amalan tilik



nasib dengan sambutan Tahun Baharu Cina. Amalan tilik nasib yang diwarisi secara turun-temurun mencerminkan kepercayaan kosmologi budaya yang berakar dalam sanubari masyarakat etnik Cina. Anggota masyarakat etnik Cina mencari tukang tilik nasib kerana perkembangan trend terkini, ketidaktentuan masa hadapan, gangguan masalah harian, pengaruh amalan tradisional, titik permulaan hidup baru, ingin mencapai cita-cita, kebahagiaan hidup, dan mengambil langkah-langkah pencegahan dalam kehidupan haraian mereka. Kajian yang seumpama ini dapat mengkayakan lagi disiplin ilmu kajian etnik amnya dan korpus ilmu kajian etnik Cina khususnya di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Tilik Nasib; Masyarakat Etnik Cina; Tahun Baharu Cina; Budaya; Nasib

INTRODUCTION

Based on the perspective of the Chinese people regarding cultural inheritance and traditional cultural practice, the beginning of spring, “Li Chun” (立春), literally means the beginning, the recovery, and the renewal of all living things on the planet earth in a year. We interpret the concept of Li Chun (立春) separately to gain a deeper understanding about the core value of Chinese traditional culture. The ancient Chinese character “立” (li) resembles a person standing on the ground. Its original meaning is “to stand.” Li literally carries the meaning of dwelling or residing, which means all things are based on the standing principle; all the standing objects are dependent on standing (住也。从大立一之上。凡立之属皆从立). The Chinese character “春” (chun) evolved from the ancient character 萸 (chun); it was a combination of cao 艸 (grass) and ri 日 (day). The character 萸 symbolizes grass grown up in springtime (萸, 推也。从艸, 从日, 艸, 春時生也, 屯聲).

FORTUNE-TELLING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE

The Chinese belief in and inheritance of traditional culture is reflected by the understanding of the beginning of spring. It also symbolizes the new round of the cycle of the 24 solar terms (节气) in a year. The spring season is the starting of a cycle; all the living plants on planet earth will return to the starting point again and regrow. At the end of spring, immediately followed by summer, autumn, and winter, which are changing in a cycle. The most exciting moment for the Chinese people is the commencement of the new calendar year, that is, the arrival of the Chinese Lunar New Year (春节). At the beginning of the traditional lunisolar Chinese calendar, the Chinese will celebrate Chinese Lunar New Year, which is represented by the animals in the traditional Chinese zodiac (十二生肖).

Based on observations, many places in Malaysia where Chinese ethnic groups predominate exhibit the enthusiasm of the Chinese Lunar New Year, and the festive season’s vibrant environment is on par with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China in the East Asia



region. Every household is busy doing last-minute shopping in department stores to purchase Chinese Lunar New Year merchandise, such as food, clothing, and home decoration items. The Chinese Lunar New Year's zodiac fortune chart and relevant fortune-telling references written by renowned masters are the seasonal bestsellers. The fortune-telling consultation services are highly demanding during Chinese Lunar New Year. In fact, personal destiny and numerology have a significant impact on the understanding of the Chinese ethnic community (Pan, 2025: 1). Historical texts from ancient China have already shown evidence that fortune-telling practices have been in use for a long time (Wang, 2024: 3). Fortune telling, or numerology, is the practice of assessing personal physical characteristics such as a person's facial appearance and palm lines, their birth zodiac, the sound of a name's pronunciation, and others to predict an individual's potential, future life development, or assess their good or bad luck (Lu, 2021:1). Therefore, we can understand why the busiest fortune-telling masters are enthusiastic to show their clients the maze in the hopes that they will not only benefit greatly in terms of health, wealth, family, and career in the coming year but also be advised on how to avoid bad luck.

Fortune-telling is not just popular among the Chinese during the Chinese Lunar New Year. The consultation services provided by the fortune-telling masters, which include rigorous and professional analysis of the fortune of customers (命理运程分析) and feng shui consultation (风水堪舆咨询), have now evolved into an emerging career; it has become a lucrative business. However, tracing back to the more extensive level, the divination that prevailed among the people and even the emperors and ministers has a longer history. In fact, contemporary fortune-telling practice has evolved from the divination of ancient times, which was called Zhan Bu (占卜).

Park (2014:81) states that Zhan Bu (占卜) is supposed to belong to the scope of black magic; this is because the practice of Zhan Bu itself fulfills three basic elements, which are mantra, ritual, and the actor. Park (2014:82) enhances the discussion by providing additional insights and relevant information about Zhan Bu (占卜), which in the past as a ritual used to be practiced by the emperors or nobles of the Shang and Zhou dynasties to fulfill their own political agenda. Once again we examine the Chinese words "Zhan Bu" (占卜) separately. In Shuo Wen Jie Zi (说文解字), the oldest Chinese character dictionary, "Zhan" (占) is defined as to look at the omen and do the prediction (占, 視兆問也). Meanwhile, "Bu" (卜) literally means to burn and peel a tortoise shell and then to interpret the cracks on a burned tortoise shell (卜, 灼剝龜也。象炎龜之形。一曰象龜兆之縱橫也).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Bloomfield's account (1983:120), the Chinese adapted a series of methods to get insight into their future. The Chinese hold the belief that their understanding allows them to predict and foretell a person's future. If someone's fate is predicted to bring good fortune in the future, then the person will work even harder to achieve his desires. Conversely, if a person had predicted something worse would happen in the future, the person would take preventive



measures and change the initial plans to avoid the accident (Ann, 1994:2). Usually, if a fortune-telling master says the prediction indicates unfavorable circumstances, the person is required to do something to achieve a better life in the future (Ann, 1994:2).

