e-ISSN: 2948-4804

Journal of Ethnic and Diversity Studies (JOEDS)

www.joeds.com.my

Owned by
Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA),
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

Published by
Penerbit UKM (UKM Press)
starting December 2026.

PENERBIT UKM
UKM PRESS

UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA
The National University of Malaysia

KITA





Memory and Identity: A Review of Music Studies from the Perspective of Cultural Memory

(Memori dan Identiti: Sorotan Kajian Muzik dari Perspektif Memori Budaya)

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ABSTRACT

Music evokes individual experiences and carries collective cultural memory. Based on a systematic literature review and rigorous selection, this paper reviews research on music as a medium for constructing memory and identity from the perspective of Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory. The article is divided into four sections: 1) Theoretical and empirical discussions on music and memory; 2) Memory mechanisms within and through music; 3) How cultural memory participates in the construction of collective identity; 4) Empirical research and case studies on music entering cultural memory and its social functions. Rather than merely 'passively reflecting' identity, music actively 'constructs' belonging and group boundaries through memory techniques, education, and performance practices. When works enter the discourse and communication system through canonization, education and interpretation, they become part of cultural memory. The article also identifies two major shortcomings in the existing research: a tendency to prioritise Western discourse and a lack of an operational, interdisciplinary and replicable research framework. To address these issues, the article proposes a research framework connecting the three dimensions of 'musical material–memory practices–identity politics' to promote cross-cultural comparison and methodological operationalization.

Keywords: Music, Memory, Identity, Culture, Cultural Memory Theory.

ABSTRAK

Muzik membangkitkan pengalaman individu dan membawa ingatan budaya kolektif. Berdasarkan tinjauan literatur yang sistematik dan pemilihan yang ketat, kertas kerja ini mengkaji penyelidikan tentang muzik sebagai medium untuk membina ingatan dan identiti dari perspektif teori ingatan budaya Jan Assmann. Artikel ini dibahagikan kepada empat bahagian: 1) Perbincangan teori dan empirikal mengenai muzik dan ingatan; 2) Mekanisme ingatan dalam dan melalui muzik; 3) Bagaimana ingatan budaya mengambil bahagian dalam pembinaan identiti kolektif; 4) Kajian empirikal dan kajian kes mengenai muzik yang memasuki ingatan budaya dan fungsi sosialnya. Daripada sekadar 'mencerminkan secara pasif' identiti, muzik secara aktif 'membina' sempadan kepunyaan dan kumpulan melalui teknik ingatan, pendidikan dan amalan persembahan. Apabila karya memasuki sistem wacana dan

https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-01
Article History: Received: 28 August 2025 | Accepted: 8 April 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



komunikasi melalui kanonisasi, pendidikan dan tafsiran, ia menjadi sebahagian daripada ingatan budaya. Artikel itu juga mengenal pasti dua kelemahan utama dalam penyelidikan sedia ada: kecenderungan untuk mengutamakan wacana Barat dan kekurangan rangka kerja penyelidikan yang beroperasi, antara disiplin dan boleh ditiru. Untuk menangani isu ini, artikel itu mencadangkan rangka kerja penyelidikan yang menghubungkan tiga dimensi 'bahan muzik-amalan ingatan-politik identiti' untuk menggalakkan perbandingan silang budaya dan operasi metodologi.

Kata kunci: Muzik, Memori, Identiti, Budaya, Teori Ingatan Budaya.

INTRODUCTION

Past events often lead us to deep reflection. When we confront the past, we try to remember, but we cannot escape the reality of forgetting. When memory becomes plural and forms collective memory, it creates a space for remembrance, prompting us to keep recalling. Memory is central to identity recognition, and identity is formed and transformed within specific social or collective frameworks. While memory often enables us to recall many past events, the temporal scope of these memories is typically limited to the period from the age of conscious awareness onwards. Memory is not merely an individual psychological activity, but a socialised process. Through specific symbolic practices, social groups can collectively remember and pass on their history and culture (Connerton, 2002).

Collective memory is the fundamental source of ethnic identity for group members who have not experienced the 'past' first-hand. Memory relies on social frameworks, including family, religion and occupational groups. These frameworks provide members of different social groups with specific memory patterns and content, assisting individuals in locating and recalling past experiences (Halbwachs, 2002). Jan Assmann (2011: 36-37) built upon the framework of collective memory to introduce the concept of cultural memory. Cultural memory differs from communicative memory. While communicative memory is preserved through oral communication and social forms, cultural memory transcends personal experience and is transmitted through media such as language, text, art and rituals. This makes it more enduring and stable, and gives it a stronger influence on collective identity and memory. Cultural memory is an active construction process whereby memories are selected to become shared collective memories.

As a form of cultural expression, music often serves as a medium for conveying collective memories. As a cultural research paradigm in musicology, cultural memory emphasises the social construction of memory and analyzes its social mechanisms(Nieper & Schmitz, 2016).



As a unique symbolic system, music requires the support of musicological knowledge to analyse these memories. For music to be permanently remembered, it must be transformed into a coding system. Music that is retained in memory must be conceptualised as memorable at an early stage. However, in addition to musical symbols, this memorable image also takes the form of concerts and recordings within the musical performance system(Unseld, 2016).

Music and memory are closely connected; the spaces created and reflected by music are also spaces of collective memory. Music helps to create memory images, and is also an important medium for emotional expression and memory stimulation(Wietschorke, 2020). As an important medium of collective memory, music reinforces cultural identity and group belonging through expression in social interaction and historical context. This paper conducts a literature review and summary of music-related memory and identity formation under Assmann's cultural memory theory framework, with the aim of summarising past scholars' explorations in music studies under memory theory.

METHODOLOGY

This study's methodology is based on a systematic review of the literature, supplemented by additional literature searches and a strict screening process to establish the final evidence base for the review. The specific steps are as follows: First, keyword searches were conducted in international and regional academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, RILM, JSTOR, ProQuest and Google Scholar), as well as Chinese databases (CNKI), with the search timeframe primarily covering the period from 1989 to 2024, as this field has produced a significant number of theoretical and empirical findings over the past three decades. Additionally, several foundational works (such as those by Halbwachs and Assmann) were included without time restrictions to ensure theoretical tracing was comprehensive. Search keywords included (but were not limited to): 'music and memory / musical memory / cultural memory', 'music and identity/ music and identity', 'sites of memory', 'music notation and memory', and 'music and collective memory'.

The literature screening process consists of two stages. The first stage involves an initial screening of titles and abstracts to exclude literature that is clearly irrelevant or repetitive. The second stage involves a full-text assessment of the literature selected in the first stage, and a final decision is made based on pre-established inclusion or exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs or edited volumes and chapters of an authoritative nature; direct relevance to music-memory-identity or cultural memory theory; availability of the full text with accessible methods or theoretical arguments; and texts



written in English or Chinese (with translations into other high-impact languages included when necessary). Exclusion criteria include non-academic media (e.g., blogs and non-peer-reviewed articles), single cases unrelated to the theme (unless they directly discuss memory and cultural dimensions), and duplicate publications. Archival materials (e.g., government commemorative project descriptions or significant archival catalogues) are included under a supplementary inclusion strategy only if they provide unique historical or contextual evidence.

Data extraction is carried out according to pre-designed criteria, including author, year, research objectives, theoretical perspective, research methods, research subjects and regions, key findings and connections to the cultural memory framework. Selected studies undergo quality assessment, with the theoretical literature being evaluated for conceptual clarity, argument coherence and supporting evidence. This comprehensive approach primarily employs a thematic review, focusing on core topics such as 'the mechanisms of music as a medium of memory', 'memory-identity construction pathways', and 'the role of musical memory in identity construction', to facilitate interdisciplinary integration.

MUSIC AND MEMORY

Music is not just a form of artistic expression; it is also a social and cultural phenomenon with multiple semantic layers of meaning. Its existence often depends on social, historical and cultural contexts (Jost & Sebald, 2020). At the same time, the process of musical memory plays a central role. Since integrating sound events into musical forms is a necessary part of experiencing music, memory functions are essential for this process. When listening to music, if stored information in memory shares similarities or semantic connections with the music being heard, it is activated (Halbwachs, 2020). Music has always been closely linked to human memory. It consistently serves as a form of social culture with collective content, where each sound narrates the stories of individuals within the collective.

Music is not only an art form, but also a storehouse of memory and history (Adorno, 2018). In the context of globalization and immigration, music plays a particularly important role in cultural preservation by enabling diaspora communities to maintain connections with their ancestral lands and traditions(Shelemay, 2006). The communication of music involves processes such as composition, performance and reception. As cultural memory, music is constantly reshaped and given new meaning. Pfleiderer (2011) notes that music originally belonged to the category of 'communicative memory', but gradually entered the domain of 'cultural memory' through archives, commemorative events, and documentary research. The melodies, lyrics and rhythms of music can evoke personal and collective memories, making music an integral part of cultural memory.



Unlike visual memory, sound cannot be directly 'frozen' on a physical medium, but must be preserved through storage and transmission technologies(Dreckmann, 2020). As a form of cultural memory, music is closely linked to the issues of recording and storing memory. The most common technology used to record music is a symbolic system that uses musical notation as its recording medium. Music notation is considered a type of writing, similar to written language. It transforms intangible things into tangible ones, temporary things into permanent ones, and gives local things the ability to spread widely (Assmann, 2019). Halbwachs (2020) emphasises the connection between sheet music and musical memory. Not only is sheet music a tool for recording musical works, it is also an 'external memory' shared by the musical community. This highlights the crucial supportive role of notation as a medium for musical memory.

Musicians focus on sound because it is the most effective way to convey musical cultural memory. As this medium constructs the most authentic sound events in people's memories over time, it completes the auditory perception from the past to the present. From the phonograph and radio to film and the widespread adoption of digital media, methods of communicating music have undergone significant transformation. While music has long been regarded as 'intangible cultural heritage', through written sheet music and recordings, it has partially transformed into 'tangible cultural heritage' (Buzarovski, 2024). Mediation increases the accessibility of music and influences its social memory, enabling specific musical works to transcend temporal constraints and become part of the collective memory (Jost & Sebald, 2020).

MUSIC AS A MEDIUM FOR MEMORY

With their unique symbolic systems and structural characteristics, musical works have developed memory mechanisms that are distinct from those of traditional literary works. Firstly, musical works refer to their past. This process can be interpreted as a metaphor for memory, as it creates possibilities for meaning through references and internal quotation, as well as the potential to form memories of the past (Assmann, 2020a). The structure of music reveals the repetition of the exposition in the recapitulation, as well as the repetition of motifs and phrases within movements.

FIGURE 1 uses Haydn's *keyboard sonata (Hob. XVI)* to illustrate thematic repetition between the exposition and recapitulation.

JOURNAL OF
ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY STUDIES (JOEDS)
E-ISSN: 2948-4804
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

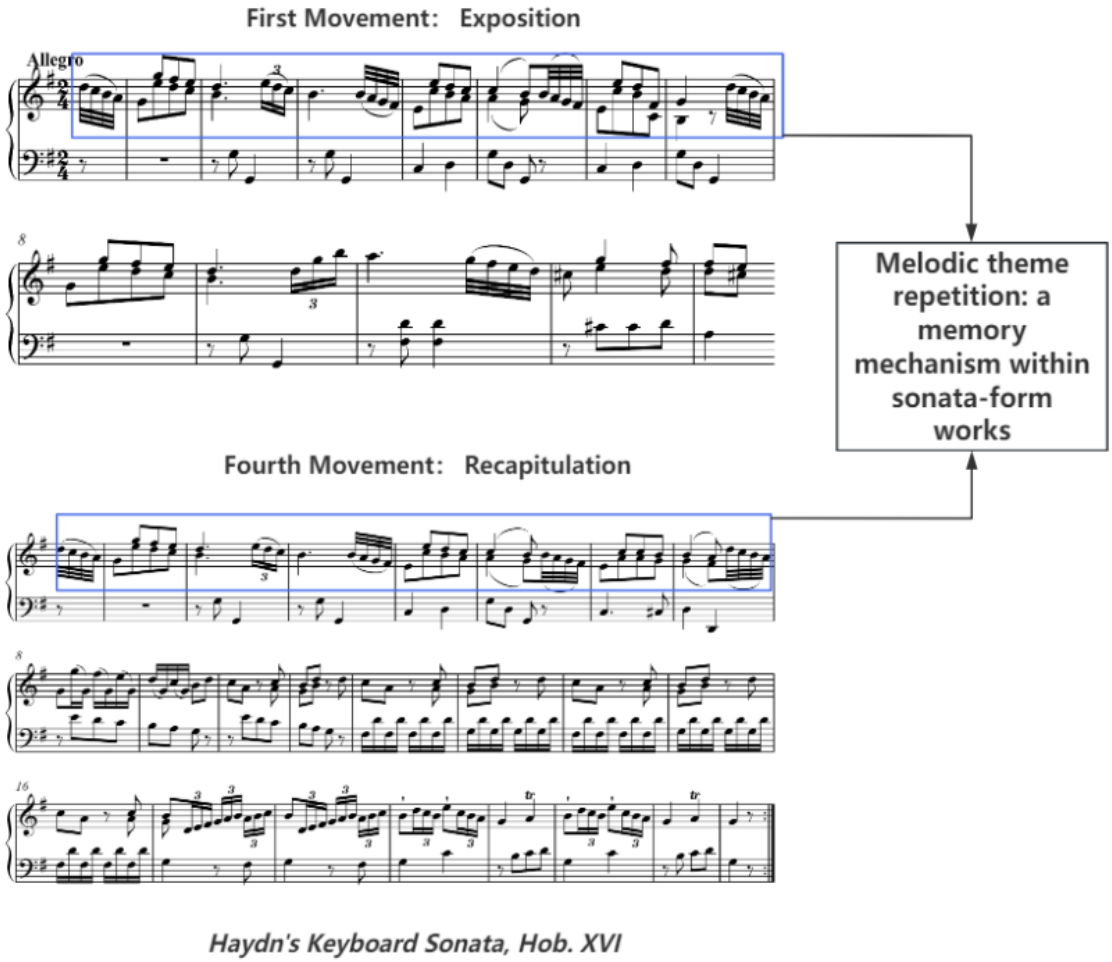
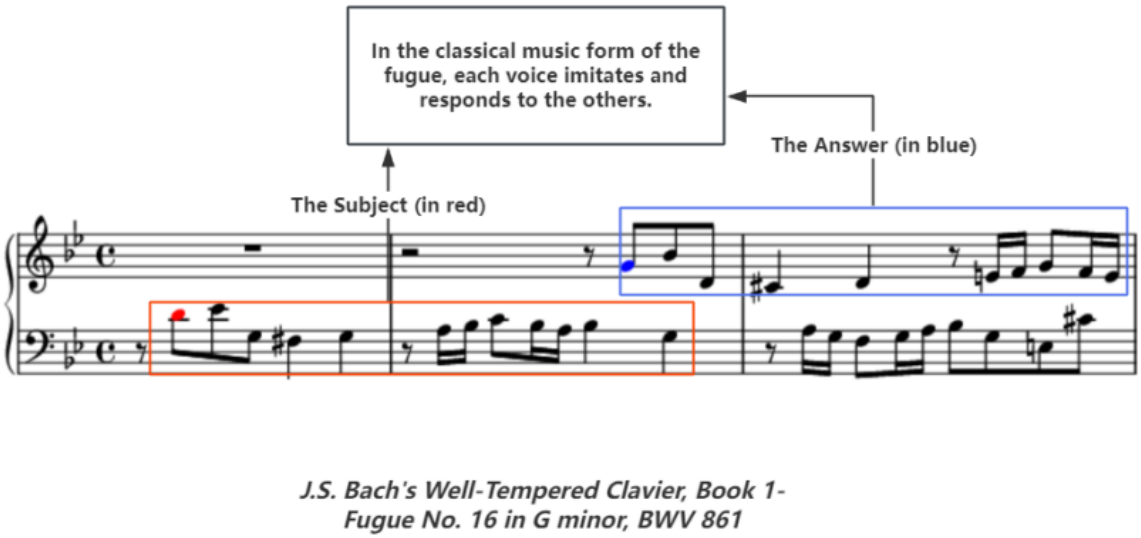


FIGURE 1. The exposition and recapitulation of Haydn's sonata

A polyphonic structure involves repeatedly exposing the melodic theme from beginning to end, with the voices imitating and responding to one another. Each answer serves as a reminder of the main musical idea from the beginning of the piece, but how this is done is not limited to responses alone; there are also countersubjects and inversions. It is not difficult to see how wonderfully unique this metaphor of recollection is in music, and how it can be used to great effect.

FIGURE 2 shows the interplay between the theme and answer in a polyphonic piece, using the fugue from Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, No. 16 (BWV 861)*.

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E-ISSN: 2948-4804
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J.S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1-
Fugue No. 16 in G minor, BWV 861

FIGURE 2. The theme and answer of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*

Similarly, Preuß (2016) argues that music can represent the 'past' through recollective themes and serve as a symbol of the passage of time through progressively developing melodies. Music's structure often relies on memory for interpretation, and polyphonic music requires listeners to remember the interplay of multiple melodic lines. Classical sonata form requires listeners to remember the theme and recognize when it returns in the recapitulation. Musical works often quote or adapt past music, thereby establishing connections with it and demonstrating clear intertextuality(Wappler, 2016). For instance, composers such as Chopin and Debussy have quoted Bach or Mozart in their compositions, thereby creating 'musical memories'. Liszt preferred to create musical memories by adapting pieces for the piano, which was a direct way of evoking memories in listeners. He often adapted vocal pieces by other composers for the piano. One example is his piano piece "*Rigoletto Paraphrase de Concert*", which is a transcription of the opera "*Rigoletto*" by the Italian composer Verdi. This piece transforms piano music into vivid drama, turning the opera's visual narrative of exposing corruption into pure auditory momentum that activates the audience's memories.

FIGURE 3 shows the references to opera music from the past in Liszt's *Rigoletto Paraphrase de Concert*.

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ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY STUDIES (JOEDS)
E-ISSN: 2948-4804
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FIGURE 3: Liszt's "*Rigoletto Paraphrase de Concert*" refers to the past opera

A musical work only truly enters collective cultural memory when listeners hear it and form their memories of it. For a musical work to become part of the cultural memory of the past, it must become a 'classicized' work. Assmann (2020b) identifies four functions that musical works typically fulfill in order to become 'classics' in society: an educational function (serving as models for 'classical masters' and forming the basis of music education); an aesthetic function (establishing a tradition of music criticism through analysis and commentary); a historical function (influencing musical historiography and defining composers' historical status); and intertextuality (classical music influencing subsequent works and forming musical traditions). Classic musical works are destined to be frequently performed. Even when set down in sheet music or recordings, they continue to evolve across cultures and through different performers. Different generations of audiences interpret and receive the same work in distinct ways, continually evolving the music within collective cultural memory(Buzarovski, 2024).



Identity is shaped through collective memory. The social framework of memory determines how a group understands itself and constructs its identity. When individual or group memory is challenged, this can result in identity confusion or shifts in identity(Halbwachs, 2002). Winter (2010) argues that memory is not static, but rather maintained through 'performance' and altered each time it is recalled. Therefore, memory is not merely a reflection of the past, but a dynamic social practice that has a significant influence on group identity.

Collective identity is constructed through shared memory: each time society chooses to recall certain memories, the sense of collective identity is deepened. However, memory is not an objective historical record, but rather a process shaped by social selection and construction. Groups often emphasize certain memories while intentionally or unintentionally forgetting others in order to maintain their identity(Connerton, 2002). National memory, as a form of collective memory, has been the subject of extensive discussion. Anderson (2006) analysed how nations shape national identity through memory and history. Nationalism requires the forgetting of certain historical events to maintain national unity, and nations establish a unified national identity through education, commemorative days, monuments and language. National memory is often dominated by 'master narratives' (e.g., heroic, victim, and civilizational progress narratives) and is transmitted through historical education and public rituals. Understanding these mechanisms helps to reveal how different nations shape public perceptions of history and influence the formation of national identity (Carretero & van Alphen, 2018).

A collective identity is always associated with an image constructed by society. Members of a collective identify with this image. Based on his research into cultural memory, Assmann (2015) argues that collective identity is an awareness of social belonging. This is formed through a shared knowledge system, shared memory and a shared symbolic system among members. This symbolic system can be transformed into symbols that convey a sense of commonality, forming a cultural identity. Cultural memory possesses normativity and fixity. Through the process of canonization, cultural memory often establishes legitimate memory, enabling collective members to establish their identity (Assmann, 2011). These discussions mean that cultural identity is not naturally formed, but shaped by the selection of memory, political imagination and social construction.

The creation of memorial sites is closely linked to identity, particularly after the French Revolution, when the state used commemorative symbols to preserve collective memory(Boer, 2008). In the United States, landmarks such as the Washington Monument and the Declaration of Independence reinforce the nation’s founding narrative and national identity(Hebel, 2008).



In the era of globalization and digitalization, the concept of memory sites is evolving to include new media and virtual commemorative methods. States shape collective memory and national identity by creating, maintaining and updating these sites. Harth (2008) explored how cultural memory can become central to national identity through the 'sanctification' of historical events (e.g., the French Revolution), which can be used to unify national identity.

Studies on cultural memory in the media also include case studies focused on identity. For example, Thomas (2021) analyzes a scene from the 1965 classic film The Sound of Music, in which Maria forgets the steps to the Ländler dance. Through this analysis, Thomas explores how dance, as a form of cultural memory, becomes part of national identity. Through film, music and dance, Austria constructed a national identity to distance itself from its historical responsibility for Nazism after the war. Similarly, Patrick (2021) analyzed how the Philippine national dance was officially defined at different historical stages and used to shape national identity. In summary, cultural memory is the result of continuous construction by the media. It originates from collectively shared symbolic systems and influences members' identities through the repeated activation of memory.

MUSIC AS CULTURAL MEMORY CONSTRUCTS CULTURAL MEMORY

Music is a social behaviour and music culture is closely related to the social context. Not only does music occur within society, but society can also be viewed as occurring within music (Turino, 1989). Stoke (2020) argues that music plays a central role in shaping a sense of place. It is not only part of social life, but also an important tool for social interaction, identity formation and the construction of cultural boundaries. It is not merely a reflection of society, but a mechanism for producing identity. It serves as a medium for cultural exchange and identity formation, fostering connections between different social groups. For instance, popular music can define subcultural groups, while ethnic music can preserve cultural identity at a national or ethnic level(Jost & Sebald, 2020). Music is a means of both expressing and experiencing identity. Frith (1996) argues that music provides an experience of both 'self-identity' and 'other-identity'. Music is a medium for expressing emotions and also defines identity through performance and participation. Rice (2017) highlights three roles that music plays in identity construction: identity symbolism (where music symbolizes a particular ethnic group or community); identity practice (where people express their identity through music, such as through ethnic dance or playing styles); and identity politics (where nations, governments or social organizations use music to shape identity).



Local music plays a vital role in shaping urban and community identity. Through the interaction of memory, emotion and space, it transcends its role as mere entertainment to become a part of social and cultural structures(Bennett & Rogers, 2016). Local music shapes cultural identity continuously through social interactions such as composing and listening. Various case studies have examined how local music shapes cultural identity.