The Chinese inherently believe in a person's fate, which can be passed down through generations. A person's fate significantly impacts the overall aspects of one's life journey. Quite a number of Chinese residents in predominantly Chinese communities, driven by some reason, tend to seek guidance from fortune-tellers. In general, fortune-telling methods include physiognomy (面相学), palmistry (掌相学), the three-generation book (三世书), mediumship (乩童扶乩), fate-changing rituals (转运), psychic medium message delivery (灵媒召灵), and so on (Ann, 1994:10-15). This tendency of seeking fortune tellers is very obvious when the Chinese Lunar New Year is approaching, as the Chinese Lunar New Year is considered a fresh starting point in all aspects of life according to the Chinese calendar.

The cultural practices of the Chinese community have been discussed in a previous subtopic. As mentioned before, the Chinese generally believe that a person's future fortune can be predicted according to their beliefs. It can be seen in areas predominantly inhabited by the ethnic Chinese community that various types of fortune-telling services have emerged and the demand rate is increasingly gaining traction. Although this fortune-telling practice is predictive, the ethnic Chinese community is so enthusiastic about seeking out renowned fortune-telling masters to obtain fortune-telling services. Traditionally, Chinese Lunar New Year indicates a fresh start of a year. The most interesting fact is that there is an increasing number of Chinese people eagerly seeking fortune tellers, especially during Chinese Lunar New Year, but they lack the desire to seek fortune tellers at other times. Why they acted that way requires further investigation. Generally, this article aims to gain insight into the practice of fortune-telling among the Chinese community. In this study, the author attempts to explain the relation between Chinese Lunar New Year and fortune-telling practices, the driving factors for Chinese people seeking fortune tellers, and further explanations in detail of why the Chinese people seek fortune tellers during the Chinese Lunar New Year.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity has shaped Malaysia's unique spectrum globally. Studies focusing on the local ethnic Chinese community, particularly on religious belief and traditional cultural practices, are typically conducted by authors who carry on their studies in traditional Chinese culture, and inevitably their findings are presented in their Chinese mother tongue language. However, the findings of scholarly studies presented in the Chinese mother tongue language can only be understood by readers of Chinese ethnicity, as well as other individuals who have learned Chinese and mastered basic Chinese language proficiency skills. Therefore, readers from other ethnic groups who are interested in Chinese religious beliefs and traditional cultural practices, if they wish to delve deeper into Chinese religious beliefs and culture, will certainly have difficulty understanding the content of these scholarly materials. Given the limited number of authors conducting studies on fortune-telling practices among the



Chinese ethnic community in English, based on a social anthropological theoretical framework, it is hoped that the findings of this study will enrich the body of knowledge about fortune-telling practices among the Chinese ethnic community. This study aims to strengthen the existing body of knowledge and help readers understand the rationality behind the Chinese ethnic community's actions in seeking fortune-telling services. With this, future authors can refer to this published study as a source of reference for their research projects in similar studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of Chinese fortune-telling can be seen everywhere, especially in communities inhabited by the Chinese ethnic group. Early Chinese history already shows records of fortune-telling practices. Although this fortune-telling practice appears irrational because it lacks a scientific basis (Lin, 2024: 1), as Park (2014: 81-104) stated, fortune-telling was practised by the ancient Chinese emperors and ministers during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties as a reference to consolidate their power and fulfil their political agendas.

In the context of modern life, Chiu's (1993: 125-143) study shows that in Taiwan, where the majority of the population is of Chinese ethnicity, individuals who feel increasingly uneasy about the future are more likely to seek fortune-telling services they have never tried before. The study results show that the more anxious people are about future developments, the more likely they are to seek fortune-telling services. Chiu (1993: 125) argues, "...under the influence of the latest information, modern technology and medical science, the occurrence of witchcraft activities may gradually decrease. However, in an increasingly complex and rapidly developing society, the increase in social uncertainties may also lead to the persistence of witchcraft." Chiu's argument is good for deep reflection because Taiwanese experienced the economic growth in the 1990s, and Taiwan has achieved a high level of urbanisation. Today, in the fast-growing society, many job opportunities in various fields are available in the job market. However, at the same time, the daily lives of the population became increasingly challenging, leading to uncertainty about the future because it was difficult to predict someone's fate the next day. The most rapid urbanisation process in Taiwan, which causes feelings of uncertainty among Taiwanese. The relevant study could be found in Tseng's (2008) study, which examined the psychological factors and motivations that encourage people to seek fortune-telling services for consultations and solutions. The practice of fortune-telling is not just a matter of passing it down to the next generation, but it can also be practised by the inheritor continuously over time. The diversity of fortune-telling methods is also one of the factors contributing to the increasing popularity of this practice, which can evolve with the pace of modernisation. Chiu's study can assist in writing this journal article because the populations in Taipei, Taiwan, and the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia share many similarities in terms of population structure and traditional cultural practices. The identified shortcomings in Chiu's study are related to the lack of connection between fortune-telling services and Chinese Lunar New Year. Chiu only compared the fortune-telling methods chosen by residents in Taiwan in 1985 and 1990 to see the trends in the increasing and decreasing preferences for fortune-telling methods. Essentially, the methods of fortune-telling today are



becoming increasingly diverse, and the demand for fortune-telling services reaches its peak around Chinese Lunar New Year.