An analysis of Afghan folk music reveals that, during a period of cultural fragmentation in Afghanistan, musicians used the radio to spread folk music in an attempt to establish a multi-ethnic political community(Baily, 2022). Collecting and creating folk music fosters a shared collective memory and cultural identity. Similarly, Polish composer Frédéric Chopin played a significant role in shaping Polish identity. His universal values and patriotic sentiments, especially his folk-inspired creativity, were well-suited to constructing Polish identity (Mach, 2022: 62). His works are based on the cognitive experiences of the people of Warsaw and adapt Polish dance music, folk songs and other musical materials into piano pieces. In doing so, he also conveyed the essence of Polish culture. The Polish government also regarded Chopin as a national prophet, and he played a significant role in the construction of Polish national identity. In Brazil, the poet Olavo de Andrade encouraged Brazilian composers to contribute to the development of a serious national musical tradition. He incorporated the three main ethnic groups in Brazil's "nation-state"—the Portuguese, African-Brazilians, and indigenous peoples of the Americas—into original Brazilian musical works. Brazilian folk music was transformed into a unifying force, promoting national cohesion (Reily, 2022). Magowan (2022) discusses how the Australian pop music industry has redefined the notion of regional indigenous identity. By transforming traditional music into modern pop, Australian Indigenous peoples have expressed their territorial claims and conveyed their identity. In these countries and regions, indigenous peoples have internalized the individuality of ethnic music and personal musical experiences, expressing them through new music genres that combine social functions while constructing an objective identity.

Much like possessing real culture and history, possessing music is a true collective symbol. Stokes (2022) argues that music has great social significance. While not exclusively, music largely enables people to identify with different regions and boundaries, and to explore various aspects of their identity. It can represent various aspects of identity, such as nationality, location, race, class, religion and gender. The text, melody, vocal style, instruments used and bodily movements all contribute to this expression (Shelemay, 2006). Musical activities are usually collective. This ensures the presence of individuals in the processes of musical composing, performing, and listening. Through this cultural exchange, a wonderful response emerges as music integrates individual differences into a unified identity.



Musical communication also has an important ritualistic dimension. Ritual experiences connect us, build relationships and create common ground. When we follow the rhythm of music, we align with one another, creating resonance(Harwood, 2017). In any country, the most revered music is undoubtedly the national anthem. Through the most direct auditory experience, the national anthem evokes our national pride, and even if we do not remember the lyrics, the melody reminds us of our shared values and sense of identity. They represent our current identity, but also remind us of our shared history and perhaps our expectations for the nation(Gilboa & Bodner, 2009). People within a group also tend to believe that others in the group share their musical tastes, and they are more likely to choose musical styles that represent the group as a whole (Tarrant et al., 2001). Thus, music can evoke emotions and coordinated behaviour within a group, thereby shaping and defining cultural identity. At the same time, music can also add emotional value to identity.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have shown that the existing literature exhibits two distinct characteristics in terms of its theoretical construction and case interpretation. On the one hand, memory theory (as represented by Assmann and Halbwachs) and musicological concepts and tools have been systematically introduced in order to explain how music functions as a 'memory technique' and 'memory space' in the construction of collective identity. Music enters the field of cultural memory through memory-oriented structures, such as repetition, intertextuality and the canonization of music pieces. Through educational, performative and communicative processes, music embeds individual memories in a context that can be passed on culturally, thereby facilitating the transformation from 'personal memory' to 'collective memory'. This argument is frequently made in discussions of form, intertextuality, and the 'canonization' function.

RESEARCH GAP

However, a close reading of the literature reveals two types of structural deficiency in the review. The first is a clear deficiency in the de-Westernization of the context. Although theoretical discourse still centres on European and American traditions, such as those of Halbwachs, Assmann, Adorno and Stokes, existing non-Western examples, such as Afghan folk songs, Filipino dance music, Brazilian nationalist narratives and the popularization of Australian Indigenous music, are mostly isolated case studies lacking systematic comparison



or regional theoretical reconstruction. This hinders the achievement of comparability and explanatory power for 'memory mechanisms in cross-cultural contexts'.

Although scholars have repeatedly called for interdisciplinary dialogue in their research, actual studies have mostly been limited to the application of theories within a single tradition or case-by-case interpretations. These studies have lacked operational theoretical frameworks that can be reproduced by others or subjected to quantitative testing. Therefore, the current literature requires a de-centring of Western paradigms to expand comparative studies across multiple regions and contexts. It also requires the development of interdisciplinary, operational research designs that connect the three levels of 'musical materials—memory practices—identity politics'. This approach aims to achieve theoretical refinement and methodological validation, thereby raising the profile of Western experiences as an analytical paradigm on a level with mainstream theories.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

In response to gaps in the current research on these two areas and based on memory theories by Halbwachs and Assmann, we propose the following theoretical framework. This framework can be used to study the mechanisms of cultural memory construction and the negotiation of cultural identity in cross-cultural, ethnic social contexts, with a focus on music as a medium of memory. The framework comprises three core dimensions. Firstly, it considers the memory mechanisms of music as a memory medium. Specialized music analysis will be employed to explore the internal memory forms within musical works and their references to the past beyond the works themselves. Extracting musical elements such as form, melody and rhythm is essential throughout the analysis process as it enables the specific content carried by music to be analyzed.

Secondly, consider how music contributes to the construction of cultural memory. Studying how musical works enter cultural memory is equivalent to studying their canonization and classicization. This involves exploring how musical works enter social memory, such as being held up as models for music education, being widely criticised or interpreted, and being cited in an intertextual manner. Each of these aspects deserves evaluation within its unique cultural context. Effective analytical evaluation reveals how musical memory remains continuous from the past to the present.

Thirdly, how does musical memory help to reconstruct collective identity? In cross-cultural communities and multicultural societies, music plays a key role in the reconstruction of collective identity. Identity is defined as both the perception of commonality and continuity and the perception of difference and discontinuity (Hall, 2021). In what ways does music



represent meaning in collective cultural memory, and how does it reconstruct collective cultural identity through both commonality and difference? Investigating the meaning of music itself and how audiences perceive it is key to analyzing the dynamic process of cultural identity construction. This process highlights the negotiation between integration and separation of identity in a cross-cultural context.

CONCLUSION

As a cultural practice, music can construct a society's cultural memory and (re)construct its collective identity within a specific social framework. In contemporary academic discourse, it is evident that music has evolved from a purely auditory performing art into a cultural symbol that embodies multiple social functions. From a cultural memory theory perspective, music serves as a medium for memory culture, embodying a unique 'memory technique'. Through its inherent structural elements, music can refer to its past to inscribe its memory; it can also construct a musical memory space by referencing past music or culture. Once a musical work is revered as part of a cultural canon, it enters the field of cultural memory. Music transforms memories into shared symbols that represent cultural meaning within the social symbolic system. By integrating and differentiating itself from others to define the boundaries of shared identity, music constructs a sense of belonging and solidarity towards that cultural identity.

While existing literature has established the theoretical connection between music, memory and identity, as well as revealing the social effects caused by several mechanisms, in order to achieve breakthroughs in theory and methodology in this field of research, it is necessary to incorporate more systematic and comparative studies from non-Western contexts into the mainstream discourse. This will avoid the use of Western experience as a model. Promoting the 'operationalization' of interdisciplinary methods — such as combining music analysis, archival research and audience surveys to construct a repeatable, testable, practical framework — responds to the main text's discussion of memory techniques and identity construction, and provides a clear theoretical framework for filling the gaps above in research.

As a methodological perspective, cultural memory theory places the data of musicology research within the context of cultural dynamics, thereby becoming a focal point of research (Nieper & Schmitz, 2016: 12). The core of interdisciplinary musicological research is the reconstruction of past phenomena. Traditions become objects of memory within musical culture and are continuously transmitted through contemporary interpretations.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the reviewers for their valuable comments and professional advice, which have significantly enhanced the academic quality of the arguments presented in this paper.

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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

(Amalan Tilik Nasib Masyarakat Etnik Cina Menjelang Tahun Baharu Cina: Suatu Tinjauan Kerasionalan Di Sebalik Tindakan Berdasarkan Teori Fungsionalisme Budaya Bronisław 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 berstuktur digunakan untuk mendapatkan data kajian ini. Hasil kajian telah menjelaskan hubung kait antara amalan tilik

https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-02
Article History: Received: 2 February 2026 | Accepted: 8 April 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



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。凡立之屬皆从立). The Chinese character "春" (chun) evolved from the ancient character 萶 (chun); it was a combination of cao 艸 (grass) and ri 日 (day). The character 萶 symbolizes grass grown up in springtime (萶，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:

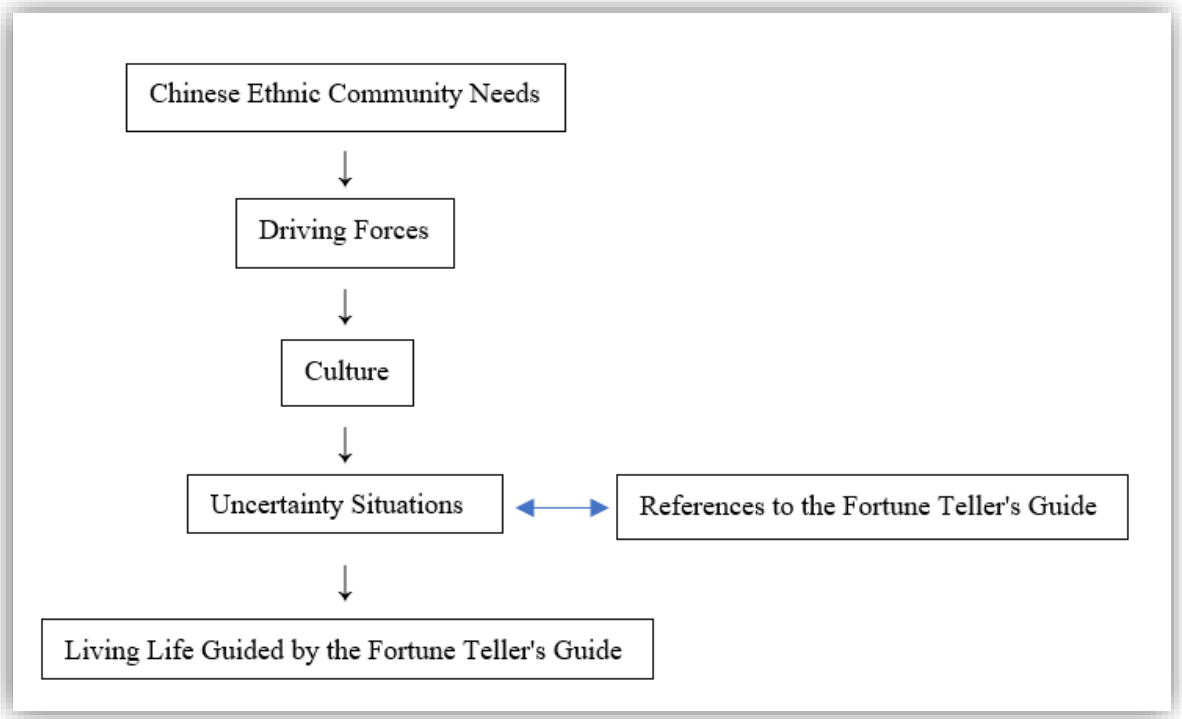
> "*Even this rapid survey leads us to an important generalization which will serve as a convenient starting-point. We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range. We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, 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

JOURNAL OF
ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY STUDIES (JOEDS)
E-ISSN: 2948-4804
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank all informants, reporters, and other individuals who were directly and indirectly involved, providing assistance and cooperation to the author, allowing this study to be completed.

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Towards a Conceptual Framework for Analysing Social Cohesion Through Everyday Food Spaces: Mamak Restaurants in Malaysia

(Restoran Mamak di Malaysia: Ke Arah Pembentukan Kerangka Konseptual bagi Analisis Kesepaduan Sosial melalui Ruang Makanan Harian)

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https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-03
Article History: Received: 3 March 2026 | Accepted: 8 April 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



ABSTRACT

This paper develops a conceptual framework for analysing how social cohesion in Malaysia is produced, negotiated, and experienced through everyday food spaces, using Mamak restaurants as an analytic lens. Malaysia's colonial legacy of ethnicisation has long complicated the pursuit of national unity within its diverse society. Yet social cohesion has been sustained through bargaining, consensus-seeking, and accommodation among ethnic communities. Existing studies of social cohesion are often framed from macro, authority-defined perspective, overlooking how cohesion is enacted through everyday practices embedded in ordinary and informal spaces. Addressing this gap, the paper proposes an everyday-defined approach to social cohesion through three interrelated dimensions: (i) the spatial distribution and characteristics of Mamak restaurants; (ii) the cultural transformation of Mamak cuisine into a shared Malaysian symbol; and (iii) the spatial practices that position Mamak restaurants as representational spaces of Malaysian-ness. Drawing from ethnographic insights from Kuala Lumpur, this paper examines how everyday spatial and food practices produce and express social meanings. This paper contributes theoretically by advancing food space as an analytic lens for social cohesion and developing a conceptual framework of everyday cohesion; methodologically by integrating ethnography with spatial mapping; and practically by underscoring the value of accessible and inclusive everyday food spaces in sustaining cohesion within diverse societies.

Key words: Social cohesion; everyday practices; food spaces; Mamak restaurants; Malaysia.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membangunkan satu kerangka konseptual untuk menganalisa bagaimana kesepaduan sosial di Malaysia dihasilkan, dirundingkan dan dialami melalui ruang makanan seharian, dengan restoran Mamak digunakan sebagai lensa analitik. Legasi penjajahan berasaskan pengkelompokan etnik telah merumitkan pembinaan perpaduan nasional dalam masyarakat berbilang kaum di Malaysia. Namun, kesepaduan sosial terus dipelihara melalui proses tawar-menawar, pencarian konsensus, dan sikap bertolak ansur diantara pelbagai komuniti etnik di negara ini. Kajian-kajian sedia ada lazimnya membingkai kesepaduan sosial daripada perspektif makro yang ditentukan autoriti, sekali gus mengabaikan bagaimana kesepaduan dilaksanakan melalui amalan seharian dalam ruang santai dan tidak formal. Bagi menangani jurang ini, artikel ini mencadangkan pendekatan kesepaduan sosial yang ditakrifkan secara seharian melalui tiga dimensi saling berkaitan: (i) taburan dan ciri spatial restoran Mamak; (ii) transformasi budaya masakan Mamak sebagai simbol ke-Malaysiaan yang dikongsi bersama; dan (iii) amalan spatial yang memposisikan restoran Mamak sebagai ruang representasi ke-Malaysiaan. Berasaskan dapatan etnografi di Kuala Lumpur, artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana amalan ruang dan makanan seharian menghasilkan serta menzahirkan makna sosial. Artikel ini menyumbang secara teori dengan mengangkat ruang makanan



sebagai lensa analisis kesepaduan sosial dan membangunkan kerangka konseptual kesepaduan seharian; secara metodologi melalui penggabungan etnografi dan pemetaan spatial; serta secara praktikal dengan menegaskan kepentingan ruang makanan seharian yang mudah diakses dan inklusif dalam mengekalkan kesepaduan dalam masyarakat berbilang kaum.

Kata kunci: Kesepaduan sosial; amalan seharian; ruang makanan; restoran Mamak; Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The predicament of ethnicization, a legacy of Malaysia's colonial past, constitutes a persistent and significant concern within Malaysian society, as it remains pervasive and continues to shape social, economic, and political relations in Malaysia today (Ali 2015; Embong 2018; Holst 2012; Shamsul 2008). Ethnicization has given rise to divisive spaces across many aspects of Malaysian everyday life, posing significant challenges to national unity and the integration of its diverse social fabric, one of the key agendas of the country's nation-building efforts. To maintain ethnic harmony and promote social integration, the Malaysian government has undertaken extensive efforts to ensure peace and sustained economic development. These include the 1971 New Economic Policy and its subsequent 1991 National Development Policy, which aimed to foster national unity by eradicating inter-ethnic resentment arising from socio-economic disparities. The 1971 National Cultural Policy likewise sought to promote cultural assimilation and the development of a national culture based on three key elements: indigenous culture, suitable elements from other non-Malays cultures, and Islamic culture. In addition, nation building campaigns such as *Bangsa Malaysia* (United Malaysian Nation) and *OneMalaysia* were introduced to strengthen national unity, enhance quality of life, and nurture a shared national identity (Harun 2010; Saad 2012). Despite these efforts, the nation's multi-ethnic composition and the associated differences in culture, religion, language and identity have rendered the political project of nation building an arduous struggle and it remains work in progress (Harun 2010; Mohamed 2002; Shamsul 2011).

In the discourse on managing ethnic relations within the context of nation building in Malaysia, various perspectives exist. While some describe Malaysia as an "ethnically divided or fractured society" (Embong 2007:12) or characterise it as one marked by "divides and dissent" (Embong 2018:238), others view the country through the lens of "unity in diversity" or as existing in a state of "stable tension" (Shamsul 2010:7). The concept of social cohesion, as conceptualised by National Distinguished Professor Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of the National University of Malaysia, has gained attention as a way of describing the ongoing, work-in-progress nature of national unity (Musa & Jalil 2013). Shamsul (2011) posits that Malaysia has enjoyed relative peace, stability and prosperity over the years through constant bargaining, consensus seeking and cooperation among its ethnic communities, resulting in a state of social cohesion. He further proposes that social cohesion can serve as a discursive tool



for framing nation building and social integration in the Malaysian context. Shamsul argues that the social imagination of unity as uniformity, often characterised by one race, one religion, and one language, is a utopian goal that is difficult to achieve. Instead, social cohesion is a more pertinent and cherished feature in multicultural societies, regarded as a crucial element of nation building and a prerequisite for achieving national unity.

The study of social cohesion is ubiquitous in social policy and political science, particularly in the multi-cultural Western nations such as those in Europe, Canada, and Australia, yet it is often examined at the macro level using quantitative methods that focus on social, economic and political indicators. International organisations and state agencies, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Council of Europe, the Canadian Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion, and the Scanlon Foundation in Australia, have developed various frameworks for measuring social cohesion. By contrast, empirical research at the community level, grounded in the everyday practices and routines of individuals, remains relatively limited, even though such micro-level investigations are crucial for understanding how integration and cohesion are experienced in daily life. Aruqaj (2023) critiques the macro-level approach, arguing that aggregated macro-indices often fail to capture the social realities at the community level. Since integration and social cohesion constitute a dynamic phenomenon that continually shapes the spaces of everyday life, and the negotiation of differences often occurs locally through everyday interactions and experience, endeavours to measure and promote them cannot solely be dependent on national policies and strategies (Amin 2002; Dukes & Musterd 2012).

Similarly, studies of social cohesion in Malaysia have predominantly adopted macro-level, authority-defined approaches, measuring directly or indirectly through indices such as the National Unity Index and the Quality of Life Index. Beyond these macro-level analyses, other academic research has also mirrored this orientation by focusing on the evaluation of nation-building initiatives, primarily through government-led projects in education (Abu Bakar 2023; Jamil & Santhiram 2012; Kaur et al. 2017; Ong et al. 2014; Selvadurai et al. 2015) and community development programmes (Abdullah et al. 2017), hence reinforcing an authority-defined perspective. While these studies provide valuable insights into government-driven strategies, they risk overlooking how social cohesion is experienced, negotiated, and reproduced in everyday arenas. From an everyday-defined perspective, a growing number of studies have begun to explore social cohesion within the contexts of business and economic activities (Abdullah et al. 2018; Hassan et al. 2018; Mak Din et al. 2019) and popular culture, such as food (Olmedo & Shamsul 2016) and music consumption (Johan & Hamzah 2019). However, current research has yet to fully examine how social cohesion manifests in everyday or micro-level practices, where differences are negotiated in ordinary and mundane settings.

Building on these perspectives, this study addresses the gap by shifting the analysis of social cohesion in Malaysia from a macro, authority-defined paradigm to a micro, everyday-defined perspective. It examines the everyday practices of individuals and communities within food spaces, with particular attention to how modalities of social cohesion are manifested through routine interactions and spatial practices of eating out in Malaysia's iconic *Mamak* restaurants. Food spaces provide a critical lens for this analysis, as these everyday practices



reveal the integral role of food in both unifying and segregating individuals and groups within a society. Such practices not only foster community cohesion but also define group identity and demarcate social boundaries, offering valuable insights into the micro-level processes that shape social relations. This study specifically explores how *Mamak* restaurants embody accessibility and inclusion, function as spaces of interaction, negotiation, and identity formation, and whether these practices can inform the development of a conceptual framework for understanding social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies from an everyday perspective.

Hence, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose a framework for understanding everyday social cohesion through food spaces. Using *Mamak* restaurants as an empirical field, the framework develops three analytical axes to investigate:

1. The spatial distribution and characteristics of Mamak restaurants, to understand their role in fostering accessibility and inclusivity.
2. The transformation of *Mamak* cuisine and its possible contribution to the development of a shared Malaysian food identity.
3. The spatial practices of *Mamak* restaurants in producing a representational space of *Malaysian-ness*.

By synthesising these axes, this paper argues that *Mamak* restaurants can be conceptualised as everyday spaces of cohesion, where the challenges, negotiations and accommodations that shape the dynamics of social cohesion within the nation's diverse social fabric can be observed and analysed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SOCIAL COHESION: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The concept of social cohesion has a long-standing history in social psychology, sociology, and political philosophy (Chan et al. 2006; Friedkin 2004; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). Its intellectual origins trace back to Emile Durkheim, the founder of the French school of sociology (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Jenson 1998; Pahl 1991), who highlighted concerns that traditional morality was being disrupted and social cohesion weakened in modern societies. The decline of the traditional moral values and erosion of social ties resulted from technological evolution, industrialization, urbanization, and increased social and geographic mobility (Canadian Policy Research Sub-committee on Social Cohesion 1997; Jenson 1998; Pahl 1991). In subsequent decades, globalization and large-scale immigration further introduced diversity and pluralism into societies (Beauvais & Jenson 2002; Dukes & Musterd 2012; Markus 2014; Spoonley et al. 2005). Social cohesion, in a more contemporary context, is also challenged by economic restructuring; global population movement, rising ethno-cultural diversity, revolutions in information and communication technologies, and changing social relationship (Beauvais & Jenson 2002; Chan et al. 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). These transformations have manifested in growing inequalities, unemployment and crime, social and ethnic fractionalization, and even violent conflict (Jenson 1998; Lockwood 1999; Easterly et



al. 2006; Langer et al. 2017). Social cohesion has since emerged as a core concept in both policy and academic discourses, particularly in efforts to understand the impacts presented by these social changes on social cohesion and to develop policies and strategies that create conditions conducive to strengthening it.

SOCIAL COHESION IN POLICY DOMAIN

The policy discourse on social cohesion is largely problem driven and led by policymakers and social policy analysts. The concerns with social cohesion among them attributed to the realization of the significance of social cohesion as the possible antecedent of societal development, economic growth, and policy reform (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Chan et al. 2006; Easterly et al. 2006). Easterly et al. (2006) state that social cohesion's analytical power aids to advance policymakers' understanding and decision making in economic and social development processes, while Berger-Schmitt (2000) posits that social cohesion is essential for public administration to implement reforms as the people need to have confidence and trust in the government in generating long-term benefits to compensate short-term losses. In addition to that, Chan et al. (2006) suggest that politicians and policymakers have promoted social cohesion as a new form of governance to overcome social cleavages, and it is significance in developing the economy of a country.