Despite mainland China's history, it is noteworthy that its fortune-telling practices are still popular. The residents in the village area also exhibit fortune-telling practices that are deeply ingrained in their daily lives. Xu (2007), in a case study conducted in a rural area of Anhui Province (安徽省), examined the daily practices of a fortune teller from an anthropological perspective. Xu (2007:1) states that the practice of fortune-telling has historical, academic, and practical study value. As he said, "...the practice of fortune-telling as a cultural phenomenon of society has historical origins, has long existed in village areas, and is of value for study from historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives. This is because in the practice of fortune-telling, the fortune-teller will dominate all fortune-telling processes when serving their clients. Data obtained from informants focused on the life experiences of fortune tellers, their daily activities, the methods used in the fortune-telling process, fortune-telling tools, reference books used, their living realities, and the atmosphere of village life to observe fortune-telling practices from a cultural heritage perspective. According to Xu's (2007: 1) observation, fortune-telling practices are deeply ingrained in the lives of villagers, as this practice is needed by the villagers to gain some certainty. This fortune-telling practice is said to be a 'gateway' to understanding the foundations of traditional culture in rural areas, and it has been found that this fortune-telling practice is part of the cultures present in mainland China. Fortune-telling practices in rural areas are said to be a part of the village lifestyle, but fortune-telling in urban areas is more complex due to urbanisation. The complexity relates to social change, and economic activities focused on trade, industry, and services should be taken into account. The rationality behind the fortune-telling practices of urban residents cannot be explained solely based on observing fortune-telling practices in rural areas.

We are grateful for the emergence of sophisticated information technology. Human daily life is becoming increasingly easier nowadays. Moreover, daily trivial matters can be resolved easily online without having to leave one's residence. This trend can be proven through a study conducted by Li (2010: 3) in Gansu Province, China, on the emergence of online fortune-telling service websites offering consultation services to internet users. This development trend indicates that rapid community development leads to people having less confidence in the future. So, the sophistication of information technology has also given rise to increasingly popular websites offering online fortune-telling consultations in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In his study, he surveyed the reasons people visit fortune-telling websites and concluded the motives of his informants and the effects behind the socio-cultural influence on people who visit fortune-telling websites.

Based on current trends, fortune-telling programmes in the media, fortune-telling service centres, and fortune-telling websites are becoming increasingly popular. Residents face uncertainty in their daily lives and experience stress driven by various motives to seek online fortune-telling consultations in order to find solutions (Pan, 2025: 1). The practice of fortune-telling moves in tandem with the flow of cyber technology development, now not only as a service sought after by customers who need it but also as a career that promises lucrative



profits. Modern fortune-telling practices can not only be done through online applications, but fortune tellers also have their own websites offering online consultation services (Kuo, 2022).

Modern fortune-telling services no longer require in-person attendance. Individuals seeking online fortune-telling services based on entertainment motives, social motives, and the desire for satisfaction from online fortune-telling services also produce different fortune-telling outcomes (Lu, 2021).

In fact, current development trends show a relationship between psychological well-being and the demand for fortune-telling services (Lin, 2024). Wang (2024: i) links the relationship between fortune-telling websites and user personality and the motives for seeking fortune-telling services. Users with different personalities and motivations yield different predictive outcomes, whether fortune-telling is used as guidance or as a remedy to soothe anxiety.

The spotlight on freelance works is indeed relevant to the title of this journal article. Referencing past studies can guide author in developing knowledge that can be further strengthened.

METHODOLOGY

This section reveals how the data can be obtained. This study was conducted using a qualitative method. Author conducted field studies, observations, and interviews to obtain data. Author interviewed fortune tellers in Ipoh to gain their insights based on prepared questions. The collected data allows author to conduct further analysis and discussion. A total of four fortune tellers were selected as informants. It needs to be explained here that the author interviewed fortune tellers to obtain explanations from fortune tellers who offered fortune-telling services to the Chinese ethnic community in Ipoh. The interview sessions were conducted in the buildings, offices, and booths owned by fortune tellers. A total of four informants were selected, but their full names were not included to protect their privacy. All the informants were assigned unique alphanumeric identifiers: Informant A, Informant B, Informant C, and Informant D. The informants have at least 10 years of fortune-telling experience, and some fortune-tellers have over 30 years of experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with some key questions prepared and follow-up questions based on the informants' answers.

i. Part One: Key Questions

1. What drives the Chinese to seek out fortune tellers?
2. Why do the Chinese tend to seek fortune tellers, especially leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year?

ii. Part Two: Subsequent Questions

Many fortune-tellers respected the privacy rights of both themselves and their clients. They refused to be interviewed by someone they weren't familiar with the interviewer's background. They pointed out and expressed concern regarding potential reputational harm and worried about the possibility of more trade secrets in the practice of fortune-telling being leaked



to outsiders. Unless there was an intermediary person who truly knew both parties, the author and the fortune-teller. The author was able to interview informants with the assistance of a news reporter in Ipoh. The interview session doesn't take much time, usually within a two-hour time frame. This is because fortune tellers usually have many appointments with their clients and other matters to attend to.

BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI'S THEORY OF CULTURAL FUNCTIONALISM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), a British-Polish anthropologist who was highly influential in the early 20th century. His work titled "A Functional Theory of Culture" has developed the theory of cultural functionalism. The essence of Malinowski's cultural functionalism theory states that all cultural activities are aimed at fulfilling a number of human life needs in daily life (Koentjaraningrat, 1980:162). There are three aspects that need to be emphasised in Malinowski's theory of cultural functionalism. First, culture must meet basic needs such as food and women's fertility. Second, culture must meet derived needs such as rules of life and educational opportunities. Third, culture must meet integrative needs, which are spiritual in nature, such as religious beliefs and artistic aspects (Hidayatullah, 2014:3-4).

Malinowski's views were formed after his exploration of the Trobriand Islands, where he conducted fieldwork to observe the Kula Ring system, a barter system ceremony that also included religious rituals performed by the Trobriand people and those in the surrounding areas. In Malinowski's ethnographic work (2014: 157-158), his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, he observed that the barter economic system activities carried out in the Trobriand Islands community were influenced by local cultural elements, namely the belief system, kinship relations, and the island's social organisational structure. The main aspect emphasised in Malinowski's notes is the functional operation of society. This means that community life is integrated through a function, and the framework of community life is interdependent through functions arising from the Kula Ring ceremony. Based on Malinowski's observations, he later emphasised that all human activities in society have formed cultural elements that satisfy a number of human needs in all aspects of life. According to Keesing (1981:196), the Kula Ring ceremony reveals the social classes, social stratification, and social system of the inhabitants of Trobriand Island.

Malinowski (1944: 171) argued that culture is meant to fulfil basic human needs, and cultural elements are found to have specific functions. Therefore, 'needs' and 'functions' are two important concepts underlying Malinowski's functionalism theory (Malinowski, 1944:17). For example, Malinowski stated that a wooden log functions as a boat paddle, a stick, or a weapon depending on the cultural context. Therefore, according to Malinowski's argument, an object is part of a cultural element because it can be used to meet human needs in society. In other words, tools are not just their physical form but have a function within culture. To analyse a society's culture, we need to look at the function of a tool; for example, decorative objects in a culture, religious ceremonies, or rituals have their own distinct functions (Malinowski, 1944:25, 171).



Malinowski (1944: 91-108) concluded that humans live in societies to meet their needs, creating a new situation that can be recognised as culture. So, culture is used to meet human needs within society. However, all efforts to meet needs require a driving force, and that driving force can be considered functionalism. Malinowski has the following definition of basic needs and cultural responses:

TABLE 1: Basic Needs and Cultural Responses Bronislaw Malinowski’s Functionalism Theory

Basic Needs and Cultural Responses	
Basic Needs	Cultural Responses
Metabolism	Commissariat
Reproduction	Kinship
Bodily Comforts	Shelter
Safety	Protection
Movement	Activities
Growth	Training
Health	Hygiene

Source: Malinowski, B. (1944). *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Others Essays*. Chapel Hill, N. Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, page 91.

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that culture exists to meet the diverse needs that arise from members of society (Malinowski, 1944: 91-108). It can be formulated that in Malinowski’s functionalism theory, culture exists to meet all human needs, all efforts to meet needs require a driving force, and this driving force can be considered functionalism. Every cultural achievement, such as the tools created and the use of symbols, is due to increased function, as it directly meets human needs (Malinowski 1944:171).

Based on Bronislaw Malinowski’s Functionalism Theory, the study of fortune-telling practices in the Chinese ethnic community leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year can be guided by Malinowski’s theoretical framework. Members of the ethnic Chinese community, as social beings, have various daily needs that must be managed in their daily lives. Their life journey has created a system of values, norms, and beliefs that form culture. Culture becomes a way of behaving, shapes social systems, and preserves the social fabric of society, allowing members of the Chinese ethnic community to adapt to their environment. Culture serves as an instrument of adaptation so that members of society can successfully handle life’s challenges. Moreover, today’s society has experienced social changes that can be seen in population density, economic system uncertainty, lifestyle changes, rising cost of living, an unfavourable economic climate, an uncertain career future, and many other factors, making life increasingly challenging. Challenges and an uncertain future had to be faced and overcome.



We go back to Malinowski's Functionalism Theory: human needs are diverse and hierarchical, namely basic needs, derived needs, and integrative needs. Malinowski provided an example that when someone needs comfort, they will build shelter, and the existence of a culture of building shelter with diverse architectural designs. Meanwhile, those who have security needs will seek protection, thus giving rise to a culture of creating tools to protect their personal safety. For those who have a need to engage in sports, a culture of physical activity is created (Malinowski, 1944: 91-108).

Meanwhile, Bronislaw Malinowski (1948: 116), argues that:

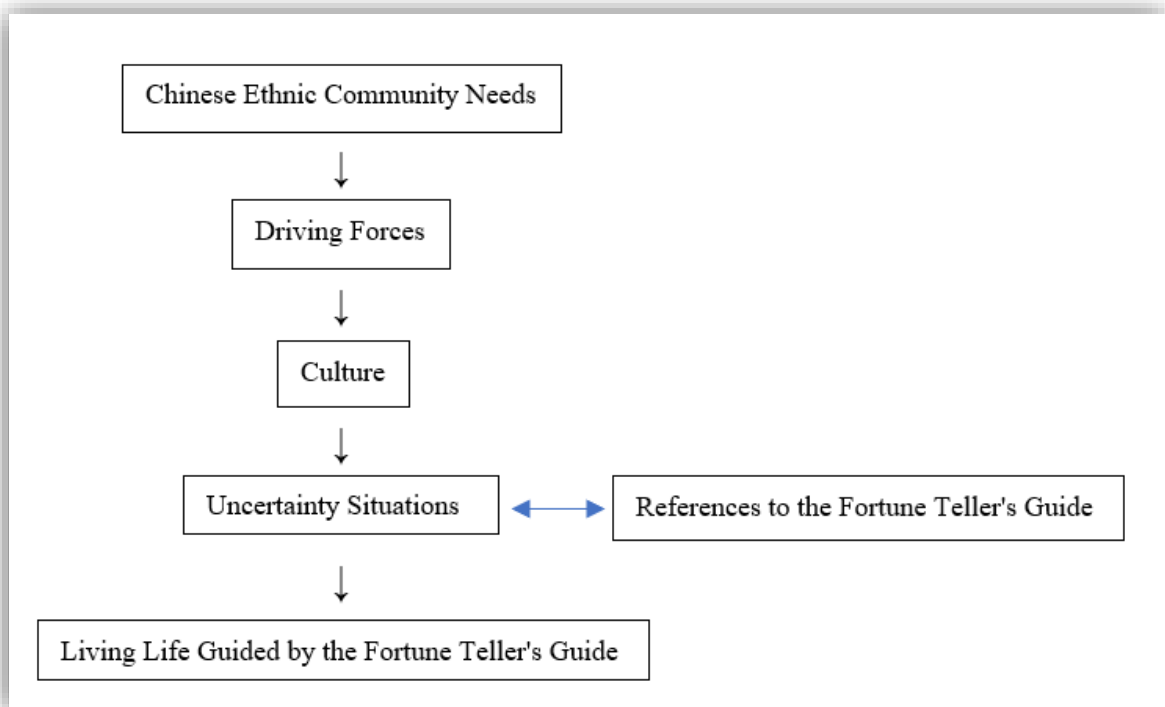
“Even this rapid survey leads us to an important generalization which will serve as a convenient starting-point. We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range. We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous. We do not find it wherever absolute safety eliminates any elements of foreboding. This is the psychological factor. But magic also fulfils another and highly important sociological function. As I have tried to show elsewhere, magic is an active element in the organization of labor and in its systematic arrangement. It also provides the main controlling power in the pursuit of game. The integral cultural function of magic, therefore, consists in the bridging-over of gaps and inadequacies in highly important activities not yet completely mastered by man. In order to achieve this end, magic supplies primitive man with a firm belief in his power of succeeding; it provides him also with a definite mental and pragmatic technique wherever his ordinary means fail him. It thus enables man to carry out with confidence his most vital tasks, and to maintain his poise and his mental integrity under circumstances...”

Therefore, the Chinese ethnic community have specific needs to continue their lives. Among them are the need to achieve comfort in life, obtain a good job, and reach self-actualisation, which requires a driving force to achieve these needs. Those who have self-sufficiency needs will find employment, thus creating a culture of work. Additionally, those who have a need to establish a household will seek life partners to marry, thus giving rise to a culture of dating. The Chinese ethnic community who are seeking a high standard of living are increasingly purchasing housing properties, thereby fostering a broader cultural emphasis on housing acquisition across emerging residential developments. They will be buying new land and hiring qualified contractors to build their dream houses. Moreover, the cultures that arise, such as work culture, dating culture, and buying-a-new-house culture, do not necessarily meet the needs of the Chinese ethnic community. This is because there are many uncertain situations in the future, and it is true that it has become a tradition for the Chinese ethnic community to seek fortune tellers during Chinese Lunar New Year for consultation in predicting their fortunes



so that they can obtain guidance for the future, hoping that they will be more confident in their daily lives. The theoretical framework for this study is shown in Figure 1 below:

FIGURE 1: Theoretical Framework



Source: Author (2026).

DATA

Data was obtained from semi-structured interviews. In this section, the author discusses the study findings based on the predetermined research questions as follows:

1. What drives the Chinese to seek out fortune tellers?
2. Why do the Chinese tend to seek fortune tellers, especially leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year?

Due to the limited size of the dataset and the interpretive nature of the research questions, the author employed an iterative interpretive approach to manually analyse the qualitative interview data. The author repeatedly read all the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. Initial codes are generated inductively and refined systematically through continuous comparison. Then the codes are organised into broader categories to generate themes and sub-themes that reflect the recurring patterns and meanings that are relevant to the research questions.



TABLE 2: Themes and Sub-Themes Derived from the Interview Transcripts Analysis

Themes	Sub-Themes
Current Trends	Various Methods of (Young) Fortune Tellers
Uncertain Future	Economic Uncertainty, Investment and Job Market Trends
Daily Problems	Gaining Peace of Mind
Chinese Culture	A Person's Fate Influences the Course of Their Life
Fresh Start	New Starting Point
Achieve Aspirations	Self-Esteem
Happiness in Life	Marriage and Family Happiness
Unpredictable Risk	Preventive Measures

Source: Author (2026).

MAIN THEME 1: CURRENT TRENDS

Based on feedback from the four informants, it can be understood that the motivation for Chinese people to seek fortune tellers is due to following current trends.