Additionally, international organizations such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and trans-national entities like European Union have adopted the concept of social cohesion to address issues arising from economic, social and technological changes (Chan et al. 2006; Jenson 1998; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has taken the lead since 1980 in advocating the concept of social cohesion as a social investment to balance and sustain economic restructuring among its member states and within the policy communities. Similarly, in response to the growing population mobility and diversity after the establishment of the Union, European Union, through the Council of Europe, also announced in 1990s that social cohesion is the goal to strive for in social development (Chan et al 2006; Jenson 2010). In addition to the international and trans-national agencies, socio-political institutions in Canada, France, Australia and United Kingdom have also included the concept of social cohesion in their social policy to promote multi-culturalism (Chan et al 2006; Markus 2014), and to foster new identity (Woolley 2003).

SOCIAL COHESION IN ACADEMIC DOMAIN

The academic discourse of social cohesion can be divided into two broad categories, namely based on the theoretical traditions and causation patterns. There are three main traditional theoretical discourses of social cohesion. Different schools of thought conceptualize social cohesion based on their underlying ideologies, leading to distinct interpretations of social order and, consequently, varying constitutive elements of social cohesion (Bernard 1999; Green et al. 2006; Jenson 2002; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017). Broadly, Green et al. (2006) label these



theoretical traditions as liberal, republican, and social democratic, while Jenson (1998) refers to them as classical liberalism, social cohesion, and democracy theories.

In the liberal discourse, active civil society is emphasized more than the state. Market liberals argue that societal collective action is the accumulated sum of individual's actions and behaviours, which precede society's shared value and common identity. An active civil society with elevated level of civic association is more effective in maintaining social order. In contrast, the republican or social cohesion discourse emphasizes the state over civil society. They posit that society is an integrated system with a set of shared values that stress on solidarity and common identity. Through its institutions, the state has a duty to advance social cohesion by ensuring welfare, social protection, and equitable redistribution. The social democratic discourse is like the republican perspective but places more emphasis on equality and equity is more profound (Bernard 1999; Green et al. 2006; Jenson 1998; Schiefer & van der Noll 2017).

Contemporary work led by sociologist and political scientists on the interpretation of social order and social cohesion has been influenced by these three theoretical traditions. These traditions help to situate the work of social cohesion both theoretically and empirically. According to Jenson (1998), while certain theoretical perspectives view social cohesion as rooted in shared values and commitment to a community, others highlight on institutional processes and conflicting interest more than values. The choice of theoretical tradition underpins the decision of how one would advance the social cohesion agenda in their respective context and studies.

In addition to conceptualizing social cohesion based on the three main theoretical traditions, patterns of causation can also be used to analyse social cohesion, functioning either as a cause or a consequence of other aspects of political, economic, and social life. The condition of social cohesion can be regarded as a dependent variable, typically understood as the result of other factors; for example, diversity and economic polarization are often perceived as threats to social cohesion. On the other hand, social cohesion can be viewed as an independent variable that generates outcomes; for instance, it has been shown to contribute to positive economic results (Beauvais & Jenson 2002). Among these, the relationships between social cohesion, economic growth, and societal diversity have received scholarly attention, reflecting their importance in understanding how social cohesion supports broader societal and developmental outcomes.

There is a substantial body of studies on social cohesion and its relationship to economic growth. In addressing the significance of quality public institutions in devising and implementing pro-growth policies, Easterly et al. (2006) stress the centrality of social cohesion required in the developmental and policy reforms of a country. Constitutive elements of social cohesion, including income inequality and ethnic fractionalization, can undermine institutional quality, which subsequently hampers economic growth. Social cohesion generates confidence and trust in government to implement reforms to achieve sustainable growth and long-term gains. Relatedly, Ritzen (2000) also highlights that social cohesion is vital in managing the effectiveness of state's policy in response to the changes of global economy. McCracken (1998) also suggests that economic performance is positively correlated to social cohesion. Social cohesion, on the one hand, improves especially when economic gains are equitably shared and



social programmes are put in place to assist individuals in regaining their position in society; on the other hand, evidence also suggests that social cohesion positively impacts macroeconomic performance.

Cross-national immigration has increased societal diversity, particularly in developed countries (Cheong et al., 2007; Dukes & Musterd, 2011; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011; Putnam, 2007; van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Ethno-racial diversity is often perceived as a potential threat to social cohesion. Putnam (2007) finds that ethnically diverse environments in the United States are associated with lower social trust and weaker bonds within and between communities. While diversity may bring long-term cultural, economic, and developmental benefits, it tends to impede social capital in the short to medium term. Subsequent research, however, provides limited evidence that diversity erodes social cohesion (Evers, 2014; Gijsberts et al., 2011; Letki, 2008; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011; van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Ethnic heterogeneity may impinge on local cohesion while reducing interethnic contact and trust, yet these local effects do not spill over to broader prosocial behaviours, and socioeconomic deprivation, rather than diversity itself, remains the principal factor undermining cohesion (Letki, 2008; Sturgis et al., 2017). Despite these short-term challenges, diversity can become an asset in successful immigrant societies by fostering emergent solidarity and more encompassing identities, which in turn encourage creativity and innovation, support stronger economic growth, and sustain a younger workforce. To fully realise these benefits, governments must implement immigration policies and social programmes that facilitate the economic and social integration of new immigrants (Berger-Schmitt, 2000; Dukes & Musterd, 2012; Letki, 2008; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011).

SOCIAL COHESION: THE MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

Diversity is a feature of Malaysian society, both past and present. The long term historical and sociological development has no doubt played a significant role in framing the social structure of Malaysia, one of an ethnic heterogeneous society. While ethnic heterogeneity and division is a legacy left by the colonial capitalism, the dichotomy of *Bumiputera* (“son of the soil”) and non-*Bumiputera* or the newly evolved Muslim and non-Muslim–centric ideologies (Brown 2009; Hoffstaedter 2013), implementation of preferential policies or of policies of positive discrimination namely the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 to 1990 and subsequently replaced by the National Development Policy in 1991 (Ali 2015; Jomo 2004; Sriskandarajah 2005), and the vernacular school system (Saad 2012) have been perceived to have further reinforced the polarization of ethnic situations in Malaysia. Hence, maintaining a socially cohesive country remains a paramount task and an important political agenda of the government as it safeguards the continuous and multidimensional development in Malaysia. The discourse of social cohesion, spearheaded largely by the Malaysian government through top-down approaches, is embedded within the endeavour of nation building where racial harmony, social integration and national unity take the centre stage.

Despite nation building projects such as *Rukun Negara* (National Ideology), *Bangsa Malaysia* (United Malaysian Nation), and One Malaysia campaign, challenges persist in many



areas. Despite the challenges, Shamsul (2010) posits that Malaysia has reached a state of social cohesion, a pre-requisite for unity, though the much-desired national unity has not been attained since the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1971. Shamsul (2015) in his study of conceptualizing diversity in Malaysia states that social cohesion in Malaysia is achieved through negotiation with an accommodating spirit to yield consensus, compromise, and tolerance. Social cohesion is defined as a "situation where there is peace, stability, prosperity and well-being in a society" and is based on the following five pre-requisites: high level of materialism indicated by medium to high quality of living index, access to facilities that sustain quality of living and social mobility, stable and peaceful social structure, organic and positive interaction between multi-ethnic groups, and positive endeavours to promote involvement in mainstream activities (Shamsul 2015:8)

Social cohesion is believed to be crucial for Malaysia to continue to enjoy its positive economic and societal development, there is no specific measurement of social cohesion in Malaysia yet. However, a national unity index is currently available. The project to develop a national unity index is spearheaded by the Department of National Unity and Integration under the Prime Minister Department and the Institute of Ethnic Studies at the National University of Malaysia (UKM). According to the Ministry of National Unity, the National Unity Index (IPNas) is a comprehensive measurement tool at the national level, designed to explain community dynamics in Malaysia and serve as an indicator of the level of national unity in Malaysia. In addition, the Malaysian Quality of Life Index (MQLI) formulated the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) under the Prime Minister department is served indirectly as an indicator for the well-being of Malaysian society. The main objective of the MQLI it to assess the impacts of socioeconomic development policies and programmes in Malaysia.

Shamsul (2011) posits that although Malaysia has enjoyed peace and stability over the last few decades, the unity that has been attained is still "work in progress" and the need to monitor the progress is crucial. In addition to using statistical tools, he suggests that social research and development should be implemented to provide in-depth analysis to strengthen our understanding of Malaysia's social health, both short and long-term. This integrated approach helps to ensure that efforts to enhance social cohesion are rooted in a thorough understanding of the complex social fabric of Malaysia.

SOCIAL COHESION: DEFINITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

Despite its prevalence across research and policy literature, there is neither agreed definition nor an agreed set of dimensions for measurement of social cohesion (Berman & Phillips 2004; Chan et al. 2006; Green et al. 2009; Jensen 2010; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016; Fonseca et al. 2019; Aruqaj 2023), except the consensus that social cohesion is a desirable attribute of a society and the decline of this attribute (Jenson 1998; Schniefer & van der Noll 2017). Defining and measuring social cohesion is not a simple undertaking due to the contested notion of social cohesion at two levels (Berman & Phillip 2004). Firstly, the contestation of what constitute social cohesion as suggested by the different theoretical traditions and secondly, the criticism over social cohesion as a quasi-concept by Bernard (1999) as it is a complex and of a multi-



dimensional construct (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Chan et al. 2006; Green et al. 2009; Jenson 2010; Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & an der Noll 2017).

Across the literature, different schools of thought and institutions emphasize dimension of social cohesion according to their theoretical traditions, causal assumptions, and ideological orientations. Nevertheless, core dimensions of social cohesion remain relatively consistent. As summarised in Table 1 and Table 2, the key dimensions identified in the various conceptualizations and frameworks of social cohesion largely correspond to components of social capital, including the strength of social relations, shared values and common identity, sense of belonging to a community, as well as mutual respect and trust among members of a society; and institutional features such as redistributive mechanism to foster equalities and social inclusion, quality of life, civic and political participation, as well as conflict resolution.



Table 1. Conceptualizing of social cohesion from a western perspective: Summary of definitions and dimensions: Policy domain

AGENCY/AUTHOR	DEFINITION	DIMENSIONS / INDICATORS	
Maxwell (1996:13)	A process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.		
Government of Canada's Policy Research Sub-Committee on Social Cohesion (1997:3)	The ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians.	**Conditions favourable for inclusive social cohesion** • Economic conditions • Life chances • Quality of life	**Elements of socially cohesive activity** • Willing to cooperate • Participation
Jenson (1998:16)		• Belonging-Isolation • Inclusion-exclusion • Participative-non-involvement • Legitimacy-Illegitimacy • Recognition-Rejection	
The Council of Europe (2004:3)	The capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation	**Inequality dimension**	**Social capital dimension**



Berger-Schmitt (2000:4) for European System of Social Indicator Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion	Reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion • Belonging • Social justice and equity • Participation • Worth • Acceptance, rejection and legitimacy	Strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties

Table 2. Conceptualizing social cohesion from a western perspective: Summary of definitions and dimensions: Academic domain

AGENCY/AUTHOR	DEFINITION	DIMENSIONS / INDICATORS
Lockwood (1999:69)	"Strength or weakness of primary social relationship, of which those of kin, friends and neighbours"	Decline in civic community indicated by decreasing voluntary association membership, increased crime rate and family disorganization



Kearns & Forrest (2000:996)	A cohesive society 'hangs together'; all the component parts somehow fit in and contribute to society's collective project and well-being; and conflicts between societal goals and groups, and disruptive behaviours, are largely absent or minimal.	• Common values and a civic culture • Social order and social control • Social solidarity and wealth disparities • Social networks and social capital • Place attachment and identity

		Dimensions	**Subjective Component** (people's state of mind)	**Objective component** (behavioural manifestation)
Chan et al. (2006:290,294)	A state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.	Horizontal (cohesion within civil society)	• General trust with fellow citizens • Willing to cooperate and help • Sense of belonging or identity	• Social participation and vibrancy of civil society • Voluntarism and donation • Absence of inter-group cleavage
		Vertical (state-citizen cohesion)	• Trust in public figures • Confidence in political and social institution	• Political participation

Easterly et al.	**Direct measures**	**Indirect measures**



(2006:4-8) …continuation	The nature and extent of social economic divisions within society.	• Membership rates of participation and civic participation • Measures of trust	• Income distribution measures • Ethnic heterogeneity (ethnolinguistic fractionalization) measures
Green et al. (2009:19)	The property by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion.	**Administrative data** • Inequality • Wage regulation • Employment protection • State involvement • Welfare state • Ethno-racial diversity • Crime / disorder	**Surve** to be continued… • Value diversity • Active civic participation • Passive participation in nationwide organization • Freedom vs. equality • Merit vs equality • Ethnocultural vs civic identities • Ethnic tolerance • Social hierarchy • Gender equality
Schiefer & van der Noll (2016:586)	"A descriptive attribute of a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness." (Schiefer, 2016:592)	**Ideational** **Relational** • Social relations • Attachment/belonging • Orientation towards the common goods • Shared values	**Distributive** • Inequality • Objective and subjective of quality of life



An extensive review of the literature on social cohesion reveals a discernible lack of consensus on its definition and measurement, except that it is widely regarded as a valued quality of a society or community and a concept encompassing multiple constructs and dimensions (Schiefer & van der Noll 2016; Friedkin 2004; Jenson 2002). Consequently, scholars, research organizations and policy institutions have endeavoured to elucidate the concept, making considerable progress in identifying its definition, dimensions, and possible indicators, often with the objective of developing conceptual frameworks suitable for empirical analysis and policy application.

*Theoretical Perspectives and Ambiguity***.** Despite these advances, the concept of social cohesion remains theoretically ambiguous. This ambiguity arises because different frameworks emphasize distinct constructs and dimensions, influencing what is examined, how it is measured, and how findings are interpreted, hence leading to different policy recommendations. Furthermore, social cohesion is often linked or overlapped with conceptually similar constructs such as social integration, social capital, social exclusion, and quality of life, reflecting its conceptual interconnections and further contributing to this theoretical complexity.

From an epistemological standpoint, discourses in social cohesion, both historically and in contemporary contexts, frequently emerge in response to social transformations perceived as threats to social fabric, traditional morality and social order. These transformations are often engendered by phenomena such as globalization, immigration, industrialization, and capitalism. Within this paradigm, studies tend to examine the causal relationships between social, economic, political, and technological changes and the condition of social cohesion. Consequently, social cohesion is frequently treated as an outcome of broader societal processes such as diversity and economic restructuring due to globalized market and technological advancement. In studies that analyse social cohesion as an outcome, social solidarity and shared values are often regarded as the core elements through which social cohesion is both expressed and maintained. These dimensions help explain how social change influences the strength and quality of social ties and how cohesion manifests in different social contexts. Conversely, social cohesion can also be conceptualized as a precursor contributing to positive economic performance and societal well-being. Studies that adopt this perspective are primarily concerned with the adverse impacts that a lack of social cohesion might have on socio-economic conditions and seek to identify strategies to address these issues.

The Predominance of Macro-Level Approaches to Social Cohesion. The abundance of social cohesion studies in the Western context has generated a wide ranging of valuable conceptualizations and measurement approaches. However, these studies predominantly focus on macro level, systemic analyses, encompassing social, economic, and political dimensions and often adopting a quantitative approach in its measurement. For example, within the European Union, the dimensions and indicators of social cohesion are part of a larger research framework of the European System of Social Indicators (EUSI), with studies conducted for the



entire European Union community. Analyses and comparisons of various indicators between countries were made not only on social cohesion but also quality of life and sustainability (Berger-Schmitt 2000). Similarly, the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, a longitudinal national survey conducted annually in Australia since 2007, provides data to assess the country's immigration programme and its social impact on cultural diversity and social cohesion (Markus 2014). In Malaysia, the formulation of the Malaysian Quality of Life Index and the National Unity Index aims to make statistical data available at the national level to evaluate and monitor societal well-being.

While these macro-level approaches have yielded important insights, they have inevitably overlooked the practices and interactions through which cohesion is produced and experienced in everyday life. This highlights the need to consider analytical levels beyond the macro scale, particularly those that capture the lived experience of individuals and communities.

Social Cohesion: Research Gap in Malaysia. Studies of social cohesion in Malaysia reflect both the outcome-oriented and precursor-oriented approaches. On one hand, social cohesion is interpreted as an outcome of ethnic diversity, revealing how a multi-ethnic society maintains harmonious ethnic relations. On the other hand, it is simultaneously framed as a precursor to national unity, representing a crucial foundation for nation building (Shamsul 2015; Ong et al. 2016). This dual framing illustrates that social cohesion is simultaneously a product of Malaysia's ethnically heterogeneous reality and a prerequisite for national progress. Consequently, fostering social cohesion among diverse communities is regarded as essential for building a stable and prosperous nation. Scholars and policymakers view a socially cohesive society as vital for Malaysia's progress and harmony, hence, efforts to strengthen national integration, bridge social divides, and promote a collective national identity have become increasingly pivotal.

A review of Malaysian studies on social cohesion indicates that existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level dimensions and formal institutional frameworks. Beyond the National Unity Index and Malaysia Quality of Life Index, numerous studies examine policies and roles of education in promoting inclusion, integration, and social cohesion (Jamil & Santhiram 2012; Kaur et al. 2017; Ong et al. 2014); analyse challenges in maintaining social cohesion from a Malaysian legal perspective (Musa & Jalil 2015); explore the impacts of business networking on social cohesion (Hassan et al. 2018); and evaluate the progress of governmental programme, such as the Neighbourhood Watch initiative under *Rukun Tetangga* (Abdullah et al. 2017). To a lesser extent, meso-level studies have examined social cohesion within community settings, including investigations of its correlation with neighbourhood crime rates (Marzbali et al., 2014) and analyses of its relationship with public spaces, social integration, and community cohesion (Bajunid et al. 2018; Tang & Khan 2012; Uiang et al. 2015). While these studies attempt to elucidate the complex issue of social cohesion in different Malaysian societal settings and contribute valuable insights to devise public programmes, shared public spaces and housing communities which are conducive for social interaction, integration and cohesion, they largely remain macro-centred or institution-focused, leaving micro- and meso-level everyday practices relatively underexplored. In particular, the



potential of everyday food spaces, such as Mamak restaurants, to illuminate the lived modalities of social cohesion remains largely unexamined.

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

Analysing social cohesion through the lens of food is an under-researched subject area. Despite Malaysia prides itself as a food paradise, linking food and social cohesion in research is relatively new and unexplored except the Malaysian *Mamakization* project initiated by Olmedo and Shamsul (2016). *Mamak* stalls are posited as "great good place" characterized by their inclusivity and locality, hence a potential space, at the everyday-defined level, for social cohesion (Olmedo & Shamsul 2016). Similarly, Duruz and Khoo (2014) also see *Mamak* restaurants as potential sites for public sphere in Habermas' term and Oldenburg's great good place. *Mamak* restaurants offer *halal* cuisine and can be found easily on the streets of Malaysian urban cities, undoubtedly can be deemed as a cosmopolitan space where diverse cultures or groups can come together and mingle.

Mamak restaurants may, at first glance, appear to be ordinary places for satisfying ones' physiological and social needs. However, upon closer examination, they function as microcosms of Malaysian urban plurality and as spaces embedded with dynamic processes of socio-cultural diversity and politics. They offer a lens through which to apprehend the country's complex social fabric, as their omnipresence provides insight into how various sociological forces converge in an everyday setting where food, ethnic politics and identity intersect. As everyday shared spaces, Ma*mak* restaurants bring together individuals from diverse social classes and ethnic backgrounds, creating opportunities for interaction across societal divides. Moreover, the act of consuming food of the 'Other" represents a powerful symbol in the contestation of individual and collective identity, frequently reflecting the porosity of ethnic boundaries. Consequently, *Mamak* restaurants, emerge as possible sites for the everyday negotiations of identity, where boundaries of ethnicity may shift and be re-constructed. The adaptation, struggles, and persistence witnessed in *Mamak* restaurants mirror a broader trajectory of social transformation within Malaysian society.

The *Mamakization* project, conducted by Olmedo and Shamsul (2016), analyses social cohesion through the social practice of eating out in Malaysia's iconic *Mamak* stalls, focusing on an economic dimension using the alternative food network, and a sociological dimension based on the in-alienated social transaction. According to their empirical findings, they conclude that three social functions generated by the role of *Mamak* restaurants can serve as a prerequisite for social cohesion. The three social functions comprise social solidarity, economic sustenance and identity maintenance. Extending from the *Mamakization* project, this study seeks to advance the analysis of social cohesion by examining three interrelated analytical axes, spatial distribution, cuisine transformation, and spatial practices, that together shed light on how social cohesion is spatially produced and experienced. These axes are analytically mapped onto the broader dimensions of social cohesion, particularly those related to distributive aspect



and social capital, as these are especially relevant to understanding social cohesion from an everyday perspective.

First, instead of using statistical or aggregated data to reflect measure social, political and economic disparities and inequalities, the (in)equality or distributive dimension in this study is conceptualize through the lens of spatial distribution and characteristics of *Mamak* restaurants as a spatial representation of social access and inclusion. In doing so, it highlights the significance of the accessibility and inclusivity of food spaces that may function as everyday arenas for building or reflecting social cohesion. As the empirical field of this study, the distribution and characteristics of *Mamak* restaurants will be inventoried and categorised into various ideal types to reveal their spatial pattern and temporal changes over time. The categorization will be based on the business model including features such as size, location, menu selection, décor, and ambience, as well as other operational related features.

Second, the social capital dimension is analysed through its ideational and relational aspects. The ideational aspect is closely tied to sense of identification and belonging that individuals feel with the broader national community. The analysis examines on the possible transformation of an ethnic minority cuisine from being perceived as "Others" to becoming part of "Ours." Such a shift denotes a transitional process in which ethnic boundaries are blurred, contributing to the construction of national belonging through the emergence of a shared Malaysian food identity. Specifically, the de-ethnicization of *Mamak* cuisine offers a lens to explore how a food culture rooted in a strong Indian Muslim identity can evolve to reflect a collective Malaysian identity. This process highlights how food can serve as a medium for fostering collective belonging, while also illustrating the porosity of ethnic boundaries within Malaysia's multi-ethnic context.

The relational aspect, on the other hand, focuses on the social connections and ties among members of society through their interactions within the food space. Analysing spatial practices reveals how individuals engage in the everyday negotiation of social life through what they do, where they do it, what they consume, and with whom they interact, as well as how they cultivate a sense of belonging and attachment to place. To understand how social cohesion is produced and negotiated in Mamak restaurants. and how Malaysians experience and inhabit these spaces, the third research objective of this study draws on spatial theories, particularly Henri Lefebvre's theory of the *production of space* and Michel de Certeau's concept of space as a *practiced place*. Lefebvre (1991) conceives space not an inert nor a passive backdrop, but as a social product constituted through complex social actions. His spatial triad, comprising perceived, conceived and lived dimensions, offer a dialectical understanding of how space is simultaneously material, abstract and experiential. In Lefebvre's framework, space is actively produced and reproduced through the interplay between institutional design, spatial practices and imagination. While Lefebvre elucidates the macro processes of spatial production, de Certeau (1985) focuses on the micro-level of everyday life, and highlighting how individuals and communities negotiate, appropriate, and reinterpret the spaces structured by dominant systems. Through everyday practices such as walking or eating, he argues, people tactically assign alternative meanings to the spaces they lived.



Combining the perspectives of Lefebvre and de Certeau helps to provides a more holistic understanding of how food spaces operate as both products and producers of social relations. In the context of this study, *Mamak* restaurants can be read through Lefebvre's framework as socio-spatial formations shaped by historical, economic, and cultural processes in Malaysia's multi-ethnic landscape, while de Certeau's insights illuminate how everyday practices of eating, interaction, and sociability within these restaurants continually reconfigure and re-signify them. This synthesis enables an examination of social cohesion not as a fixed spatial or cultural condition, but as an ongoing, negotiated process enacted through the everyday practices of ordinary people. *Mamak* restaurants are thus not only perceived as inclusive food space but also function as social arenas through which social relations between space and people can be analysed. This includes how different communities enact shared identity or maintain ethnic boundaries, strengthen social ties or remain fragmented, and cultivate a sense of belonging and trust with other members of society or otherwise. This perspective also highlights how social relations are simultaneously produced by the space through practices such as commensality and, in turn, shape the space itself. Examining these practices clarifies the interplay between spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation in producing a representational space that embodies Malaysian-ness.

In summary, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study and Table 3 illustrates how the analytical axes are mapped onto the conceptual dimensions of social cohesion to understand *Mamak* restaurants as everyday spaces of social cohesion.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysing social cohesion in *Mamak* restaurants.

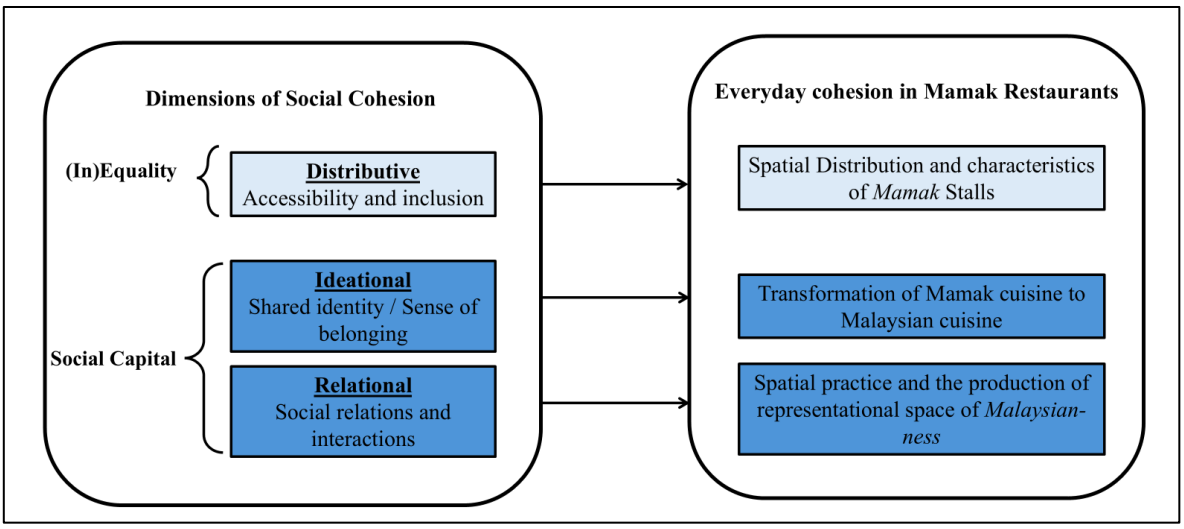




Table 3. Mapping of dimension of social cohesion and analytical axes for this study

Dimension of Social Cohesion	Mapping of Analytical Axis	Conceptualization and Focus
(In)equality Dimension) – Distributive (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Spatial Distribution and Characteristics of *Mamak* Restaurants	This dimension is conceptualized through the lens of spatial distribution and characteristics of *Mamak* restaurants as a spatial representation of social access and inclusion. The study inventories and categorizes *Mamak* restaurants based on features like size, location, menu selection, décor, and operational features to reveal their spatial pattern and temporal changes over time. This approach highlights the significance of the accessibility and inclusivity of these food spaces.
Social Capital - Ideational Dimension (Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Transformation of *Mamak* Cuisine	This aspect is closely tied to the sense of identification and belonging that individuals feel with the broader national community. Analysis focuses on the de-ethnicization of *Mamak* cuisine, the transitional process where an ethnic minority cuisine shifts from being perceived as "Others" to becoming part of "Ours". This shift contributes to the construction of national belonging through the emergence of a shared Malaysian food identity, illustrating the porosity of ethnic boundaries.
Social Capital - Relational Dimension (Moody & White 2003; Schiefer & van der Noll 2016)	Spatial Practices of *Mamak* Restaurants	This dimension focuses on the social connections and ties among members of society through their interactions within the food space. The relational aspect focuses on the dynamic micro-level interactions within the spaces. By using spatial theories (Lefebvre and de Certeau), the framework views *Mamak* restaurants not as static backdrops but as "practiced places" where social relations like trust, fragmentation, or shared identity, are actively negotiated through eating and socializing. This perspective clarifies how social relations are simultaneously produced by the space and, in turn, shape the space itself.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATION

This study presents significance in the aspects of theoretical, methodological, and practical. Each of these aspects contributes to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in the study of social cohesion within multi-ethnic societies through everyday practices.

From a theoretical perspective, while social cohesion has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, the proliferation of varied definitions has resulted in inconsistencies in its conceptualization and measurement. This study seeks to address the gap in existing literature concerning the absence of conceptual framework and empirical evidence for analysing of social cohesion through the lens of everyday food space. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by analysing social cohesion through three interconnected dimensions: the spatial distribution of Mamak restaurants, the transformation of the cuisine, and the spatial



practices they embody. Focusing on these, this study aims to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how social cohesion is produced, negotiated and experienced in the everyday food space.

From a methodological standpoint, while existing scholarship on social cohesion often emphasizes policy-driven and macro-level data, this study focuses on meso- and micro-level insights derived from everyday practices within an ethnic food space. It adopts a qualitative approach, including ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, to examine the spatial distribution and practices of Mamak restaurants. This methodological choice enables the researcher to capture the richness and complexity of everyday practices and routine interactions occurred in the *Mamak* restaurants, facilitating an empirically grounded understanding of social cohesion at both the community and individual levels. In doing so, it offers insights on how to bridge the gap between macro-level aggregated indices and the lived realities observed at the meso- and micro-levels.

From a practical perspective, the availability of accessible and inclusive spaces is crucial for nurturing social cohesion in Malaysia. This study seeks to shed light on the significance of accessible and inclusive food spaces in fostering social cohesion. Malaysian neighbourhoods have historically been ethnically configured, tracing back to the colonial times when British administration segregated the ethnic communities into different locality based on their economic roles that were intrinsically linked to their ethnic background. Although urbanization and modernization have gradually led to a more ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, particularly in urban areas, the legacy of ethnic configuration remains evident and continues to be a significant aspect of Malaysian social landscape. Hence, the creation and maintenance of accessible and inclusive spaces that facilitate participation and interaction among different ethnic groups is crucial in strengthening community ties and fostering social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

Pursuing a socially cohesive society within multi-ethnic Malaysia is a complex endeavour; equally challenging is the task of analysing and measuring social cohesion. Nevertheless, it is imperative for institutional actors including those in government, academia, and civil society to remain attuned to the evolving dynamics of nation building. Social cohesion is regarded as prerequisite for national unity and is closely linked to a nation's development and prosperity. Although the narratives and efforts to manage ethnic relations and pursue national unity remain as important tasks at the authority-defined level, much of the contestation and negotiation of difference occur at the local level, through everyday experiences and spatial practices, thus justifying the focus of this study. While this study may not be able to measure all indicators of social cohesion, it has identified and encapsulated key dimensions relevant to understanding the concept in the Malaysian everyday context. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a conceptual framework for analysing social cohesion in a multi-ethnic society, through the lens of everyday food spaces. This framework not only highlights the significance of everyday



spaces in shaping social relations but also offers a grounded approach to examining social cohesion beyond the authority-defined narratives.

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Sinophone Malaysian Articulations And Intergenerational Dynamics In A Malaysian Chinese Film: The Kid From The Big Apple (2016)

(Artikulasi Sinofon Malaysia dan Dinamik Antara Generasi dalam Filem Cina Malaysia: The Kid From The Big Apple (2016)

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ABSTRACT

Transnational migration, a factor of modern cultural and social transformations, has induced profound changes in Chinese people individually as well as their family units. The migration process has inevitably brought about displacement of cultural identity which has profound influence on family life and structure. The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) is a Malaysian Chinese film that captures all the essence of the diasporic experience of a Malaysian Chinese family across generations, that also incorporates a transnational angle. Using concepts from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper aims to explore the ways the said film – The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) – visually represents the articulation of Sinophone Malaysian identity whilst also investigate the particular experience of being Chinese in Malaysia from the perspectives of an older and younger generation. Further, this paper also demonstrates the fluidity and malleability of Chinese cultural practices as practices that can be learnt or unlearnt through meaningful dialogue as well as openness to cultural negotiation. It concludes that the film provides a significant space to reflect on emerging patterns of intergenerational interactions in multigenerational Malaysian Chinese households in the 21st century.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese films, Sinophone Malaysian, identity, intergenerational, transnational

https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-04
Article History: Received: 18 March 2026 | Accepted: 26 May 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



ABSTRAK

Migrasi transnasional, sebagai salah satu faktor transformasi budaya dan sosial moden, telah membawa perubahan yang mendalam kepada masyarakat Cina secara individu serta kepada unit keluarga mereka. Proses migrasi ini secara tidak langsung telah menyebabkan pergeseran identiti budaya yang memberikan kesan besar terhadap kehidupan dan struktur keluarga. Filem The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) adalah suatu filem Cina Malaysia yang merangkumkan inti pati pengalaman diaspora sebuah keluarga Cina Malaysia merentasi generasi, yang turut mengandungi dimensi transnasional. Dengan menggunakan konsep daripada kajian Sinofon serta teori identiti budaya oleh Stuart Hall, kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka cara filem tersebut – The Kid from the Big Apple (2016) – menggambarkan secara visual artikulasi identiti Sinofon Malaysia, di samping meneliti pengalaman khusus menjadi orang Cina di Malaysia daripada perspektif generasi tua dan generasi muda. Selain itu, kajian ini juga menunjukkan sifat fleksibel dan boleh berubah bagi amalan budaya Cina, iaitu sebagai amalan yang boleh dipelajari atau ditinggalkan melalui dialog yang bermakna serta keterbukaan terhadap rundingan budaya. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa filem tersebut menyediakan ruang yang signifikan untuk merefleksikan corak baharu interaksi antara generasi dalam isi rumah Cina Malaysia yang berbilang generasi pada abad ke-21.

Kata kunci: Filem Cina Malaysia, Sinofon Malaysia, identiti, antara generasi, transnasional.

INTRODUCTION

As human mobility increases and become more diverse, increasing number of families are separated by borders and subsequently find themselves at the intersections of national and ethnic influences (Castle et al., 2013). Migration is a constitutive force in global change as migrants create diasporic public spheres that complicate theories that rely on the continued salience of the nation state as key arbiter of socio-cultural changes. When discussing migration, it is the young or new generation that become the agents of socio-cultural challenge and change, not the elderly. The new generation experiences and pushes boundaries, thereby producing change.

To Appadurai, modern day migration simultaneously produces cultural homogenization as well as cultural heterogenization (Appadurai, 1990). The resultant modern subjectivities are produced at the conjuncture of transported ideas, values, life styles, as well as everyday lives from their homeland and those of the communities they migrate to. Furthermore, Appadurai (1998) claims that electronic media, especially television, has been influential in terms of modifying cultural spaces and the cultural world. Everyday discourses are transformed through electronic media's ability to transform the sense of distance between viewer and event.



Like Appadurai, Stuart Hall's (1989) two pronged concepts of cultural identity explains that cultural identities are simultaneously stable and fluid . It is stable as cultural identity is formed through the routes of one's history, and fluid as cultural identity is constantly undergoing transformation through the encounter with difference. As such, Hall's definition of diaspora identities are oft-changing, transforming, absorbing and renewing. Though Hall's case study centers on the Caribbean and British Black diaspora phenomenon in the 1980s, such postcolonial experiences are shared too by the Chinese diaspora globally.

By extension, Hall's thoughts on cultural identities as targets of postcolonial subjects are appropriate in the case of Malaysian Chinese culture. As Malaysia enters into the third decade of the twenty first century, the current generation of Malaysian Chinese is in a perpetual status of looking for a cultural and national identity that can be called Malaysian Chinese or a Sinophone Malaysian identity. As such, it is not peculiar then that this particular awareness of being Malaysian Chinese has been more explicitly represented in films in the most recent decade.

"Culture is produced with each generation; we reproduce our own identities in the future rather than simply inherit them from the past. Of course, we make them in the future, out of the past" (Paul, 2005). While the pre-migration past of Chineseness can be a source of reference, current diasporic Malaysian Chinese positionality invariably must be in conversation with the present and future. As such, using Hall's lens on the diversity of diaspora – in this case the Malaysian Chinese diaspora – in this paper, the analysis will reflect on the complex interplay between the heritage of the culture of the older generation Malaysian Chinese and the experiences of adaptation of the younger, also transnational, generation in order to demonstrate how Malaysian Chinese culture is in a perpetual status of formation from one generation to another. To do so, this paper aims to explore the ways a selected Malaysian Chinese family film – *The Kid from the Big Apple* (2016) (henceforth *TKFBA*) – visually represents the manifestations of Malaysian Chinese identity or, also known as, Sinophone Malaysian identity in the early 21st century.

FAMILY, INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS AND FILM AS A MEDIUM FOR MEANING MAKING AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

As the basic social unit of society, family is a microcosm of culture and operates as a space through which social structures and values, practices and beliefs are maintained or negotiated over time. It is through the family that resources and capital are exchanged between generations, and the space where values and norms are transmitted or negotiated intergenerationally.

For social and cultural transmission of values, it is important to take into account emotional and relational aspects. That is to say, socialisation is not merely a set of rational transactions, but is enmeshed with less tangible influences such as emotions, identities,



expectations and values that structure and underpin intergenerational relationships and dynamics (James, 2013). Therefore, in order to make meaning of socio-cultural continuity or change over time, it is necessary to pay attention to the narratives about everyday family life to demonstrate the ways the characters relate to each other, showing how they feel and the ways they make sense of the possibilities of their given social contexts.

As Gledhill states, "Home is where the heart is" (1987). It goes without saying that the family space is closely related to emotional ties, which transcends one's place of residence. Being the most significant social unit, the fictional families in films provides the window to study the intersections of ethnicity, culture and identity. In this regard, Malaysian Chinese films that showcase the family experience across generations will be a most suitable medium to investigate and make meaning of intergenerational negotiations and tensions, which would allow for the reflection of the wider processes of social changes playing out within families and society at large.

The choice of investigating Malaysian Chinese family in films mainly has to do with the fact that Malaysian Chinese family life has been increasingly represented in Malaysian films in the past ten years (IMDb, 2020). As alluded above, the rapid increase in people's transnational mobility has had significant impact on family life and this phenomenon is also true of diasporic Chinese families, Malaysian Chinese families included. Transnational migration has induced profound changes in Chinese people individually as well as their family units, in the sense that the migration process has inevitably brought about displacement of cultural identity which has profound influence on family life and structure. It is not unusual to find grandparents and grandchildren located in different countries across different time zones.

Kinship is an issue of universal relevance and families in many different countries share common elements. Notwithstanding this, family structures, values and beliefs concerning marriage and family life are always culturally specific (Netting, Wilk and Arnould, 1984). When the family unit and its members experience transnational migration, these intergenerational negotiations come into sharp focus. In the context of transnational migration, families in general are transformed in more complex and unpredictable ways (Hjorth, Ohashi, Sinanan, et. al., 2020). It is in this regard that films involving transnational Malaysian Chinese families have come to play an important role in depicting cultural tensions, ambivalence, negotiations and cohesion that take place intergenerationally within the Malaysian Chinese family context. By utilizing the cinematic form of family films, the complexity within the family domain, where diverse forms of conflict exist between generations, gender roles, cultures and nations, is brought into focus.

CONFUCIAN INFLUENCE ON CHINESE FAMILIES

In contrast with Euro-American societies, Chinese familial and intergenerational relationships used to be structured in accordance with Confucian ideals. Confucian tradition



supported gender and generational hierarchy as the principal category that defined the structure of a patriarchal family and the ways it functioned. Family hierarchy denotes the respect and devotion of the child to the elders. Differential family status and roles of men and women are regarded as essential within families so as to maintain family harmony. The traditional Chinese family exhibit a strong hierarchical order whereby children were raised to practice filial piety towards their parents, family roles were gendered and embedded in a male kinship network. Essentially, the ideal traditional family was "patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal" (Johnson, 1985). Confucian ideal valorises the primacy of family interests as a collective unit over the interests of individual family members, and thus is positioned as antithetical to individualism. These virtues and morals have greatly influenced Chinese populations and its diaspora, including the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, for generations and generations.

Descending from common ancestral and Confucian origins, Malaysian Chinese families continue to place significant emphasis on the role of family obligations although economic, social and cultural changes modify the expectations and attitudes through which such obligation operates. By analysing the dimensions of power in the intergenerational dynamics as depicted in the selected film, this paper will trace any transformation in the power relations between the grandparent, adult-child and grandchild in the intergenerational collaboration in this new millennium.

MALAYSIAN CHINESE DIASPORIC FAMILIES AS REPRESENTED IN FILMS

Malaysia is home to Southeast Asia's largest ethnic Chinese population standing at approximately 6.86 million people as at January 2023 (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal). Correspondingly, throughout Southeast Asia, Malaysia produces the highest number of Chinese language feature films each year. According to records in FINAS, in 2019, the country produced about 20 Chinese language films (FINAS, n.d.). Unsurprisingly, Malaysian Chinese films usually revolve around the stories of the local Chinese community whereby family, comedy, romance and horror are among the popular genres.

As traced from Imdb.com website, since 2000, more than 100 titles of Malaysian Chinese films have been produced and released in the domestic and international market, making Malaysia one of the countries in Southeast Asia that produces one of the most Chinese language films each year (IMDb, 2020). With a sizeable repertoire of Malaysian Chinese films, it is timely to study one of these films as spaces to reflect on Sinophone Malaysian articulations in an intergenerational household, and analyse the transformation the main characters undergo as the older and younger characters navigate cultural and communication barriers as well as generational differences between them.

In an overview of Malaysian films from the post-independence period onwards, one will find that Malaysian Chinese representations rarely appear as a family. It was not until the new millennium that a large number of films have been produced by ethnic Chinese filmmakers to expand the visibility of Malaysian Chinese community and to capture the Malaysian Chinese family on the silver screen. This generation of filmmakers and artists combined both the



cultural reference points from transnational influences and the local elements borne out of battling with elements of a multiracial, multicultural society in Malaysia into new forms of cinematic representation.

Different types of discourse shape the Chinese familial experience, and more complicated variants could influence the Chinese family especially one that encompasses a multicultural, multi-ethnic as well as a diasporic and transnational context. *TKFBA* is one such film that captures all the essence of the diasporic experience of a Malaysian Chinese family across generations, that also incorporates a transnational angle. Migration and digital communication facilitate mother and daughter, Sophia and Sarah, who return to Malaysia to rekindle familial relationship with their Malaysian father and grandfather respectively. Using concepts from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper aims to explore the ways the selected film, *TKFBA*, visually represents the articulation of Sinophone Malaysian identity whilst also investigate the particular experience of being Chinese in Malaysia.

CHINESE DIASPORA IDENTITY AND THE SINOPHONE

As Shih clearly states, "Sinophone culture is therefore transnational in constitution and formation but local in practice and articulation" (2002, p. 7). Based on this line of reasoning, through a close reading of the characters and narrative of the selected film, *TKFBA,* this paper seeks to explore the evolving articulations of Sinophone Malaysia identity from an older generation to a younger transnational generation.

In order to tease out evolving articulations of Sinophone Malaysia identity, this paper aims to demonstrate how a younger generation's lack of access to ethnic roots and identity being a subsequent generation Sinophone subject raised in America to Malaysian Chinese parentage could through interactions with her Malaysian grandfather come to acquire and embrace a hybridised identity that comes to constitutes a Sinophone Malaysian identity. The transformation from a lack of appreciation to the acknowledgement of one's ethnic roots and the acceptance of one's Malaysian Chinese identity suggests that identity, in accordance with Hall's theory, is always evolving, always becoming.

Further, this paper aims to reveal spaces where the film reflect on significant moments of intergenerational interactions wherein constitute moments of cultural contact and exchange which result in the negotiation and transmission of culture which contributes to the process of formation of a Sinophone Malaysian identity. By evaluating Chinese culture and practices using the concepts drawn from Sinophone studies and Hall's theory on cultural identity, this paper will analyse and expound on the selected film on the basis of a specific time period and place – that is in the early 21st century in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur – as well as taking into account generational axis.

SINOPHONE ARTICULATIONS AND PATTERNS OF INTERGENERATIONALITY IN *THE KID FROM THE BIG APPLE* (2016)



TKFBA centres around the intergenerational dynamics between grandfather Lin and his granddaughter Sarah. Eleven year old Sarah, who is raised in New York City by her single mother, had to come to Malaysia to stay with her grandfather, whom she has never met, while her mother had to attend to work commitments in China.

The opening of the film depicts Sarah as an urban adolescent hailing from sophisticated metropolitan New York City – as the film's titular name suggests – while grandfather Lin plays the role of a conservative and traditional elderly Chinese man living in a predominantly Chinese suburb in Kuala Lumpur. Sarah is introduced with long curly hair, donning a cap adorned with sparkly beads spelling the letters 'NYC' presumably the acronyms for New York City, dressed in stylish leather jacket and trendy boots to match despite the tropical weather in KL. Brightly coloured and decorated with stickers, badges and key chains, Sarah's baggage can be likened to that of her character – her outlook and demeanour exudes a personality that is unrestrained and individualistic representative of a liberal Western culture.

Grandfather Lin, on the other hand, is introduced in his apartment from where he operates an oriental chiropractic clinic – it can be read as representing Chineseness and the practice of traditional Chinese medicine and culture. With a Chinese song blaring from the radio boxset, the camera closes into the house of which the mise-en-scene exudes an air of antiquity of one being brought back into the time frame of the early 1980s. A Chinese prayer alter, jars of traditional Chinese medicine lining the wall cabinet, Chinese characters and decorations in his house go to depict the image of a man steeped in a traditional Chinese way of life. Through the visual imageries of the vintage television and radio boxset indicative of appliances from the 1980s era, Grandfather Lin and his home represents the traditional character he upholds and the conservative backdrop of the space he inhabits. Symbolically, the vintage furniture represents conservatism as compared to contemporary flat screen television and modern stereo systems of the 21st century.

The audio and visual imageries surrounding Grandfather Lin in the opening scene becomes the way in which both Grandfather Lin first engages with Sarah and a place where generational and cultural clashes are at its most conflicting points. As such, the film not only represents a space to explore the theme of generational conflicts where traditional values clash with modern concepts of individualism and freedom of expression, but it is also a space that juxtaposes traditional Chineseness against metropolitan transnational American youth identity.