Sub-Theme: Various Methods of (Young) Fortune Tellers Today's trends show that fortune-telling services are offered in the air-conditioned offices and comfortable settings, and there are also free online fortune-telling service websites that attract young people. It cannot be denied that nowadays, there are many young fortune tellers who are proficient in English and are trying to approach Chinese customers educated in English-stream education. Besides fortune-telling services, young fortune tellers offer services such as changing Chinese names, suggesting names for newborn babies, and recommending business registration names upon customer request. Furthermore, today's fortune tellers are computer literate and skilled in using fortune-telling software to perform advanced fortune-telling analyses. That is one of the reasons why the Chinese community is becoming increasingly interested in this current trend. Fortune tellers not only predict the future, but they also advise clients on how to avoid bad luck in the future. Fortune tellers will not let their customers leave disappointed if the results of the



reading show that their customers' future prospects are not very encouraging. They will try their best to advise their customers to minimise their emotional distress by selling decorative items such as crystals, which are said to bring good luck to a person. This is the current trend that drives members of the Chinese ethnic community to seek out fortune tellers.

"...in this modern age, various fortune-telling practices attract young people to try them. A young man would be considered outdated if he had never sought advice from a fortune teller..."
(Informant A)

"...fortune-telling practices are becoming increasingly popular because they are followed by many people today, and fortune-tellers are able to provide peace of mind to their clients..."
(Informant A)

In addition, there are members of the Chinese ethnic community who simply want to hear the predictions of reputable fortune tellers. If the predictions are pleasant to hear, they feel happy, but if the predictions indicate something will happen in the future, they will take precautions.

"...it is expected that in the future, fortune-telling practices will continue to be popular, as the results of the predictions are accurate, and our customers believe in the predicted outcomes. In fact, other ethnic groups such as the Singh and Indian communities visit our place..."
(Informant C)

MAIN THEME 2: UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In an era filled with competition and pressure, an uncertain future like the current economic uncertainty, investment and job market trends are causing more people to have low confidence in facing the future.

Sub-Theme: Current Economic Uncertainty, Investment and Job Market Trends The Chinese seek fortune tellers for guidance and advice on achieving happiness in their present and future lives and to take preventive measures against future misfortunes. For business owners, they are interested in knowing their wealth prospects in the coming years. They also want to know other things, such as whether the current year is suitable for expanding their business based on their latest business plan. Therefore, through this fortune-telling practice, they know how to win over customers' hearts and thus can find more new customers while retaining loyal ones. In today's increasingly competitive job market, it is indeed true that a person's career future is difficult to predict, especially in the private sector. As informed by the informant:

"...those customers who come looking for me because they are uncertain about their future..."
(Informant B)



Workers who are worried about their career future tend to make an appointment with the fortune tellers for advice to avoid the expected bad luck. This meeting will open doors for those who feel uncertain about the future but are interested in knowing if they have the opportunity to meet influential individuals to gain better future prospects in all fields they will pursue. This influential person is also known as a noble person “贵人” (gui ren), and this kind of person consists of kind-hearted people who enjoy helping others achieve their goals in their chosen fields. However, the opportunity to meet a gui ren depends on one’s fortune. The Chinese saying “可遇不可求” (ke yu bu ke qiu) means that the ability to meet a gui ren depends on luck, which is beyond human control. Moreover, the existence of a gui ren can help individuals to maximise their potential and abilities. Although the future is uncertain and cannot be predicted with one hundred per cent accuracy, they can still control some of the situations that arise and therefore can devise steps to find solutions. It is clear here that the Chinese ethnic community seeks fortune tellers for guidance, advice on achieving happiness in the present and future, and to take preventive measures against future misfortunes.

MAIN THEME 3: DAILY PROBLEMS

A person’s life journey is bound to have ups and downs; they are forced to face daily problems that disrupt their emotions. Regardless of the responsibilities they bear and the career fields they pursue, those who are married face financial difficulties, company employees face problems socialising with strict employers, and business owners face bad debt issues.

Sub-Theme: Gaining Peace of Mind Thus, meeting a fortune teller is said to be important for gaining peace of mind, in addition to avoiding the threat of danger. According to Chinese understanding, if someone experiences many incidents to the point where nothing they do succeeds, as the Chinese say, “诸事不顺” (zhu shi bu shun) “misfortune comes without warning”, they need the advice of a fortune teller to take precautions in the future so they can overcome all misfortunes, as the Chinese say in a Chinese idiom, “逢凶化吉” (feng xiong hua ji). In general, the Chinese believe that their daily fortunes are likely to encounter good, bad, and average luck.

“...there are some situations we can control, while there are some situations beyond our control...”

(Informant A)

“...If the Chinese believe in fate, they will be able to predict something happening in the future if they can see the birds flying low, the fish frequently breathing and appearing on the pond



surface, and the tree branches floating on the rushing river, all these signs indicating that heavy rain is coming based on the laws of nature...”

(Informant B)

There is no Chinese person who likes misfortune. It is in the nature of Chinese to love good fortune while they try to avoid all bad fortune, which is expressed in the phrase 趋吉避凶 (qu ji bi xiong). They were worried this problem would recur, so they sought fortune-telling for guidance in navigating these critical moments. They hope that by retelling the unfortunate events that have occurred, the fortune teller they seek will assess factors such as age, gender, occupation, and personal characteristics based on the fortune-telling book 通书 (tong shu) to provide guidance to their clients on what they should do and what they should avoid in the future.

MAIN THEME 4: CHINESE CULTURE

The practice of fortune-telling is related to the influence of Chinese culture, and the practice is used to gain insight into the course of life. Today, the ethnic Chinese community considers themselves Malaysian citizens of Chinese descent (马来西亚华裔), are free to practise traditional Chinese culture, and can speak their native languages and dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew, Hainan, and other local dialects.