Although essentially the film foregrounds the theme of Chinese culture and the Chinese family, far from a monolithic essentialised notion of Chineseness, the film's opening clearly portrays cultural distinctiveness between grandfather and granddaughter. At the beginning of the film, the grandfather-granddaughter relationship is one fraught with intergenerational friction and cultural tensions, due largely to the different subjectivities as a result of the disparate social-cultural and geo-temporal circumstances in which the characters are embedded.



The discussion in this paper seeks to unpack the subjective experiences of being Chinese in different spatial, temporal and generational contexts and in furtherance to this, to examine transformation the main characters undergo as they navigate cultural and communication barriers as well as generational differences. Additionally, this paper also problematise Chineseness as an essentialised and fixed identity category, and in place, proposing instead that Malaysian Chinese identity be approached as an open, fluid assemblage of multiple Sinophone articulations that varies from one generation to another. Multiple scenes in the film reveal that whilst there are certain articulations that are stereotypical of Chinese culture and ways of being Chinese, Malaysian Chinese identity or Sinophone Malaysian identity, is a fluid identity category that is constantly in the process of becoming. As Shih states, "the Sinophone – as lived cultures as well as living languages and peoples – is spatially and temporally specific to different generations and in different locations" (2002, p. 43).

In the movie, Sophia was raised by grandfather Lin as a single parent. Flashback scenes reveal the strained relationship between Grandfather Lin and Sophia when she was a young woman before she fled to America. In a particular flashback to a scene in Sophia's bedroom in 2004, grandfather discovered that Sophia was planning to elope to New York to live with her then boyfriend, Hao Nan, on the pretext of studying in America.

In that scene, Grandfather Lin was opposed to Sophia going abroad to further her studies. As grandfather belongs to the older generation of Malaysian Chinese strictly guided by traditional Chinese culture, the rigidity in his ways of thinking can be adduced in the rambling monologue :

Grandfather Lin: You want to study, can't you study here?
Why must you go to the United States?
You're Chinese, why must you study abroad in English?
The Chinese culture is deep and profound, the learning is never ending.

In the scene, Lin disapproved of Sophia's choice of life partner in Hao Nan. Steeped in the notions of Chinese masculinity, he commented contemptuously on Hao Nan's inappropriately long hairstyle as androgynous, neither resembling a man or a woman. In the heated argument, Lin reprimanded Sophia that she should never return to the family home should she decide to leave.

Sophia, then unmarried and pregnant, went against her father's wishes and eloped to New York to live with Hao Nan, who pursues a career as an artist. In New York, things did not work out as planned between Sarah's father, Hao Nan, and Sophia. Hao Nan eventually abandoned Sophia when Sarah was a new born, leaving Sophia to raise Sarah single-handedly.

The film started off showing Sarah and Sophia's return to Kuala Lumpur in a symbolic homecoming for both mother and daughter that re-embed them in crisscrossing transnational and intergenerational social networks. Sarah meets with her grandfather for the first time in her teenage life and had to stay with him for the duration her mother's business trip to China.



Thereon begins the intergenerational association between Grandfather Lin, Sophia and Sarah. During this time, Sarah is introduced to the multi-ethnic community in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur as well as socialises with the neighbourhood kids while maintaining relationship with her mother digitally through text messages and voice calls.

DIALECTICS OF TRANSNATIONAL INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Consumption plays a key role in shoring up identity narratives, allowing individuals to display and perform identities with material objects. The consumption pattern at which Sarah was introduced provides visual, auditory and other sensory means through which Sarah understands and participate in American youth culture, and indirectly reinforces her separateness from Malaysian Chinese culture. In her interactions with her mother, Sarah speaks her mind freely, voicing her dissatisfaction and dissent at having to leave New York City, and having to relocate to Kuala Lumpur to stay with her grandfather.

The distance in terms of cultural and generational values between grandfather and granddaughter find expression in the different styles of consumption whether in terms of clothing or food consumption and in terms of common language of communication. Being raised as a Chinese in America, Sarah is a manifestation of several personas in one. Initially, she struggles with integrating herself in the Malaysian Chinese culture and finding herself caught in the contradictions between cultures and between her identities. Sarah's struggle is expressed by her indifferent and rude attitude towards her grandfather. Moreover, Sarah's refusal to communicate with her grandfather is indicated by the fact that she feigns inability to understand and speak Mandarin – the language intelligible to grandfather. The transformation of Sarah's identity into being more receptive of Chinese culture can be seen in later scenes whereby it was revealed that Sarah is able to communicate in Mandarin.

In the very first encounter with Grandfather, after greeting her own father, Sophia requested that Sophia greets grandfather by calling him 'Grandpa'. As Chinese culture is very much centred on the concept of respect by the younger towards the older, greeting an elder family member is a central part of Chinese and Confucian etiquette. To her mother's request, Sarah turns her head away in disobedience.

After her mother left for China, Sarah continued to disrespect Grandfather by speaking to him rudely in English and refusing to respond in Mandarin. As Grandfather tried to invite Sarah to use her mother's former room, Sarah ignored him by playing video games on her phone. As Grandfather tried to help Sarah move her luggage to the room, Sarah continued to show indignance towards his efforts thereby resisting spaces for intergenerational communication. With hostile mannerism, she remarked angrily:

Sarah : Don't touch my things.
Don't make me angry. You won't like me when I'm angry. I'm a hulk.
Do you know what is hulk?! So stay away from me!



Thereafter, she proceeded to randomly enter a room and slammed the door shut behind her. As explained above, the traditional context of Chinese and Confucian culture dictate that the younger generation shall accord respect and deference towards their elders. When Grandfather enters the room to inform Sarah that her room is across the hallway instead of the one she is in, she pulled her luggage callously knocking into Grandfather's legs and the wheels of the luggage trampling onto his toes. Such dialogue and behaviour exemplified by Sarah is disrespectful towards her elders and is against the cultural expectations of a grandchild towards her grandfather.

The estranged relationship between the Grandfather and his Americanised Chinese granddaughter is evident in their disparate values and socio-temporal environment, informed by different cultures. While the beginning of the film depicts Sarah as closed off to intergenerational communication by refusing to respond to Grandfather in the common language, it will be revealed later in the film that Sarah is able to converse in Mandarin. This transformation in Sarah symbolically represent several significant meanings, which will be elaborated below.

At another instance, Sarah mocked at Grandfather for eating chicken feet as she breaks out in condescending laughter when Grandfather chewed the chicken feet and remarks that it is disgusting to eat chicken feet. Further behaviours that depict Sarah as trying to exude a sense of otherness is when she complains that the television has no colour and that it is boring. When her mother called from China to check on her settling in at Grandfather's, Sarah speaks rudely to her over the phone. She refers to Grandfather as a 'monster'. Collectively, these behaviours run counter to Confucian teachings and practices that place strong emphasis on generational hierarchy and respect to one's elders. Sarah's description of Grandfather eating chicken feet as 'monster' stems from her Eurocentric orientation whereby certain parts of poultry are not valued for consumption.

From the above, one can conclude that in Sarah's world, generational hierarchy and the power relations that accompanies that hierarchy is de-emphasised. It can be adduced that she was accorded tremendous space and freedom to negotiate with her mother on many aspects of family life whilst in New York. Hierarchical power in intergenerational relations only make sense to those who are familiar with the former family pattern and lived through such patterns in family life (Yan, 2021).

Grandfather Lin hails from the generation where the practice of patriarchal ideology and male dominance in both the public and private spheres are the central ideology. This can be seen midway through the film in the scene where he instructed Jia Bao, a boy from the neighbouring unit, to explain to Sarah the three crucial house rules that must be observed by Sarah when staying in his house. Firstly, that the younger generation must be respectful towards the older generation. Secondly, girls must dress appropriately, which in the traditional sense means that tops must not be overly revealing and that bottoms or shorts must not overexpose. Thirdly, one must carry oneself with self-discipline and good mannerisms in behaviour. As Sarah tends to wear sleeveless tops and hotpants, this contrasted with the ideas held by Grandfather on what counts as suitable clothing styles for girls her age, suggesting that the



intergenerational conflict is in line with an ongoing process of social change in the younger generation.

Rather than fixating on identities being bounded by place, identities are in a process of perpetual transformation that makes use of circumstances one is embedded in. Cultural negotiation occurs when a range of cultural practices are drawn upon and reconfigured in response to time, place and circumstance. In this respect, the family is a primary site for cultural negotiation, whereby cultural practices are negotiated both by the older and younger generation in response to everyday interaction. In a diasporic transnational context, the family mediates cultural identities by negotiating between members, generations and places.

FROM RESISTANCE TO ACCULTURATION TO SINOPHONE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCES

The continuous evolution of Sinophone articulations from one generation to another is illustrated lucidly in the film *TKFBA*. From initial resistance and disrespect towards Grandfather Lin, the everyday intergenerational engagement and interaction that Sarah experiences in Kuala Lumpur have gradually influenced her to be more receptive to the cultural environment around her and the ways of being Chinese in Malaysia. In the beginning, Sarah rejected Chinese food such as Chinese sausages and Chinese style fried egg, lamenting that it is not the Western style sausages and egg fried sunny side up that she was exposed to in New York.

As the narrative progresses, a process of transformation occurs. Moments of meaningful dialogue and negotiations between the two generations aided in the bridging of the cultural differences between two generations. Taking on the advice of the neighbour to narrow the generational differences between himself and Sarah, Grandfather decided to make the first move. He brought Sarah and three other kids from the neighbouring units to lunch at Mc Donald's – a fast food chain from the United States. Seeing that Grandfather is making efforts to understand her, Sarah began to open up to him. She revealed that she is able to understand and conversing in Mandarin. In another scene, Sarah took an interest to learn and accept Malaysian Chinese food as she tried Hokkien fried noodle with Grandfather. As a form of ethnic dish, Hokkien noodles are yellow noodles fried with black soy sauce and is normally served with pork, fish cake, shrimp and vegetables. Hokkien noodles originate from Fujian province in China, and have become a common noodle dish in Malaysia in the variegated localised version.

Instead of using fork and spoon to consume the noodles, Sarah requested for chopsticks and Grandfather immediately changed the eating utensils. Symbolically, fork and spoon are representative of Western culture while chopsticks are stereotypically Chinese utensils, and is an important symbol of Chinese characteristics. Sarah's proficiency at using the chopsticks is an indication of some knowledge of Chinese culture which she has learnt and practised in America. This moment marks a sharp turn in the narrative whereby from this moment on, Sarah



became more receptive to revealing aspects of Chinese culture and practices that she has been exposed to in America, the articulation of which she was diametrically opposed to prior to this. The imageries of Hokkien noodles and chopsticks are significant to demonstrate food as a space for intergenerational negotiation and communication as well as the gradual reception of Sarah towards her Chinese identity in the form of Sinophone Malaysian articulations.

In the second half of the film, Sarah's character undergoes further transformation whereby she becomes more receptive to the everyday people as well as the Sinophone Malaysian culture around her. Instead of a resistant teenager who bemoans her circumstances, Sarah transforms into a bubbly and cheerful girl. In the scene where she accompanies Grandfather to breakfast at a local coffee shop, Sarah learns about Malaysian Chinese breakfast of kaya toast and semi raw eggs. Kaya toast is a dish consisting of two slices of toast with butter and kaya. Kaya spread is a coconut based jam. It is believed that Hainanese immigrants created the kaya toast as a replacement for Western fruit jams as coconut is abundant in tropical Malaysia. Kaya toast is commonly served alongside soft boil eggs and coffee and has become integrated into the Malaysian coffee shop culture. These scenes of Sarah and Grandfather sharing meals at a Malaysian coffee shop depict Sarah's gradual acculturation into Sinophone Malaysian culture through food.

Further, in terms of language and communication, at this point of the film, Sarah is more receptive to using Mandarin to communicate with her grandfather. For the first half of the film, Sarah chose to close off communication with Grandfather. Towards the middle of the film, further transformation occurred whereby both grandfather and granddaughter are in the stage that concerns the process of coming to terms with each other's differences. This stage enables social and emotional bonds to be established between the two generations. This is marked by Sarah becoming more receptive towards her grandfather and opening up to him as she starts to use kinship terms such as *kong kong* to greet him.

In another scene, Sarah learns calligraphy from Grandfather. Sarah writes her Chinese name in Chinese character using brush and ink. Compared to the beginning of the film where Sarah was oppose to various forms of Chinese culture, as intergenerational communication between grandfather and granddaughter improves, Sarah begins to learn more about Chinese culture and practices. Towards the later part, Sarah is an active participant to the various and diverse ways of being Chinese. In this sense, the film provides the space that demonstrates the significance of respective local societies in the shaping of the experience and identification of diasporic Chinese whereby culture may signify something slightly different in different local contexts. As Tan Chee Beng states,

> The people of Chinese descent identify closely with their respective motherlands – the countries where they are born and which they are citizens of. Their identities are shaped by the experience of living in the respective national societies. The subjective experience of Chinese Malaysian are obviously different from the Chinese Americans. (1998, p. 344)



In terms of language, *TKFBA* is clearly a Sinophone Malaysian production as it is peppered with complex language creolization. It is typical of Sinophone Malaysian cultural productions to often contain loan words, expressions and cultural features from other major languages and cultures that circulate in multilingual, multicultural Malaysia . The elderly characters in the film converse primarily in Mandarin interspersed with Cantonese, while the younger characters are able to converse in a mixture of English and Mandarin interspersed with Cantonese. At certain parts of the conversations, characters conveniently codeswitch to Cantonese or Hokkien, as certain Cantonese or Hokkien vocabulary could more aptly describes the situation. For instance, when Grandfather Lin addresses his neighbour, who is also the lady boss of the neighbourhood grocery store, he greets her as "Aunty Ming" in Cantonese, then the both continues the conversation in Mandarin and Cantonese and intermittently inserted a Hokkien word. Code-mixing between different Chinese dialects and the intermixture of multiple languages in conversations are very familiar conversational habits to Malaysian Chinese who are immersed in a multilingual environment.

In the scene whereby the neighbour kid named Jia Bao acts as translator between grandfather and Sarah, he explained to grandfather that his granddaughter's name is Sarah. The way Jia Bao pronounced Sarah made it sound to Grandfather, who does not understand English, as 'salah' which means 'incorrect' in Malay language. This instance clearly reflects the localised identity of Sinophone Malaysians in adopting multiple languages and dialects in their daily conversations. An intermixing of multiple Sinitic dialects with other local languages and the resultant localised accents have created a creolized linguistic environment which make up the Sinophone Malaysian identity.

It is through Sarah's return to Malaysia and the everyday moments of cultural contacts and exchanges with the neighbourhood community as well as the intergenerational interactions with grandfather that various aspects of the Sinophone Malaysian identity are delineated and inscribed. At the same time, all of these factors bring about the reinvention a Sinophone Malaysian culture and identity, which in itself serves as a reactionary force that deconstructs the fixed and essentialised definition of Chineseness. Making use of intergenerational bonds, the film's producers incorporated a transnational Chinese identity into the everyday realities of a Sinophone Malaysian community as a means to showcase the malleability of cultural identities and the process of transformation in the production of a Chinese cultural identity unique to the Malaysian experience. In line with Hall's theory that culture is produced with each generation, the transformation exemplified by both Grandfather and Sarah show that Chineseness, and its manifestation, is constantly being renegotiated through the social process of resistance and reclamation, contingent on its meaningfulness in different socio-temporalities.

As the movie progresses, Sarah begins to respond to her Chinese name, Xi Jia, instead of Sarah when being addressed by her Grandfather. Sarah learns to pray at the altar table, a ritual stereotypical of Chinese ancestor prayer rites. These transformations demonstrate Sarah's ability to embrace her ethnic roots and local experiences with immersion in Chinese ethnic culture through everyday intergenerational interactions in a Sinophone Malaysian setting. What eventually evolves from the narrative is an inventive Sinophone Malaysian culture that



captures Sarah's lived experience with her Malaysian Chinese grandfather in her mother's homeland. Through intergenerational interactions and engagements, the film showcases moments of cultural contact and exchange whereby Sarah exhibits a degree of agency as an individual to select, construct and create her definition of Chinese cultural identity as an individual straddling two socio-cultural environments.

On the other hand, Grandfather Lin's constructed Chineseness in ways that relied somewhat on essentialized notions of Chineseness and Chinese culture that he learnt in his lifetime. The transformation exhibited by Grandfather towards the end of the film also reflected new and changing relationships to Chineseness that he had to explore through his growing relationship with his daughter and granddaughter who had the privilege of transnational exposure. Both main characters' identities as Chinese or more specifically, Malaysian Chinese were not tactically reproduced from generation to generation, but were continuously negotiated in relation to their own changing experiences. There were also outside influences that shaped their particular aspects of Chinese identity that the older generation chose to emphasize to transmit and develop in the subsequent generation, such as the ability to converse in Mandarin and the continuation of the tradition of using chopsticks. In this sense, it can be said that the older generation was easily able to interpret practices that were significant as representing the continuity of family tradition along with folding in new practices. Undoubtedly, contrasting cultural beliefs create cross cultural and generational conflicts within the family, yet on the counter side, they open the way to negotiation and compromise intergenerationally. This is in line with Ien Ang's idea of an uncomfortable position known as the "in-between" space because its very ambivalence is a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability which is a necessary condition for living 'together-in-difference'(2003).

CONCLUSION

A major transformation recognised in *TKFBA* is the emergent trend of moving away from the classic type of patriarchy of male dominance in Malaysian Chinese families. *TKFBA* provides the space that foregrounds the role of women taking central stage in both the private and public spheres. The waning of patriarchy signals new developments in family structure and family life – a move away from patrilineality and patrilocal residence. This is evident in the fact that Sarah bears the surname of her mother, and resides with her mother and maternal grandfather.

As can be drawn from the above analysis, ambivalence pervades the daily life of transnational subjects within an intergenerational familial relationship. This paper's examination of ambivalent moments has much relevance in understanding the construction of Sinophone Malaysian Chinese identities across three generations. TKBFA showcases that the family is an important sphere of social interactions that provides the space for moments of cultural contact and exchange through which both the older and younger generations reproduce



and negotiate ethnic and cultural values. The film also reminds that generations often differed from each other in terms of the extent to which each generation sought to hold onto the habits of the culture of origin and the importance ethnic background play in identity reconstruction.

The film portrays how differences in terms of cultural values and beliefs may arise as a result of sociocultural, temporal and generational shifts. Further, the film demonstrates that to overcome such differences and to foster good intergenerational relationships, it was central to maintain open communication in order to bridge generation gap as well as provide opportunities for the younger generation to value the tradition of their elders. Of equal importance is the willingness of the older generation to understand the challenges faced by the younger in dealing with the multiplicity of forces that represent different values, norms and ways of living in contemporary society and to allow the younger generation agency to discover and construct their own cultural identity. Overall, the film provides the space for reflecting on new patterns of intergenerational interactions in multigenerational Malaysian Chinese households in the 21st century.

Additionally, *TKBFA* represents a Sinophone Malaysian cultural production which showcases the process by which Sinophone subjects learn about, negotiate, adopt and synthesize cultures and languages from their daily interaction and everyday realities; all of which leads to the assemblage of Sinophone Malaysian articulations and the resultant creation of distinct Sinophone Malaysian subjectivities that are reflective of socio-cultural realities of the time of their production. For the subsequent or younger generation, the ongoing influences of rituals and cultural celebrations on Chineseness is not directly linked to history and Chinese traditions. Rather, such practices are more closely associated to the bonding with the older generations of the family. Ultimately, the expression and practice of Malaysian Chineseness differed from one generation to another and were modified to suit new gender ideals and shifting generational values.



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Komunikasi dan Interaksi Bermakna Rentas Etnik dalam Kawasan Rukun Tetangga: Implikasi terhadap Kesepaduan Sosial

(Communication and Meaningful Interethnic Interaction in Neighbourhood Watch Areas: Implications for Social Cohesion)

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a plural society characterized by diversity in ethnicity, religion, language, and culture. In this context, social relations at the grassroots level are crucial for maintaining societal stability. This study examines meaningful communication and cross-ethnic interactions within Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) as a social space for fostering social cohesion. The study adopts a quantitative approach using a survey design with structured questionnaires, involving 3,408 respondents from various ethnic groups across Malaysia. The data are analyzed descriptively using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation across the individual, family, and community dimensions. The findings indicate that cross-ethnic interactions within the KRT settings is generally positive. Basic communication such as greeting, conversing and receiving visits from friends of different ethnic backgrounds recorded high scores. Family support for interethnic friendship was also strong, although acceptance of interethnic marriage remained moderate. At the community level, shared use of public facilities and positive perceptions of neighborhood peace reflected a good level of social cohesion. The study concludes that KRT function as an effective social platform for fostering interethnic relations and strengthening social cohesion.

Keywords: *interethnic communication, meaningful interaction, social cohesion, neighbourhood, Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT)*

https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-05
Article History: Received: 22 April 2026 | Accepted: 15 June 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



ABSTRAK

Malaysia ialah negara majmuk yang dibina atas kepelbagaian etnik, agama, bahasa dan budaya. Dalam konteks ini, hubungan sosial di peringkat akar umbi sangat penting untuk mengekalkan kestabilan masyarakat. Kajian ini meneliti komunikasi dan interaksi bermakna rentas etnik dalam Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) sebagai ruang sosial untuk membina kesepaduan sosial. Kajian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif melalui reka bentuk tinjauan dengan soal selidik berstruktur yang melibatkan 3408 responden daripada pelbagai etnik di seluruh Malaysia. Data dianalisis secara deskriptif melalui frekuensi, peratusan, min dan sisihan piawai bagi dimensi individu, keluarga dan komuniti. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa interaksi rentas etnik dalam KRT berada pada tahap yang positif. Komunikasi asas seperti bertanya khabar, berbual dan menerima kunjungan rakan berlainan etnik mencatatkan skor yang tinggi. Sokongan keluarga terhadap persahabatan rentas etnik juga kukuh, namun penerimaan terhadap perkahwinan campur masih sederhana. Pada tahap komuniti, perkongsian kemudahan awam dan persepsi terhadap keamanan kejiranan menunjukkan tahap kesepaduan yang baik. Kajian merumuskan bahawa KRT berfungsi sebagai medan sosial yang berkesan untuk memupuk hubungan rentas etnik dan mengukuhkan kesepaduan sosial.

Kata kunci: komunikasi rentas etnik, interaksi bermakna, kesepaduan sosial, kejiranan, Kawasan Rukun Tetangga

PENGENALAN

Malaysia merupakan sebuah negara berbilang etnik yang terbina melalui sejarah panjang pertemuan budaya, agama, bahasa dan pengalaman hidup bersama. Kepelbagaian ini bukan sahaja mencerminkan realiti sosial masyarakat, malah menjadi asas kepada pembentukan identiti nasional yang unik. Walaupun kepelbagaian ini sering dilihat sebagai kekuatan dari sudut warisan budaya dan dinamika sosial, ia juga menuntut kewujudan mekanisme sosial yang berkesan bagi mengurus perbezaan secara matang, adil dan berterusan. Dalam konteks ini, kesepaduan sosial menjadi elemen penting dalam memastikan kestabilan dan keharmonian masyarakat dapat dikekalkan dalam jangka panjang.