Sub-Theme: A Person's Fate Influences the Course of Their Life In essence, the Chinese ethnic community believes that a person's fate influences the course of their life, and a person's family background at birth is enough to impact their destiny throughout their life.

“...Chinese people believe in fortune-telling, influenced by cultural factors, just as Chinese people emphasise lucky numbers like 8. The Cantonese pronunciation of the number 8, 八 (baat), resembles the Cantonese pronunciation of wealth, 发 (faat)...”

(Informant B)

Continuous misfortune drives a person to change so they can welcome a life of ease tomorrow, because that misfortune holds hidden wisdom that requires interpretation by influential fortune tellers. So, it can be understood that some members of the ethnic Chinese community place very high hopes in fortune tellers.

MAIN THEME 5: FRESH START

Explanation of the tendency of the Chinese ethnic community to seek fortune tellers, especially leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year, because Chinese Lunar New Year is considered a fresh start. They are determined to begin a new life, curious about their future in the coming months and days, and to discard all the misfortunes that affect good luck.



Sub-Theme: New Starting Point In this new beginning of life, the Chinese ethnic community considers the Chinese Lunar New Year as a new starting point, which aligns with the wisdom of the Chinese people who place great importance on spring, as in the proverb “一年之计在于春” (yi nian zhi ji zai yu chun), meaning spring is the beginning of the year and Chinese Lunar New Year is the starting point for all new plans in life. To achieve success, one needs to do the right things, in the right place, and be helped by kind people, as stated in the proverb “天时地利人和” (tian shi di li ren he). Noble people also play an important role in the struggle for human life. A good plan, if pursued diligently and with the help of a noble person (guì ren), will undoubtedly yield success that is multiplied, far beyond expectations.

“...the Chinese people who came to see me aimed to find out if they had violated the cultural taboo of fan tai sui (犯太岁). They needed to pray and undergo ritual ceremonies at the temple to ensure a smooth life journey...”

(Informant C)

MAIN THEME 6: ACHIEVE ASPIRATIONS

The Chinese ethnic community usually believes in the Chinese Lunar New Year, “A year’s plan lies in spring” (yi nian zhi ji zai yu chun), as good timing to achieve their aspirations. So, for those who have careers, they seek fortune tellers to find out their potential for success in all fields they pursue.

Sub-Theme: Self-Esteem It cannot be denied that self-esteem is a driving force for someone in all areas of life. Ideals will enable us to keep working hard even if we have failed several times. The Chinese ethnic community can survive in any situation, no matter how difficult and lacking it may be. There is a saying that goes, “where there is ocean, there are Chinese people,” “有海水的地方就有华人” (you hai shui de di fang jiu you hua ren). Chinese business owners seeking fortune tellers ask for predictions from fortune tellers about whether they can make a large profit and expand their business in the future, such as opening branches. If they don’t meet the requirements, they will seek the help of fortune tellers for guidance so they can change their current situation. Although the Chinese ethnic community has a saying that goes, “What will become true, will be; what is destined not to become true, will not be, no matter how much hard work is put in,” as in the saying “命里有时终须有，命里无时莫强求” (ming li you shi zhong xu you, ming li wu shi mo qiang qiu). However, many Chinese people still want to know if they are destined to be rich in the future because wealth in life will also bring about changes in social stratification that can break free from the cocoon of poverty and bring social rank and status.

“...people living in this era full of uncertainty, they want to get guidance to reduce that uncertainty...”

(Informant D)



“...seeking fortune tellers and asking for advice from them avoids hard work but yields no results...”

(Informant B)

MAIN THEME 7: HAPPINESS IN LIFE

Chinese people place great importance on happiness in life.

Sub-Theme: Marriage and Family Happiness For the Chinese, marriage is important for maintaining the family institution, and the ancestral lineage can be passed down from one generation to the next (Ann, 1994: 30). The Chinese consider marriage to be the most important matter in a lifetime, which is why, leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year, many Chinese parents seek fortune tellers to find out whether their children will find a life partner and then marry. The fortune teller will give tips to parents so they can convey messages to their unmarried children. In addition, for those who are in love, they seek fortune tellers to predict the development of their romantic relationships throughout this new year and whether they will run smoothly. Therefore, leading up to Chinese Lunar New Year, it becomes the season for the Chinese community to visit fortune tellers and enquire about their life’s happiness. If a customer is likely to experience something undesirable, then the fortune teller provides guidance to strengthen intimate relationships with their spouse and family members, including more effective communication methods that can prevent marital discord. Additionally, for those who are married and blessed with children, they are more interested in finding fortune tellers regarding their personal health. This is because, according to the Chinese understanding influenced by Confucian thought, a person can stand firm after reaching the age of 30, be without doubt at 40, and understand destiny at 50 “三十而立、四十不惑、五十知天命” (san shi er li, si shi bu huo, wu shi zhi tian ming), meaning each stage of life has a different life agenda. Those who have been married for a long time, if they have children and a happy family, tend to focus more on their own health and the happiness of their family life, such as the opportunity to have a second child, their children’s academic performance, and other household matters.

“...I have loyal customers who visit here every year to get their fortune told about their life happiness...”

(Informant C)

MAIN THEME 8: UNPREDICTABLE RISK

Chinese Lunar New Year is considered the starting point of a new life. Therefore, there are still risks that cannot be known in the future, such as the possibility of accidents occurring. Road accidents can result in injuries and fatalities. Chinese people seek fortune tellers for insights and advice on preventive measures.