Dalam masyarakat majmuk, perpaduan tidak lahir secara automatik. Sebaliknya, perpaduan terbina melalui proses sosial yang berterusan, khususnya melalui interaksi harian yang membentuk kepercayaan, toleransi dan rasa kebersamaan (Jenson 1998; OECD 2012; Shamsul Amri Baharuddin 2012). Penyelidikan terkini memperkukuh pandangan ini dengan



menegaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial merupakan satu proses dinamik yang melibatkan interaksi berterusan antara individu dan kumpulan dalam masyarakat (Fonseca et al. 2020; Schiefer & van der Noll 2021). Dragolov et al. (2021) turut menjelaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial merangkumi tiga dimensi utama, iaitu kepercayaan sosial, rasa kekitaan (*sense of belonging*) dan penyertaan aktif dalam kehidupan komuniti. Oleh itu, kesepaduan sosial bukan sekadar keadaan statik, tetapi satu proses sosial yang sentiasa berkembang dan dipengaruhi oleh konteks interaksi harian.

Dalam konteks tersebut, hubungan sosial rentas etnik muncul sebagai komponen teras dalam pembinaan kesepaduan sosial. Interaksi antara etnik bukan sekadar pertemuan sosial biasa, tetapi menjadi medium penting yang membolehkan individu memahami nilai, pengalaman dan sensitiviti kelompok lain. Melalui interaksi yang kerap dan bermakna, individu berpeluang membina kepercayaan, mengurangkan stereotaip dan memperkukuh hubungan sosial. Kajian terdahulu menunjukkan bahawa interaksi rentas etnik yang bersifat berterusan mampu mengurangkan jarak sosial dan meningkatkan kestabilan masyarakat (Varshney 2002; Mak Din et al. 2020). Selari dengan itu, kajian kontemporari turut menunjukkan bahawa kepelbagaian sosial tidak semestinya membawa kepada konflik, sebaliknya boleh menyumbang kepada peningkatan kepercayaan sosial sekiranya wujud interaksi yang berkualiti (Koopmans & Schaeffer 2021; Laurence 2020; Wessendorf 2020).

Namun begitu, tidak semua bentuk interaksi sosial mempunyai kesan yang sama terhadap pembinaan kesepaduan sosial. Interaksi yang bersifat permukaan, seperti bertegur sapa atau berinteraksi secara ringkas di ruang awam, mungkin tidak cukup untuk membina hubungan yang mendalam. Sebaliknya, interaksi bermakna yang melibatkan kepercayaan, sokongan emosi dan penglibatan aktif dalam kehidupan sosial dilihat lebih berkesan dalam membentuk hubungan yang kukuh. Dalam hal ini, kajian semasa menekankan kepentingan membezakan antara interaksi biasa dan interaksi bermakna dalam memahami dinamika hubungan sosial dalam masyarakat majmuk (Neal et al. 2021; Blokland & Nast 2023).

Hubungan kejiranan merupakan antara ruang sosial yang paling dekat dan signifikan dalam pembentukan interaksi tersebut. Dalam kehidupan seharian, jiran merupakan individu yang berkongsi ruang fizikal, kemudahan awam dan pengalaman sosial yang sama. Interaksi yang berlaku dalam konteks kejiranan lazimnya lebih kerap, tidak formal dan berterusan, sekali gus menyediakan asas yang kukuh untuk pembinaan hubungan sosial yang lebih mendalam. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa kejiranan yang mempunyai tahap interaksi sosial yang tinggi cenderung menunjukkan tahap kepercayaan sosial yang lebih baik, selain mampu



mengurangkan prasangka antara kumpulan etnik (Mohd Syariefudin Abdullah, Mohd Mahadee Ismail & Mansor Mohd Noor 2013; Neal et al. 2021). Malah, dalam konteks masyarakat pelbagai budaya, kejiranan sering dilihat sebagai "tapak mikro" kepada pembentukan kesepaduan sosial yang lebih luas.

Dalam konteks Malaysia, KRT memainkan peranan penting sebagai institusi sosial yang menghubungkan dasar perpaduan dengan realiti kehidupan masyarakat. Penubuhan KRT pada tahun 1975 adalah berakar daripada keperluan untuk memperkukuh hubungan komuniti selepas konflik etnik 13 Mei 1969. Pada peringkat awal, KRT lebih menumpukan kepada aspek keselamatan komuniti, namun fungsinya telah berkembang merangkumi pelbagai dimensi termasuk pembangunan sosial, kebajikan dan perpaduan masyarakat. Melalui penganjuran aktiviti kemasyarakatan, pendidikan komuniti dan program kebudayaan, KRT menyediakan ruang interaksi yang lebih tersusun dan inklusif antara penduduk pelbagai etnik (Tamring, Esa & Ibrahim 2020).

Perkembangan semasa turut menunjukkan bahawa institusi komuniti seperti KRT semakin penting dalam memperkukuh kesepaduan sosial di peringkat akar umbi. Kajian terkini di Malaysia mendapati bahawa penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti mampu meningkatkan hubungan rentas etnik dan memperkukuh toleransi sosial (Yusof & Abd Rahman 2022; Ibrahim & Hassan 2023). Ini menunjukkan bahawa kesepaduan sosial bukan sahaja dipacu oleh dasar kerajaan, tetapi juga oleh interaksi sosial yang berlaku dalam kehidupan harian masyarakat.

Walau bagaimanapun, kewujudan ruang sosial seperti KRT tidak semestinya menjamin terbentuknya interaksi yang mendalam dan berkesan. Dalam sesetengah keadaan, hubungan antara etnik mungkin hanya berlaku pada tahap permukaan tanpa melibatkan kepercayaan yang lebih mendalam. Kajian kontemporari menunjukkan bahawa interaksi sosial mempunyai lapisan yang berbeza, di mana hubungan asas lebih mudah terbentuk berbanding hubungan yang melibatkan komitmen sosial yang tinggi seperti kerjasama intensif atau penerimaan terhadap perbezaan budaya yang sensitif (Koopmans & Schaeffer 2021). Oleh itu, adalah penting untuk meneliti bukan sahaja kewujudan interaksi, tetapi juga tahap kedalaman dan makna interaksi tersebut dalam konteks kehidupan sebenar.

Sehubungan itu, kajian ini bertujuan meneliti tahap komunikasi dan interaksi bermakna rentas etnik dalam kalangan penduduk KRT di Malaysia. Secara khusus, kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada pola hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tiga tahap utama, iaitu individu, keluarga dan komuniti. Selain itu, kajian ini turut berusaha menjelaskan implikasi



dapatan terhadap pembinaan kesepaduan sosial dalam masyarakat majmuk. Dengan memberi penekanan kepada interaksi di peringkat akar umbi, kajian ini diharapkan dapat menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana kesepaduan sosial dibina dan dipertahankan dalam konteks masyarakat pelbagai etnik di Malaysia.

KAJIAN LITERATUR

Kesepaduan sosial dalam masyarakat majmuk

Kesepaduan sosial merujuk kepada keupayaan sesuatu masyarakat untuk hidup bersama dalam keadaan yang relatif stabil, harmoni dan saling bergantung. Jenson (1998) melihat kesepaduan sosial sebagai satu proses yang menuntut komitmen, tanggungjawab dan kemampuan untuk hidup bersama secara aman, manakala OECD (2012) menegaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial melibatkan usaha meningkatkan kesejahteraan semua anggota masyarakat, mengurangkan peminggiran dan membina rasa kebersamaan.

Perbincangan kontemporari telah memperluas konsep ini dengan melihat kesepaduan sosial sebagai fenomena yang lebih dinamik dan berlapis. Fonseca et al. (2020) menegaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial bukan sekadar keadaan sosial yang statik, tetapi satu proses yang terbina melalui interaksi sosial yang berterusan. Dragolov et al. (2021) pula menghuraikan bahawa kesepaduan sosial merangkumi tiga dimensi utama, iaitu kepercayaan sosial, rasa kekitaan (*sense of belonging*) dan penyertaan aktif dalam komuniti. Schiefer dan van der Noll (2021) turut menambah bahawa kesepaduan sosial melibatkan keseimbangan antara integrasi sosial dan kepelbagaian, di mana masyarakat perlu mampu menerima perbezaan tanpa menjejaskan keharmonian.

Dalam konteks Malaysia, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2012) menjelaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial merujuk kepada keadaan sosial yang dipacu oleh idaman terhadap perpaduan. Walaupun perpaduan mutlak mungkin belum dicapai, kemampuan masyarakat Malaysia mengekalkan keharmonian dalam kepelbagaian menunjukkan bahawa kesepaduan sosial telah wujud sebagai realiti sosial yang signifikan. Kajian semasa di Malaysia turut menunjukkan bahawa kesepaduan sosial dipengaruhi oleh faktor interaksi sosial, kepercayaan antara etnik dan penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti (Yusof & Abd Rahman 2022; Ibrahim & Hassan 2023).



Hubungan Sosial Rentas Etnik sebagai Asas Kehidupan Bersama

Hubungan sosial merujuk kepada jaringan interaksi yang menghubungkan individu dan kelompok dalam masyarakat. Coleman (1988) menjelaskan bahawa jaringan hubungan sosial mempunyai nilai yang boleh dimanfaatkan untuk menghasilkan tindakan kolektif dan pembinaan modal sosial. Adler dan Kwon (2002) pula menegaskan bahawa modal sosial terbina melalui hubungan yang membolehkan aliran maklumat, kepercayaan dan kerjasama berkembang dalam sesuatu komuniti.

Dalam masyarakat berbilang etnik, hubungan sosial rentas etnik memainkan peranan yang lebih penting kerana ia berfungsi sebagai jambatan yang menghubungkan kelompok berbeza. Varshney (2002) menegaskan bahawa interaksi antara etnik, sama ada secara formal atau tidak formal, berupaya mengurangkan jarak sosial dan memperkukuh kestabilan masyarakat. Dapatan Mak Din et al. (2020) pula menunjukkan bahawa hubungan sosial rentas etnik mempunyai hubungan yang positif dengan pengukuhan kesepaduan sosial di Malaysia.

Perbincangan terkini menunjukkan bahawa kepelbagaian sosial tidak semestinya membawa kepada konflik, sebaliknya boleh memperkukuh hubungan sosial sekiranya interaksi berlaku secara bermakna dan berterusan. Koopmans dan Schaeffer (2021) mendapati bahawa interaksi antara kumpulan etnik boleh meningkatkan tahap kepercayaan sosial, manakala Laurence (2020) menunjukkan bahawa penyertaan dalam aktiviti sosial bersama dapat mengukuhkan integrasi sosial. Wessendorf (2020) pula memperkenalkan konsep “commonplace diversity”, iaitu keadaan di mana kepelbagaian menjadi sebahagian daripada kehidupan harian yang diterima secara normal oleh masyarakat. Oleh itu, hubungan sosial rentas etnik tidak boleh dilihat sebagai fenomena pasif, tetapi sebagai proses aktif yang terbina melalui interaksi berulang, pengalaman bersama dan pembentukan kepercayaan sosial dalam kehidupan seharian.

Interaksi Bermakna dalam Konteks Kejiranan

Interaksi bermakna tidak sama dengan interaksi biasa. Interaksi biasa boleh berlaku pada tahap minimum, seperti bertegur sapa atau bertemu secara kebetulan di ruang awam. Sebaliknya, interaksi bermakna melibatkan unsur yang lebih mendalam, termasuk kepercayaan, penerimaan, kesediaan berkongsi ruang sosial dan sokongan dalam situasi tertentu. Dalam konteks ini, Neal et al. (2021) menegaskan bahawa interaksi harian dalam



ruang kejiranan menyediakan peluang untuk pembentukan hubungan sosial yang lebih autentik dan berterusan. Blokland dan Nast (2023) pula menunjukkan bahawa hubungan kejiranan yang aktif mampu membina rasa kekitaan dan meningkatkan keterikatan sosial dalam kalangan penduduk. Interaksi bermakna juga sering dikaitkan dengan pengalaman bersama seperti aktiviti komuniti, bantuan semasa krisis dan penyertaan dalam kehidupan sosial setempat.

Kejiranan menyediakan medan yang sesuai untuk membina interaksi bermakna kerana hubungan yang terjalin lazimnya bersifat berterusan dan praktikal. Jiran bukan sahaja berkongsi ruang fizikal, tetapi juga pengalaman sosial seperti keselamatan, kebersihan, aktiviti kemasyarakatan dan sokongan dalam kehidupan seharian (Mohd Syariefudin Abdullah, Mohd Mahadee Ismail & Mansor Mohd Noor 2013). Dalam masyarakat pelbagai etnik, interaksi di peringkat kejiranan menjadi asas penting dalam mengurangkan prasangka dan membina kepercayaan antara kumpulan.

Konsep Kejiranan dan Peranan Kawasan Rukun Tetangga

Jiran merujuk kepada individu atau kelompok yang tinggal berhampiran dan berkongsi kawasan tempat tinggal yang sama. Dalam konteks sosial, kejiranan bukan sekadar kedudukan geografi, tetapi merupakan satu bentuk hubungan sosial yang berasaskan saling mengenali, saling membantu dan berkongsi tanggungjawab terhadap kesejahteraan kawasan setempat.

Di Malaysia, Rukun Tetangga diwujudkan sebagai institusi sosial bagi memperkukuh keharmonian dan keselamatan komuniti selepas peristiwa 13 Mei 1969. Dalam perkembangannya, KRT bukan lagi hanya berfungsi sebagai mekanisme kawalan sosial, tetapi juga sebagai platform penglibatan masyarakat yang lebih luas. Penganjuran aktiviti sosial, kebudayaan, pendidikan dan kebajikan di bawah KRT memberi peluang kepada penduduk pelbagai etnik untuk berinteraksi dalam suasana yang lebih terancang dan inklusif (Tamring, Esa & Ibrahim 2020).

Kajian terkini menunjukkan bahawa institusi komuniti seperti KRT memainkan peranan penting dalam memperkukuh kesepaduan sosial melalui penglibatan sosial dan interaksi antara etnik. Penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti didapati meningkatkan toleransi, kepercayaan sosial dan rasa kekitaan dalam kalangan penduduk (Yusof & Abd Rahman 2022; Ibrahim & Hassan 2023). Oleh itu, KRT boleh dilihat sebagai ruang sosial strategik



yang menghubungkan dasar perpaduan dengan realiti kehidupan masyarakat di peringkat akar umbi.

METODOLOGI

Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan reka bentuk tinjauan bagi meneliti pola komunikasi dan interaksi bermakna rentas etnik dalam kalangan penduduk Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) di Malaysia. Pendekatan kuantitatif dipilih kerana ia membolehkan pengukuran yang sistematik terhadap corak hubungan sosial serta membolehkan generalisasi dapatan kepada populasi yang lebih luas (Creswell 2014). Reka bentuk tinjauan pula sesuai digunakan kerana kajian ini bertujuan menilai persepsi, pengalaman dan tingkah laku sosial responden dalam konteks kehidupan kejiranan.

Instrumen kajian ialah soal selidik berstruktur yang dibangunkan berdasarkan sorotan literatur berkaitan hubungan sosial rentas etnik dan kesepaduan sosial. Soal selidik dibina untuk mengukur bentuk komunikasi dan interaksi rentas etnik dalam kehidupan kejiranan dan mengandungi beberapa bahagian utama yang merangkumi maklumat demografi serta item-item yang mengukur interaksi rentas etnik berdasarkan tiga dimensi utama, iaitu individu, keluarga dan komuniti. Item-item diukur menggunakan skala Likert lima mata, daripada 1 (sangat tidak setuju) hingga 5 (sangat setuju), bagi menilai tahap persetujuan responden terhadap pernyataan yang diberikan.

Responden kajian terdiri daripada 3408 penduduk yang tinggal di KRT di seluruh Malaysia, melibatkan pelbagai etnik utama seperti Melayu, Cina, India serta Bumiputera Sabah dan Sarawak. Kaedah pensampelan rawak berstrata digunakan bagi memastikan keterwakilan setiap kumpulan etnik dalam sampel kajian. Pemilihan responden dilakukan berdasarkan strata etnik dan lokasi geografi bagi mencerminkan kepelbagaian populasi sebenar.

Data kajian dianalisis menggunakan perisian Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Analisis deskriptif seperti frekuensi, peratusan, min dan sisihan piawai digunakan untuk menggambarkan pola komunikasi dan interaksi rentas etnik dalam kalangan responden. Penggunaan analisis deskriptif adalah bersesuaian dengan objektif kajian yang memberi tumpuan kepada pemahaman tahap dan bentuk interaksi sosial dalam konteks kejiranan.



HASIL KAJIAN

Profil Responden

Responden kajian terdiri daripada 3408 orang penduduk KRT di seluruh Malaysia. Berdasarkan taburan etnik, kumpulan Melayu mencatatkan peratusan tertinggi, iaitu 67.5 peratus atau 2302 orang. Kumpulan Bumiputera Sabah dan Sarawak pula berjumlah 520 orang atau 15.4 peratus. Responden etnik Cina ialah 431 orang atau 12.6 peratus, manakala etnik India seramai 155 orang atau 4.5 peratus. Komposisi ini menunjukkan bahawa kajian melibatkan penyertaan daripada pelbagai etnik utama di Malaysia dan memberikan asas yang memadai untuk memahami pola hubungan sosial rentas etnik dalam konteks KRT.

Jadual 1: Taburan responden mengikut etnik (N=3408)

Etnik	Bilangan (n)	Peratusan (%)
Melayu	2302	67.5
Cina	431	12.6
India	155	4.5
Bumiputera Sabah dan Sarawak	520	15.4
Jumlah	**3408**	**100.0**

Hubungan Sosial Rentas Etnik pada Tahap Individu

Dapatan pada tahap individu menunjukkan bahawa hubungan sosial rentas etnik berada pada tahap yang tinggi. Item dengan skor min tertinggi ialah bertanya khabar dan berbual dengan kaum lain, iaitu min 4.07. Sebaliknya, item yang melibatkan penyertaan dalam aktiviti kebajikan anjuran kaum lain mencatatkan min terendah, iaitu 3.69.

Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa komunikasi asas antara etnik telah menjadi amalan yang biasa dalam kehidupan kejiranan. Keadaan ini selari dengan kajian terdahulu yang menunjukkan bahawa interaksi harian seperti bertegur sapa dan perbualan santai merupakan



bentuk interaksi paling lazim dalam masyarakat pelbagai etnik kerana ia tidak melibatkan komitmen sosial yang tinggi (Wessendorf 2020; Neal et al. 2021). Interaksi jenis ini penting sebagai langkah awal dalam membina kepercayaan sosial dan mengurangkan jarak sosial antara kumpulan etnik (Koopmans & Schaeffer 2021).

Namun demikian, penglibatan dalam aktiviti formal yang dianjurkan oleh kelompok etnik lain masih lebih rendah. Dapatan ini mencerminkan bahawa walaupun hubungan sosial rentas etnik wujud pada tahap asas, interaksi yang memerlukan komitmen sosial yang lebih mendalam seperti penyertaan dalam aktiviti kebajikan atau program komuniti masih terhad. Hal ini turut disokong oleh kajian Laurence (2020) yang mendapati bahawa penyertaan dalam aktiviti sosial bersama memerlukan tahap kepercayaan dan keterbukaan yang lebih tinggi berbanding interaksi harian biasa. Oleh itu, dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap individu masih berada pada lapisan awal, iaitu lebih tertumpu kepada interaksi santai berbanding interaksi bermakna yang melibatkan penglibatan aktif.



Jadual 2: Min dan sisihan piawai hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap individu (N=3408)

Item	Min	Sisihan piawai
Saya bertanya khabar dan berbual dengan kaum lain.	4.07	.802
Saya menderma untuk aktiviti kebudayaan lain.	3.72	.871
Saya ikut serta aktiviti kebajikan anjuran kaum lain.	3.69	.864
Saya berinteraksi di laman sosial di Internet dengan kaum lain.	3.86	.848
Saya menjemput kaum lain dalam setiap aktiviti sosial kaum saya.	3.83	.796
Saya menziarah rumah rakan kaum lain yang ditimpa musibah.	3.95	.747
Saya keluar makan bersama rakan kaum lain.	3.95	.777
Saya menerima kawan-kawan berbeza kaum datang ke rumah saya.	4.01	.759

Analisis frekuensi turut menyokong pola tersebut. Sebanyak 84.7 peratus responden sama ada sangat setuju atau setuju bahawa mereka bertanya khabar dan berbual dengan kaum lain. Sebanyak 80.5 peratus pula bersetuju bahawa mereka menerima kunjungan rakan berlainan etnik ke rumah. Secara keseluruhannya, interaksi pada tahap individu lebih kukuh dalam bentuk hubungan santai dan komunikasi harian berbanding penyertaan dalam aktiviti sosial yang lebih formal.



Jadual 3: Frekuensi hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap individu (N=3408)

Item	Sangat setuju	Setuju	Sederhana setuju	Tidak setuju	Sangat tidak setuju
Saya bertanya khabar dan berbual dengan kaum lain.	949 (27.8)	1940 (56.9)	391 (11.5)	57 (1.7)	71 (2.1)
Saya menderma untuk aktiviti kebudayaan lain.	559 (16.4)	1652 (48.5)	921 (27.0)	221 (6.5)	55 (1.6)
Saya ikut serta aktiviti kebajikan anjuran kaum lain.	536 (15.7)	1613 (47.3)	978 (28.7)	235 (6.9)	46 (1.3)
Saya berinteraksi di laman sosial di Internet dengan kaum lain.	717 (21.0)	1767 (51.8)	717 (21.0)	157 (4.6)	50 (1.5)
Saya menjemput kaum lain dalam setiap aktiviti sosial kaum saya.	610 (17.9)	1824 (53.5)	810 (23.8)	129 (3.8)	35 (1.0)
Saya menziarah rumah rakan kaum lain yang ditimpa musibah.	694 (20.4)	1995 (58.5)	606 (17.8)	81 (2.4)	32 (0.9)
Saya keluar makan bersama rakan kaum lain.	767 (22.5)	1882 (55.2)	623 (18.3)	110 (3.2)	26 (0.8)
Saya menerima kawan-kawan berbeza kaum datang ke rumah saya.	828 (24.3)	1915 (56.2)	558 (16.4)	77 (2.3)	30 (0.9)



Hubungan Sosial Rentas Etnik pada Tahap Keluarga

Pada tahap keluarga, dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa keluarga memainkan peranan penting dalam menyokong interaksi rentas etnik. Skor min tertinggi ialah item keluarga sering membantu rakan atau jiran yang ditimpa kesusahan (min 4.11), manakala sokongan terhadap perkahwinan campur mencatatkan min terendah (min 3.53). Dapatan ini memperlihatkan bahawa keluarga berfungsi sebagai institusi sosial yang menyokong hubungan rentas etnik, khususnya dalam aspek bantuan sosial dan persahabatan. Hal ini selari dengan teori modal sosial yang menekankan bahawa jaringan sosial dalam keluarga memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk kepercayaan dan kerjasama dalam masyarakat (Coleman 1988; Adler & Kwon 2002). Dalam konteks masyarakat majmuk, keluarga juga berperanan sebagai agen sosialisasi yang membentuk sikap individu terhadap kelompok etnik lain.