Sub-Theme: Preventive Measures The Chinese believe in “today not knowing tomorrow”, as stated in the Chinese proverb “天有不测之风云，人有旦夕之祸福” (tian you bu ce zhi feng yun, ren you dan xi zhi huo fu), which means anything can happen tomorrow that is beyond our expectations. If they are predicted to experience an accident involving injury, they will take precautions when driving, at work, or travelling abroad. So, all the explanations for Chinese ethnic communities seeking fortune tellers before the Chinese Lunar New Year can be revealed.

DISCUSSION

The practice of fortune-telling has long been embraced by the Chinese ethnic community; however, the demand for fortune-telling services peaks around the Chinese Lunar New Year, and this phenomenon has not received much attention in past academic works. After the qualitative data was collected by the author and all the interview transcripts were analysed, the data from the informants revealed the relationship between the Chinese Lunar New Year and the practice of fortune-telling. Among the reviewed literature, Chiu (1993: 125) states in his study that in societies experiencing rapid development, there are many opportunities for advancement in any career field pursued. However, at the same time, the unpredictable aspects of life have caused a sense of uncertainty about the future, a feeling that has taken root in the hearts of community members. This has led members of the community to seek out fortune tellers for advice, certainty, and peace of mind. The author agrees with other literary works that the practice of fortune-telling is a cultural aspect of Chinese society that has become ingrained in daily life. However, the practice of fortune-telling in modern urban areas is more complex in nature.

However, the author has a different perspective from other authors in previous academic studies. According to the author’s research findings through interviews, the passage of time has shown that the Chinese ethnic community seeks fortune tellers not merely due to feelings of unrest about future developments. As in this section of the research findings, the author’s data shows that members of the Chinese ethnic community seek fortune tellers for the following reasons: 1. current trends: young fortune tellers have various methods that attract young people; 2. uncertain future: the Chinese concern about economic uncertainty, investment and job market trends; 3. Daily problems: the Chinese wish to gain peace of mind; 4. Chinese culture: generally, the Chinese believe a person’s fate influences the course of their life; 5. The Chinese Lunar New Year be recognised as a start, a new starting point; 6. to achieve aspirations and self-esteem fulfilment; 7. happiness in life, regarding marriage and family happiness; and 8. unpredictable risk for preventive measures.

Such a situation can be explained through Malinowski’s functionalism theory, where human needs are diverse and hierarchical, similar to basic needs. Malinowski has shown an example that an individual who needs comfort will build a home, leading to a culture of building homes with various designs. Meanwhile, those who have a need for safety will seek



shelter, thus creating a culture of inventing tools to protect their safety. For those who have a need for sports, a culture of engaging in physical activities is created. The Chinese ethnic community have certain needs to continue their lives. Therefore, in line with Malinowski's functionalism theory, the Chinese ethnic community has created various cultures. Culture plays a role in fulfilling various life needs. Due to the difficulty in predicting someone's future, members of the Chinese community seek fortune tellers for guidance and advice.

In addition, the sophistication of cyber technology has led to the existence of very interesting fortune-telling websites. However, the research data obtained by the author still shows that Chinese people visit fortune tellers to meet face-to-face with well-known and influential fortune tellers, some of whom are willing to wait for hours and even come from far away. It is expected that in the future, the practice of face-to-face fortune-telling will still be able to withstand the passage of time.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

The Chinese ethnic population is considered the second largest demographic group in Malaysia. A study on the fortune-telling practices of the Chinese ethnic community can enrich the ethnic studies in Malaysia by examining cultural practices that shape Chinese ethnic identity, life philosophy, self-knowledge, and life skills. The practice of fortune-telling, passed down through generations, reflects a cosmological belief about one's destiny deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese ethnic community; such practices should not be labeled merely as superstitious acts. This is because the practice of fortune-telling helps the Chinese ethnic community take precautions in navigating their lives filled with uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

The practice of fortune-telling has research value from the perspective of sociology and anthropology. The Chinese ethnic community believes that a person's future fate can be predicted and foreseen according to their belief. It can be seen in major cities inhabited mostly by the Chinese ethnic community that there are various types of fortune-telling services offered. This practice of fortune-telling is predictive in nature, yet the Chinese community is so eager to seek out renowned fortune-tellers for advice and assistance. From the research question: 1. What drives the Chinese to seek out fortune tellers? and 2. Why do the Chinese tend to seek fortune tellers, especially leading up to the Chinese Lunar New Year? The study of "Fortune-Telling Practices within the Chinese Ethnic Community during the Chinese Lunar New Year: A Review of the Rationality Behind the Actions Based on Bronisław Malinowski's Cultural Functionalism Theory" successfully achieved its objective, which is to understand the main motives of the Chinese in seeking fortune tellers and to explain why the Chinese community tends to seek fortune tellers leading up to the Chinese Lunar New Year. Members of the Chinese ethnic community seek fortune tellers due to current trends, unclear future prospects, daily life disturbances, the influence of traditional practices, to request fortune predictions for a new beginning, to achieve their aspirations, to seek advice for a happy life,



and to prevent any misfortunes. The author hopes that in the future, the practice of fortune-telling among the Indian ethnic community during the festive season can be carried out. This is because Chinese fortune tellers are not only visited by Chinese ethnic customers but also by customers from other ethnic groups, such as Indians, Sikhs, and foreigners. This situation opens up opportunities for other authors to conduct similar studies in the future.

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