Namun demikian, tahap penerimaan terhadap perkahwinan campur yang lebih rendah menunjukkan bahawa terdapat batas sosial yang masih wujud, khususnya dalam aspek yang melibatkan identiti budaya dan agama. Dapatan ini menyokong kajian terdahulu yang menunjukkan bahawa walaupun masyarakat bersikap terbuka terhadap interaksi sosial rentas etnik, mereka cenderung lebih berhati-hati dalam hal yang melibatkan keputusan hidup yang lebih mendalam (Koopmans & Schaeffer 2021; Wessendorf 2020). Oleh itu, peranan keluarga dalam hubungan rentas etnik adalah bersifat ambivalen, iaitu memperkukuh interaksi sosial tetapi pada masa yang sama mengekalkan sempadan sosial tertentu.



Jadual 4: Min dan sisihan piawai hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap keluarga (N=3408)

Item	Min	Sisihan piawai
Keluarga menyokong persahabatan saya dengan rakan pelbagai kaum.	4.06	.702
Keluarga saya mempunyai ramai kenalan pelbagai kaum.	3.98	.766
Keluarga saya akan mengundang rakan atau jiran pelbagai kaum ke majlis perkahwinan.	4.01	.761
Keluarga saya sering membantu rakan atau jiran yang ditimpa kesusahan.	4.11	.690
Saya mempunyai ahli keluarga atau saudara yang menghantar anak ke sekolah jenis kebangsaan.	3.81	.937
Keluarga saya menyokong perkahwinan campur berlainan kaum.	3.53	1.015
Keluarga saya menerima makanan tradisi kaum lain semasa musim perayaan.	3.76	.911
Keluarga saya menyokong untuk belajar bahasa kaum lain.	4.06	.722

Dari segi frekuensi, 86.6 peratus responden menyatakan bahawa keluarga mereka sering membantu rakan atau jiran yang ditimpa kesusahan, manakala 83.9 peratus menyatakan bahawa keluarga mereka menyokong persahabatan dengan rakan pelbagai kaum. Namun demikian, hanya 55.7 peratus yang menyatakan keluarga mereka menyokong perkahwinan campur. Hal ini menunjukkan bahawa keluarga merupakan institusi penting yang boleh memperkukuh, namun dalam keadaan tertentu juga mengehadkan kedalaman interaksi rentas etnik.



Jadual 5: Frekuensi hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap keluarga (N=3408)

Item	Sangat setuju	Setuju	Sederhana setuju	Tidak setuju	Sangat tidak setuju
Keluarga menyokong persahabatan saya dengan rakan pelbagai kaum.	838 (24.6)	2020 (59.3)	481 (14.1)	50 (1.5)	19 (0.6)
Keluarga saya mempunyai ramai kenalan pelbagai kaum.	817 (24.0)	1833 (53.8)	647 (19.0)	92 (2.7)	19 (0.6)
Keluarga saya akan mengundang rakan atau jiran pelbagai kaum ke majlis perkahwinan.	845 (24.8)	1908 (56.0)	536 (15.7)	96 (2.8)	23 (0.7)
Keluarga saya sering membantu rakan atau jiran yang ditimpa kesusahan.	900 (26.4)	2051 (60.2)	396 (11.6)	37 (1.1)	24 (0.7)
Saya mempunyai ahli keluarga atau saudara yang menghantar anak ke sekolah jenis kebangsaan.	745 (21.9)	1691 (49.6)	628 (18.4)	271 (8.0)	73 (2.1)
Keluarga saya menyokong perkahwinan campur berlainan kaum.	555 (16.3)	1343 (39.4)	1011 (29.7)	361 (10.6)	138 (4.0)



Item	Sangat setuju	Setuju	Sederhana setuju	Tidak setuju	Sangat tidak setuju
Keluarga saya menerima makanan tradisi kaum lain semasa musim perayaan.	679 (19.9)	1578 (46.3)	861 (25.3)	224 (6.6)	66 (1.9)
Keluarga saya menyokong untuk belajar bahasa kaum lain.	889 (26.1)	1938 (56.9)	510 (15.0)	50 (1.5)	21 (0.6)

Hubungan Sosial Rentas Etnik pada Tahap Komuniti

Pada tahap komuniti, dapatan menunjukkan bahawa Kawasan Rukun Tetangga (KRT) secara umumnya berfungsi sebagai ruang sosial yang harmoni. Skor min tertinggi ialah item keamanan dan keharmonian kawasan kejiranan (min 4.08), manakala aktiviti pelbagai persatuan agama mencatatkan skor yang lebih rendah (min 3.76). Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa komuniti KRT menyediakan persekitaran sosial yang stabil dan kondusif untuk interaksi rentas etnik. Perkongsian kemudahan awam dan persepsi terhadap keamanan yang tinggi mencerminkan kewujudan kepercayaan sosial dan kerjasama dalam kalangan penduduk. Hal ini selari dengan kajian yang menunjukkan bahawa ruang kejiranan memainkan peranan penting dalam membina kesepaduan sosial melalui interaksi harian dan pengalaman bersama (Neal et al. 2021; Blokland & Nast 2023).

Walau bagaimanapun, tahap penerimaan terhadap aktiviti yang melibatkan identiti kolektif seperti agama adalah lebih rendah, menunjukkan bahawa sensitiviti terhadap perbezaan budaya dan agama masih wujud dalam masyarakat. Dapatan ini menyokong pandangan bahawa kesepaduan sosial dalam masyarakat majmuk tidak semestinya melibatkan penghapusan perbezaan, tetapi lebih kepada pengurusan perbezaan secara harmoni (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin 2012). Oleh itu, walaupun KRT berjaya menyediakan asas kepada kesepaduan sosial, usaha berterusan diperlukan untuk memperkukuh interaksi yang lebih inklusif dan mendalam.

Jadual 6: Min dan sisihan piawai hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap komuniti (N=3408)

JOURNAL OF
ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY STUDIES (JOEDS)
E-ISSN: 2948-4804
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

Item	Min	Sisihan piawai
Aktiviti pelbagai persatuan agama boleh dijalankan di kawasan kejiranan saya.	3.76	.913
Aktiviti kebudayaan dan kesenian dapat dijalankan dengan bebas di kawasan kejiranan saya.	3.84	.860
Kemudahan awam digunakan bersama dalam kawasan kejiranan saya.	4.05	.718
Kegiatan ekonomi berjalan dengan baik di kawasan kejiranan saya.	3.98	.715
Masalah sosial dapat diurus dengan baik dalam kawasan kejiranan saya.	3.94	.727
Peristiwa pergaduhan kaum di tempat lain tidak mempengaruhi kehidupan di kawasan kejiranan saya.	3.87	.860
Keamanan dan keharmonian kawasan kejiranan saya adalah baik.	4.08	.710

Analisis frekuensi menunjukkan bahawa 86.7 peratus responden bersetuju bahawa keamanan dan keharmonian kawasan kejiranan mereka adalah baik, manakala 83.6 peratus bersetuju bahawa kemudahan awam digunakan bersama dalam kejiranan. Walau bagaimanapun, hanya 67.5 peratus yang bersetuju bahawa aktiviti pelbagai persatuan agama boleh dijalankan di kawasan kejiranan mereka. Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa KRT menyediakan asas yang kukuh untuk pembinaan kesepaduan sosial, namun pembinaan komuniti yang benar-benar inklusif masih memerlukan perhatian terhadap isu yang bersifat sensitif.



Jadual 7: Frekuensi hubungan sosial rentas etnik pada tahap komuniti (N=3408)

Item	Sangat setuju	Setuju	Sederhana setuju	Tidak setuju	Sangat tidak setuju
Aktiviti pelbagai persatuan agama boleh dijalankan di kawasan kejiranan saya.	592 (17.4)	1706 (50.1)	843 (24.7)	203 (6.0)	64 (1.9)
Aktiviti kebudayaan dan kesenian dapat dijalankan dengan bebas di kawasan kejiranan saya.	635 (18.6)	1810 (53.1)	765 (22.4)	166 (4.9)	32 (0.9)
Kemudahan awam digunakan bersama dalam kawasan kejiranan saya.	793 (23.2)	2060 (60.4)	494 (14.5)	45 (1.3)	16 (0.5)
Kegiatan ekonomi berjalan dengan baik di kawasan kejiranan saya.	682 (20.0)	2086 (61.2)	561 (16.5)	55 (1.6)	24 (0.7)
Masalah sosial dapat diurus dengan baik dalam kawasan kejiranan saya.	606 (17.8)	2102 (61.7)	614 (18.0)	63 (1.8)	23 (0.7)
Peristiwa pergaduhan kaum di tempat lain tidak mempengaruhi kehidupan di kawasan kejiranan saya.	605 (17.8)	1970 (57.8)	645 (18.9)	139 (4.1)	49 (1.4)



Item	Sangat setuju	Setuju	Sederhana setuju	Tidak setuju	Sangat tidak setuju
Keamanan dan keharmonian kawasan kejiranan saya adalah baik.	827 (24.3)	2127 (62.4)	387 (11.4)	37 (1.1)	30 (0.9)

IMPLIKASI KAJIAN ETNIK

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hubungan rentas etnik tidak boleh difahami semata-mata melalui wacana makro seperti perpaduan, dasar atau konflik. Sebaliknya, hubungan tersebut perlu diteliti melalui interaksi harian yang berlaku dalam ruang sosial paling dekat dengan kehidupan manusia, iaitu kejiranan. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa interaksi rentas etnik bersifat berlapis. Komunikasi asas seperti bertanya khabar, berbual dan berkongsi ruang sosial berada pada tahap yang tinggi, namun bentuk interaksi yang menuntut komitmen sosial yang lebih mendalam, seperti penyertaan dalam aktiviti kebajikan atau penerimaan terhadap perkahwinan campur, masih terhad.

Selain itu, keluarga muncul sebagai institusi penting dalam pembentukan hubungan etnik. Walaupun keluarga menyokong persahabatan dan amalan sosial rentas etnik, ia pada masa yang sama mengekalkan pertimbangan yang lebih berhati-hati terhadap aspek yang berkaitan dengan identiti budaya dan agama. Di peringkat komuniti, kajian ini menonjolkan KRT sebagai institusi pengantara yang penting antara dasar perpaduan dan realiti sosial masyarakat. KRT bukan sahaja berfungsi sebagai wadah penganjuran aktiviti, tetapi juga sebagai ruang sosial yang memungkinkan kehidupan bersama dipraktikkan secara nyata.

Secara keseluruhannya, dapatan ini memperkukuh hujah bahawa kesepaduan sosial di Malaysia tidak semestinya dicapai melalui penghapusan perbezaan, tetapi melalui pengurusan perbezaan secara harmoni dalam kehidupan seharian (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin 2012).



KESIMPULAN

Kajian ini meneliti komunikasi dan interaksi bermakna rentas etnik dalam KRT sebagai ruang sosial penting dalam pembinaan kesepaduan sosial di Malaysia. Secara keseluruhannya, dapatan menunjukkan bahawa hubungan sosial rentas etnik dalam kalangan penduduk KRT berada pada tahap yang positif, khususnya dalam bentuk komunikasi harian dan interaksi sosial santai.

Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini turut memperlihatkan bahawa interaksi rentas etnik tidak bersifat seragam, sebaliknya berlaku secara berlapis. Interaksi asas seperti bertanya khabar dan berkongsi ruang sosial lebih mudah terbentuk, manakala interaksi yang melibatkan komitmen sosial yang lebih mendalam seperti penyertaan dalam aktiviti kebajikan atau penerimaan terhadap perkahwinan campur masih menunjukkan batas tertentu. Hal ini menunjukkan bahawa kesepaduan sosial terbina secara berperingkat melalui pengalaman interaksi yang berterusan.

Di samping itu, keluarga dan komuniti memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk dan menyokong hubungan rentas etnik. Keluarga bertindak sebagai agen sosialisasi yang mempengaruhi tahap penerimaan terhadap kelompok etnik lain, manakala KRT berfungsi sebagai platform sosial yang menyediakan ruang interaksi yang lebih tersusun dan inklusif dalam kehidupan seharian.

Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini menegaskan bahawa kesepaduan sosial dalam masyarakat majmuk tidak semestinya dicapai melalui penghapusan perbezaan, tetapi melalui pengurusan perbezaan secara harmoni dalam konteks kehidupan harian. Sehubungan itu, pengukuhan peranan institusi komuniti seperti KRT adalah penting dalam memperkasa interaksi rentas etnik yang lebih bermakna dan mampan di peringkat akar umbi.

PENGHARGAAN

Penulis merakamkan setinggi-tinggi penghargaan kepada Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia atas pembiayaan penyelidikan ini melalui Skim Geran Penyelidikan Fundamental (FRGS) dengan nombor geran FRGS/1/2022/SS10/UKM/02/16. Penghargaan juga ditujukan kepada Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) atas sokongan yang diberikan dalam menjayakan penyelidikan bertajuk “Komunikasi dan Interaksi Bermakna Rentas Etnik dalam Kawasan Rukun Tetangga: Implikasi terhadap Kesepaduan Sosial”.



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Sacred Textile, Social Fabric: Aesthetic Formation and Cohesion in Iban Pua Kumbu

(Tekstil Sakral, Fabrik Sosial: Pembentukan Estetik dan Kohesi dalam Pua Kumbu Iban)

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous textiles function not merely as utilitarian or decorative objects but as material expressions of cultural knowledge, social order, and spiritual belief. Among indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, the Pua Kumbu of the Iban in Sarawak, Malaysia, stands as a highly symbolic ritual textile. This study examines the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu and its role in sustaining social cohesion, framing indigenous aesthetics as an active social system rather than a purely visual domain. Guided by Material Culture Theory, Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, and Social Cohesion Theory, the research employs qualitative ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with weavers and ritual specialists, visual motif analysis, and archival research. Findings indicate that Pua Kumbu aesthetics—expressed through motif structure, colour symbolism, weaving techniques, and ritual protocols—are governed by cosmological beliefs, ancestral authority, and communal regulation. Iban aesthetics prioritise moral responsibility, relational legitimacy, and collective validation over individual artistic autonomy. The study further shows that Pua Kumbu reinforces shared identity, transmits cultural knowledge, regulates social relationships, and mediates connections between human and spiritual realms. By reconceptualising indigenous aesthetics as social praxis and cultural governance, this research challenges universalist aesthetic models and highlights the importance of safeguarding textile artefacts and their underlying knowledge systems.

Keywords: Iban; Pua Kumbu; cultural values; communal interrelationship; indigenous aesthetics

https://doi.org/10.17576/joeds-2026-0401-06
Article History: Received: 9 April 2026 | Accepted: 25 May 2026 | Published: 2 Jul 2026



ABSTRAK

Tekstil pribumi bukan sekadar berfungsi sebagai objek utilitarian atau hiasan, tetapi merupakan manifestasi material kepada pengetahuan budaya, susunan sosial, dan kepercayaan spiritual. Dalam kalangan komuniti pribumi di Asia Tenggara, Pua Kumbu masyarakat Iban di Sarawak, Malaysia, merupakan tekstil ritual yang sarat dengan simbolisme dan makna budaya. Kajian ini meneliti pembentukan estetika Pua Kumbu serta peranannya dalam mengekalkan kohesi sosial, dengan meletakkan estetika pribumi sebagai suatu sistem sosial yang aktif dan bukan sekadar domain visual semata-mata. Berpandukan Teori Budaya Material, Teori Estetika Pribumi, dan Teori Kohesi Sosial, penyelidikan ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif, termasuk pemerhatian lapangan, temu bual separa berstruktur dengan penenun dan pakar ritual, analisis visual motif, serta kajian arkib. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa estetika Pua Kumbu—yang dizahirkan melalui struktur motif, simbolisme warna, teknik tenunan, dan protokol ritual—dikawal oleh kepercayaan kosmologi, autoriti leluhur, dan peraturan komuniti. Estetika Iban mengutamakan tanggungjawab moral, legitimasi hubungan sosial, dan pengiktirafan kolektif berbanding autonomi artistik individu. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa Pua Kumbu memperkukuh identiti bersama, memindahkan pengetahuan budaya, mengatur hubungan sosial, serta menjadi perantara antara alam manusia dan alam spiritual. Dengan mentakrifkan semula estetika pribumi sebagai praksis sosial dan mekanisme tadbir urus budaya, kajian ini mencabar model estetika universal dan menegaskan kepentingan memelihara artifak tekstil serta sistem pengetahuan yang menyokongnya.

Kata kunci: Iban; Pua Kumbu; Nilai budaya; Hubungan sosial komuniti; Estetika pribumi

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous textiles have historically transcended their utilitarian and decorative functions, operating as complex repositories of cultural knowledge, social organisation, and spiritual belief. Across Southeast Asia, these textile traditions function as sophisticated visual languages through which communities articulate identity, social hierarchy, cosmology, and ethical norms. Among such traditions, the Pua Kumbu of the Iban people in Sarawak, Malaysia, represents one of the most symbolically intricate and culturally significant ritual textiles(Truna et al., 2021). Beyond its craftsmanship, Pua Kumbu constitutes a material manifestation of Iban epistemology, encoding cultural values that underpin both aesthetic practices and social cohesion within the community. The Iban, one of the largest indigenous groups in Sarawak, traditionally inhabit communal longhouses (rumah panjai), which epitomise collective living, shared moral responsibility, and intergenerational continuity(Jehom, 2017). Within this socio-cultural framework, Pua Kumbu occupies a central position in ritual performance, healing ceremonies, agricultural festivals, and mortuary rites. Its production, possession, and utilisation are regulated by strict cultural protocols and spiritual sanctioning, conferring upon the textile



not merely an ornamental function but also a ritual authority that reinforces social hierarchies. The aesthetic dimensions of Pua Kumbu—manifested through motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques—are therefore inextricably linked to the Iban worldview, which privileges equilibrium between humans, ancestors, spirits, and the natural environment(Low, 2008).

Although prior scholarship has meticulously documented the technical processes, motif typologies, and ethnographic significance of Pua Kumbu, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how its aesthetic formation contributes to the sustenance of social cohesion. Traditional approaches to aesthetics frequently emphasise visual harmony, innovation, and individual creativity, frameworks largely derived from Western art historical paradigms. In contrast, within Iban society, aesthetics are fundamentally relational, rooted in cultural legitimacy, spiritual efficacy, and communal recognition rather than autonomous artistic expression. Accordingly, the beauty of Pua Kumbu is not determined solely by visual appeal but by its capacity to affirm cultural continuity, regulate social interactions, and mediate between the tangible and spiritual realms. This study contends that Iban cultural values, including ancestral reverence, spiritual authority, gendered knowledge transmission, and collective identity, profoundly shape the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu(Low, 2008). These values are materially and visually encoded within the textile, transforming it into a form of cultural infrastructure that sustains social cohesion. Through shared participation in weaving practices, ritual utilisation, and interpretative engagement with motifs, Pua Kumbu functions as a medium through which communal interrelationships are constructed, reinforced, and perpetuated across generations(Islam & Abdullah, 2016).By approaching Pua Kumbu through the lens of aesthetic formation and social cohesion, this research seeks to move beyond descriptive ethnography toward a critical understanding of indigenous aesthetics as a form of social praxis. It demonstrates that within Iban society, aesthetics constitutes not merely an artistic concern but a foundational mechanism for cultural sustainability and communal integrity. In this regard, the study addresses two principal objectives: first, to examine how Iban cultural values shape the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu, with particular focus on motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques; second, to analyse and elucidate how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu functions in fostering social cohesion, including its role in sustaining communal identity, intergenerational relations, and cultural continuity.

Despite the substantial scholarship on Iban culture, ritual textiles, and indigenous aesthetics, several critical gaps persist. First, while Pua Kumbu has been extensively documented as a ritual and symbolic artefact, its role in fostering social cohesion through aesthetic formation has not been systematically theorised(Emeih Wahed et al., 2023). Second, indigenous aesthetics are seldom examined as active social mechanisms rather than passive cultural expressions(Low, 2008). Third, material culture studies have yet to adequately integrate aesthetic formation into analyses of social agency(Truna et al., 2021).This study hence, addresses these gaps by positioning the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu as a culturally regulated process that actively contributes to the production and maintenance of social cohesion within Iban society. By synthesising perspectives from indigenous aesthetics,



material culture, and social cohesion theory, this research provides a holistic framework for understanding how visual culture operates as social infrastructure in traditional communities. In doing so, it contributes to broader discourses on material culture, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based cultural development, challenging universalist conceptions of aesthetics and foregrounding the socio-cultural dimensions of visual expression. The following section examines the origins and cultural significance of Pua Kumbu as an emblematic indigenous textile that embodies both aesthetic and social meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INDIGENOUS TEXTILES AS SOCIAL ARTEFACTS AND THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PUA KUMBU

Indigenous textiles have long been recognised as complex cultural artefacts that embody systems of belief, social organisation, identity construction, and historical continuity(Maxwell, 2012). In many traditional societies, textiles function not merely as utilitarian or decorative objects but as carriers of symbolic meaning and social relations. Across Southeast Asia, textile traditions such as Batak *ulos*, Toraja *ikat*, Javanese batik, and Malay songket are deeply embedded in ritual life, social stratification, and cultural identity(Maxwell, 2012). These textiles are used to mark life-cycle events, affirm kinship relations, and express cosmological understandings, demonstrating that aesthetics in indigenous textiles are inseparable from social and spiritual functions. Within this broader regional context, the Iban *Pua Kumbu* occupies a particularly significant position due to its sacred status and its integration into nearly all major ritual activities. Unlike many commercialised textiles, *Pua Kumbu* remains largely governed by ritual prescriptions and cultural authority, making it a valuable case for examining how aesthetic formation is regulated by cultural values and contributes to social cohesion. Scholars increasingly argue that indigenous textiles should be understood not only as material culture but also as social instruments through which communal values are expressed and maintained(Chantamool et al., 2024).

Early anthropological studies on the Iban, particularly those by scholars, provide foundational insights into Iban social organisation, ritual life, and cosmology. These works situate Iban material culture within a worldview that emphasises balance between the human, spiritual, and natural realms. Within this cosmological framework, *Pua Kumbu* emerges not merely as a textile but as a ritual medium capable of mediating between these realms. Many scholars' seminal work on Iban ritual textiles offers comprehensive accounts of *Pua Kumbu*, detailing its weaving techniques, motif classifications, and ceremonial functions(Islam & Abdullah, 2016). Scholars demonstrate that certain motifs are spiritually potent and can only be woven by experienced women who have received spiritual sanction through dreams or ritual instruction(Jehom, 2017). This highlights that aesthetic production in *Pua Kumbu* is tightly regulated by spiritual and cultural authority rather than by individual artistic preference. Similarly, other scholars also emphasise that *Pua Kumbu* serves as both a ritual object and a

symbol of social prestige(Gavin, 2004). Ownership of certain textiles reflects lineage, ritual achievement, and social standing, thus embedding aesthetic artefacts within broader systems of social differentiation(Gavin, 2004). These studies collectively establish *Pua Kumbu* as a central element of Iban cultural life, yet they tend to focus more on its ritual and symbolic dimensions than on its role in fostering social cohesion through aesthetic formation.

PUA KUMBU MOTIFS, SYMBOLISM, AND VISUAL LANGUAGE AS INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF BEAUTY

A substantial body of literature has explored the symbolic dimensions of *Pua Kumbu* motifs. Motifs such as *naga* (dragon), *antu gerasi* (giant spirit), and *buah andu* (fertility symbol) are interpreted as visual narrations of Iban cosmology and mythology(Kiyai, 2022). These motifs are not merely decorative but serve as encoded narratives that communicate moral values, ancestral memory, and spiritual power(Sultan & Jusilin, 2018).

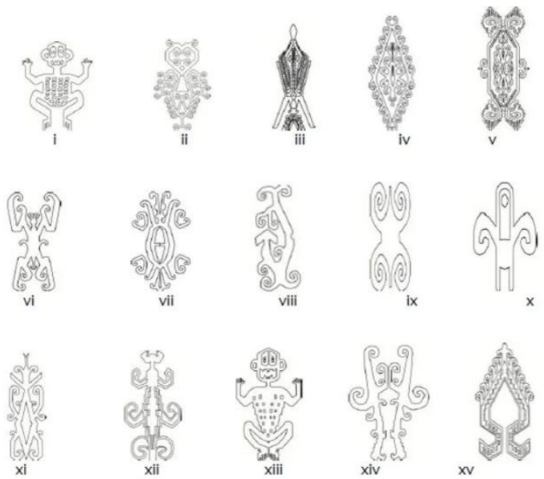


Figure 1: Motifs of Pua Kumbu: Source (Sultan & Jusilin, 2018)

However, most existing analyses treat motifs primarily as symbolic representations rather than as active agents in social life. While scholars acknowledge that motifs reflect Iban beliefs, fewer studies examine how the collective recognition, interpretation, and ritual use of these motifs actively reinforce communal identity and interrelationships(Gavin, 2004; Sultan & Jusilin, 2018). In this respect, the visual language of *Pua Kumbu* can be understood as a shared semiotic system through which communal meaning is constructed and negotiated, a perspective that remains underexplored in current scholarship(Wahed et al., 2022). Conventional Western aesthetic theory, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, prioritises concepts such as visual harmony, proportion, originality, and individual creativity(Wang et al., 2024). These



frameworks, however, are increasingly critiqued for their limited applicability to non-Western art traditions. In indigenous contexts, aesthetics are often inseparable from cultural legitimacy, ritual efficacy, and social recognition. Western scholars argue that indigenous art cannot be evaluated purely on visual criteria but must be understood within its cultural and epistemological context. Beauty, in this sense, is not autonomous but relational, emerging from the alignment between form, belief, and social acceptance. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Pua Kumbu*, where the "rightness" of a design is judged not by innovation or novelty but by its conformity to ancestral authority, spiritual sanction, and communal norms(Wang et al., 2024). Despite these theoretical advances, relatively few studies apply indigenous aesthetic theory specifically to Southeast Asian textiles, and even fewer examine how aesthetic formation itself contributes to social cohesion. Most scholarship continues to treat aesthetics as a secondary outcome of belief rather than as a constitutive element of social life. To understand this, the next section will elucidate on how textiles can become a social agent of providing meaning-making for the community values.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE SOCIAL AGENCY OF TEXTILES FOR SOCIAL COHESION, RITUAL, AND VISUAL CULTURE

Material culture studies have significantly reshaped understandings of how objects participate in social life. Scholars concept of "the social life of things" and argument that objects are active in shaping social relations rather than merely reflecting them have opened new analytical possibilities for examining artefacts such as textiles(Dant, 1999). In this view, objects are not passive carriers of meaning but dynamic participants in social processes. By applying this perspective to indigenous textiles suggests that *Pua Kumbu* should be analysed not merely as a representation of Iban culture but as an agent in constructing and maintaining social relationships. Through its circulation in rituals, inheritance across generations, and display during communal events, *Pua Kumbu* actively structures interactions among individuals and groups(Breu & Marchese, 2008). Yet, existing material culture studies have largely overlooked the specific role of aesthetic formation—rather than mere object presence—in shaping these interactions. Social cohesion, as conceptualised by scholars, refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community(Marr, 2018). In traditional societies, cohesion is often produced and reproduced through shared rituals, symbols, and collective practices. Visual culture, including textiles, plays a crucial role in this process by providing tangible forms through which collective identity is articulated and experienced. In Southeast Asian contexts, textiles frequently serve as focal points of communal interaction, whether in weddings, funerals, harvest festivals, or initiation rites. However, most studies on social cohesion in indigenous societies focus on ritual practice or kinship systems, paying relatively little attention to how aesthetic systems themselves function as mechanisms of social integration. In the case of *Pua Kumbu*, the communal participation in weaving, interpreting motifs, and ritual use of textiles suggests that aesthetic formation is deeply intertwined with the production of social cohesion(Gavin, 2004). Recent scholarship on heritage and cultural sustainability has raised concerns about the commodification and



decontextualisation of indigenous textiles. When *Pua Kumbu* is removed from its ritual and communal context and redefined as a market commodity or museum artefact, its role in sustaining social cohesion is significantly diminished. Scholars argue that safeguarding such cultural practices must prioritise the transmission of knowledge, ritual continuity, and community authority rather than merely preserving physical artefacts. This perspective underscores the urgency of understanding *Pua Kumbu* not only as heritage or art but as a living social practice. Without recognising the social functions embedded in its aesthetic formation, conservation efforts risk reducing a dynamic cultural system into a static visual product. In realising the importance of Pua Kumbu and in theorising how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu operates as a mechanism of social cohesion within Iban society. This study seeks to address this gap by integrating aesthetic theory, material culture, and indigenous knowledge perspectives into a coherent analytical framework from the perspective of material culture theory, indigenous aesthetic theory and social cohesion theory. This framework is vital to examine how Iban cultural values shape the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu, with particular focus on motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, and weaving techniques and help to analyse how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu functions in fostering social cohesion. These three complementary perspectives of theories, as explained in turn below, will enable a holistic understanding of *Pua Kumbu* as both an aesthetic artefact and a social instrument.

MATERIAL CULTURE THEORY

Material Culture Theory, particularly as articulated by scholars who emphasise that objects are not passive reflections of culture but active agents in social life(Berger, 2016). In the context of Pua Kumbu, this perspective encourages the researcher to treat the textile as a dynamic participant in communal relationships rather than merely as an artefact to be described. By framing Pua Kumbu as a socially active object, Material Culture Theory ensures that methodological attention extends beyond visual documentation to include interactions, practices, and communal contexts in which the textile operates.

INDIGENOUS AESTHETIC THEORY

Indigenous Aesthetic Theory is informed by scholars who position beauty, form, and creativity within culturally specific epistemologies rather than universal or Western-centric criteria. In this study, it frames aesthetics as culturally sanctioned and relational, privileging community recognition, spiritual efficacy, and adherence to tradition over individual artistic innovation(Robertson, 2016).Indigenous Aesthetic Theory ensures that the methodology respects cultural epistemologies, allowing the researcher to interpret aesthetic choices through the eyes of the community rather than imposing external criteria.



SOCIAL COHESION THEORY

Social Cohesion Theory, drawing on scholars' views, conceptualises social cohesion as the strength of relationships, solidarity, and shared values within a community(Taylor & Davis, 2018). Applied to Pua Kumbu, this framework highlights the textile as a medium through which interrelationships are constructed, reinforced, and transmitted. By integrating Social Cohesion Theory, the methodology explicitly links aesthetic formation to social outcomes, enabling examination not just of what Pua Kumbu looks like but also of how it functions as a vehicle for social integration. By synthesising these three theories, this study conceptualises *Pua Kumbu* as a form of cultural-aesthetic infrastructure, where aesthetic formation is not an outcome of culture alone but a generative force in shaping social cohesion. This model enables the analysis of *Pua Kumbu* beyond representation toward understanding its role in actively constructing communal interrelationships. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, as above, also provide both conceptual and practical guidance for the methodology. Each framework contributes in complementary ways, shaping the research design, data collection, and analytical strategies. Together, the three theoretical frameworks provide a coherent rationale for a qualitative, ethnographic methodology that includes: i) Artefact Documentation: Systematic recording of motifs, colour schemes, and weaving techniques informed by Material Culture Theory; ii) Participant Observation: Immersive engagement in weaving, ritual use, and community events, guided by Indigenous Aesthetic Theory and Social Cohesion Theory; iii) Interviews and Oral Histories: Capturing culturally embedded knowledge about aesthetics, spiritual protocols, and social functions; iv) Interpretive Analysis: Synthesising visual, social, and ritual data to understand how aesthetics, cultural values, and social cohesion intersect. This integrative methodology ensures that the study does not treat Pua Kumbu as merely an artistic object, but as a culturally embedded social instrument whose aesthetic formation is inseparable from its role in sustaining communal relationships. This will be explained in detail in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing ethnographic and interpretive approaches to investigate the intersection of aesthetic formation, cultural values, and social cohesion in Iban Pua Kumbu. The methodology is informed by three theoretical frameworks: Material Culture Theory, Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, and Social Cohesion Theory. Together, these frameworks provide conceptual and practical guidance for examining how Pua Kumbu functions as a culturally embedded artefact that mediates social relationships and embodies communal values. Ethnography allows the researcher to engage with the textile within its socio-cultural context, observing both production processes and ritual practices in situ. This approach is complemented by an interpretive analysis of symbolic and aesthetic elements, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how cultural values are materially and visually encoded to foster communal interrelationships. Given the socially and spiritually embedded



nature of Pua Kumbu, rigorous ethical protocols were established to ensure profound respect for the Iban community and their indigenous knowledge systems. The ethical framework was guided by the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Before commencing ethnographic observations, the study's purpose and potential impact were transparently communicated. Consent was negotiated as an ongoing, relational process, ensuring participants retained the agency to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, because Pua Kumbu weaving is historically intertwined with dream-received inspiration and spiritual taboos (pemali), the researcher strictly adhered to Iban customary laws (adat). Care was taken to ensure that in situ observations did not intrude upon sacred activities. Certain spiritual meanings or highly restricted motifs, if requested by the weavers to remain private, were intentionally excluded from public documentation to prevent cultural commodification. The study actively recognizes that the aesthetic and technical knowledge embedded in Pua Kumbu constitutes the intellectual and cultural property of Iban weavers. Participants chose between anonymity or formal acknowledgment, ensuring master weavers received proper attribution to elevate indigenous authorship rather than obscure it. Finally, prioritizing reciprocity to mitigate extractive research practices, the findings will be shared with the participating communities to contribute to the local archiving of Pua Kumbu heritage. By grounding the methodology in these ethical commitments, this investigation ensures it honors the lived realities and spiritual boundaries of the Iban people.

STUDY SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

Fieldwork was conducted in Iban longhouse communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, with a focus on regions recognised for traditional weaving practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with deep knowledge of *Pua Kumbu*. Key participants included:

- Master weavers (*indu takar*) responsible for producing ritual textiles (2 experts)
- Elders and community leaders with knowledge of ceremonial protocols (8 people)
- Female artisans and family members engaged in the transmission of weaving skills (10 people)
- Cultural custodians and ritual specialists who oversee textile usage in festivals and ceremonies (5 people)

A total of 25 participants were interviewed, with efforts made to capture a range of perspectives across gender, age, and social roles within the longhouse community.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data collection employed multiple complementary methods to capture the material, aesthetic, and social dimensions of *Pua Kumbu*:



1. **Participant Observation:** The researcher observed and participated in weaving sessions, ritual use of *Pua Kumbu*, and communal events such as festivals and mortuary rites. This enabled first-hand insight into the procedural, aesthetic, and social protocols governing the textile.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with weavers, elders, and ritual specialists to document their knowledge of motifs, colour symbolism, spiritual significance, and social functions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to articulate culturally embedded notions of aesthetic "rightness" and social cohesion.
3. **Visual Documentation:** High-resolution photography and sketching were employed to record motifs, patterns, and colour schemes. Visual analysis was conducted not merely to describe design features but to interpret their symbolic meanings and relational significance within communal contexts.
4. **Document Analysis:** Archival materials, including previous ethnographic studies, ritual manuals, and museum collections of *Pua Kumbu*, were analysed to triangulate field data and provide historical and cultural context.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using thematic and interpretive methods. Observational notes, interview transcripts, and visual records were coded iteratively to identify recurring motifs, aesthetic principles, and social functions. The analysis focused on three dimensions:

1. **Material and Aesthetic Dimension:** Motifs, spatial composition, and colour schemes were analysed to understand how aesthetic decisions are culturally regulated.
2. **Symbolic and Cultural Dimension:** The spiritual and ancestral significance of textiles was interpreted within the framework of Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, emphasising relational and communal criteria of beauty.
3. **Social and Communal Dimension:** Drawing on Social Cohesion Theory, the study examined how participation in weaving, ritual use, and textile circulation reinforces social bonds, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and collective identity.

JOURNAL OF
ETHNIC AND DIVERSITY STUDIES (JOEDS)
E-ISSN: 2948-4804
VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

Triangulation across observation, interviews, visual documentation, and archival analysis enhanced the reliability of findings and this is supported by having focus group discussion with five cultural and heritage experts to further validate the findings to established a string justification in elucidating how the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu functions in fostering

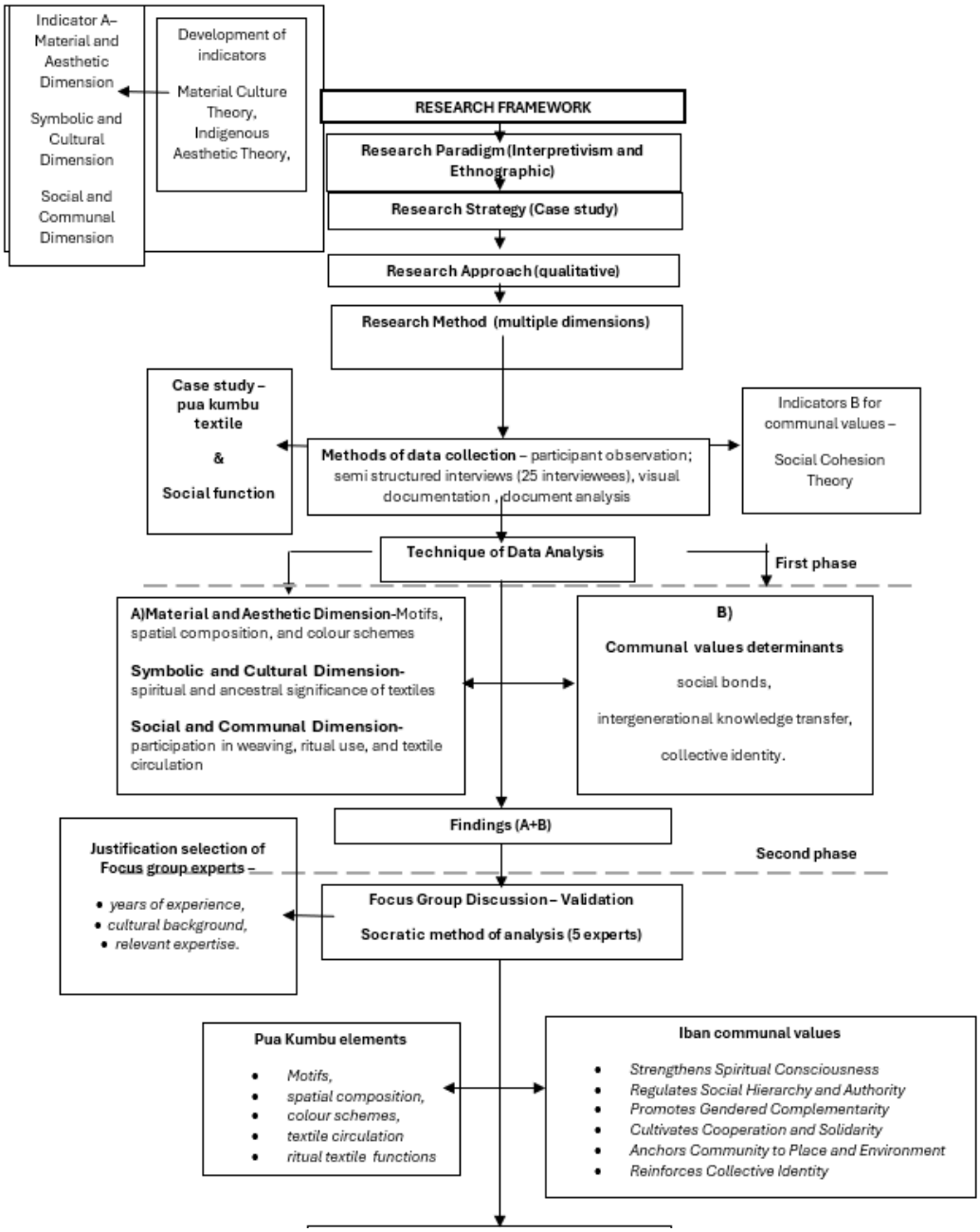


Diagram 1: Research Framework: Source (Author :2026)



social cohesion, including its role in sustaining communal identity, intergenerational relations, and cultural continuity (**Refer to Diagram 1).**

RESULTS

This section presents findings derived from ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, visual documentation, and archival sources. The analysis is organised around three analytically interrelated dimensions: aesthetic formation as materialised cultural values, indigenous aesthetics as relational and spiritual praxis, and aesthetic formation as a mechanism of social cohesion. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that Pua Kumbu operates not merely as a textile artefact but as a culturally embedded form of social infrastructure within Iban society. The findings indicate that the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu is governed by culturally prescribed principles rather than individual artistic autonomy. Motifs, chromatic choices, spatial organisation, and weaving techniques are shaped by Iban cosmology, ancestral authority, and social hierarchy. In line with Material Culture Theory, Pua Kumbu emerges as an active mediator of social meaning rather than a passive object of representation. Its visual form materialises social relations, spiritual beliefs, and moral order, rendering aesthetic practice inseparable from social structure. A central dimension of this materialisation lies in the motifs (*buah*), which informants consistently described as visual narratives encoding ancestral knowledge, mythological episodes, and cosmological relationships. Motifs such as *buah engkaramba* (spirit figures), *buah nabau* (serpent-dragon), and *buah antu pala* (spirit heads) are not ornamental but index specific metaphysical entities and ritual functions. Their transmission through dreams (*nampi*) and spiritual calling underscores their sacralised origins and legitimises their reproduction. The capacity to weave complex motifs confers social distinction and ritual authority, indicating that visual complexity operates as a marker of moral status and cultural legitimacy. Aesthetic formation thus constitutes a visible articulation of stratified social relations.

Colour symbolism and spatial hierarchy further consolidate this articulation. The dominance of red, black, and white reflects symbolic associations with vitality, ancestral power, and spiritual clarity, respectively. The spatial ordering of motifs privileges sacred elements through centrality and elevation, producing a hierarchical visual grammar that parallels Iban social organisation. In this sense, aesthetic formation functions as a semiotic analogue of social order, translating cosmological and ethical principles into material form. Beyond its material dimension, the findings demonstrate that Iban aesthetics are fundamentally relational, communal, and spiritually constituted, diverging from Western aesthetic paradigms that prioritise originality and individual expression. Consistent with Indigenous Aesthetic Theory, beauty (*manah*) is evaluated through adherence to ancestral protocols and spiritual sanction rather than subjective visual pleasure. Informants emphasised that a visually appealing textile lacking ritual legitimacy may be considered dangerous rather than beautiful, revealing



that aesthetic value is contingent upon ethical and cosmological conformity. Beauty thus emerges as a moral-spiritual achievement rather than an autonomous artistic category.

Aesthetic knowledge is transmitted through gendered and relational pedagogies. Weaving Pua Kumbu is predominantly a female domain, with knowledge circulating intergenerationally through matrilineal lines. This process entails not only technical skill acquisition but also the cultivation of moral discipline, patience, and spiritual responsibility. Aesthetic formation thereby operates as embodied pedagogy, through which social values are internalised via practice rather than discursive instruction. Indigenous aesthetics, in this context, function as a mode of cultural reproduction embedded in everyday ritualised labour.

The study further reveals that Pua Kumbu plays a constitutive role in generating and sustaining social cohesion. Drawing on Social Cohesion Theory, the findings show that shared aesthetic practices actively structure social relations and collective identity. Weaving is embedded within communal settings characterised by narrative exchange, interpretive collaboration, and affective bonding, rendering aesthetic production a socially integrative process. Moreover, Pua Kumbu assumes a central role in ritual contexts such as Gawai, healing ceremonies, and mortuary rites, where it symbolically unites participants through shared cosmological references and embodied memory. The collective recognition of motifs consolidates a sense of belonging rooted in common ancestry and worldview. The circulation and display of Pua Kumbu are subject to culturally codified restrictions, which further regulate social relations. Certain textiles are reserved for individuals with specific ritual statuses, reinforcing moral hierarchies and ethical accountability. These regulatory mechanisms operate through aesthetic means, embedding governance within visual culture and mediating authority, responsibility, and respect. Aesthetic formation thus functions not only as a symbolic expression but also as a modality of social regulation.

Intergenerational continuity constitutes a further dimension of aesthetic cohesion. Despite minor stylistic variation, core motifs and compositional principles exhibit marked stability across generations. This continuity results from deliberate cultural discipline rather than passive inheritance. By incorporating younger generations into weaving practices, Iban society ensures the transmission of technical knowledge, ethical orientations, and cosmological understandings. Aesthetic formation thereby becomes a principal mechanism of cultural sustainability and temporal cohesion.Collectively, these findings demonstrate the structural interdependence of material, aesthetic, and social dimensions in Pua Kumbu. Material Culture Theory elucidates the textile's agency in shaping social relations; Indigenous Aesthetic Theory reveals the culturally regulated and spiritually grounded nature of beauty; and Social Cohesion Theory explains how aesthetic practices actively produce solidarity and regulate hierarchy. Together, these perspectives establish aesthetic formation as a central modality through which Iban society maintains coherence, continuity, and moral order. These findings challenge conventional art-historical paradigms that isolate visual form from social function. In the Iban



context, aesthetic formation is inseparable from cultural legitimacy, spiritual authority, and communal integrity. Pua Kumbu exemplifies indigenous visual culture as social infrastructure rather than decorative artefact. More broadly, this study contributes to a reconceptualisation of indigenous aesthetics as epistemologically distinct systems of knowledge and value, necessitating theoretical frameworks that recognise their material agency and social efficacy. Ultimately, the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu emerges as a culturally regulated practice integrating visual expression, spiritual authority, and social organisation into a coherent system of communal life. Far from constituting a passive artefact, Pua Kumbu actively constructs and legitimises social relationships within Iban society. Through its motifs, chromatic codes, spatial order, and ritual functions, it embodies a visual grammar of social cohesion and cultural continuity, positioning aesthetics as a foundational mechanism in the reproduction of Iban collective identity.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

The study of Pua Kumbu within the framework of ethnic studies offers important insights into how aesthetic systems function as mechanisms for cultural continuity, identity formation, and social cohesion among the Iban community in Sarawak, Malaysia. Ethnic studies emphasise the lived experiences, symbolic systems, and cultural agency of indigenous communities, and Pua Kumbu serves as a powerful material expression of these dimensions. Its aesthetic formation cannot be separated from its social, cosmological, and ethical meanings, as the textile embodies the interrelationship between individual creativity and collective cultural knowledge. First, Pua Kumbu demonstrates how aesthetic knowledge functions as an intergenerational cultural transmission system. The weaving process involves not only technical skill but also the internalisation of mythological narratives, ritual taboos (pemali), and symbolic motifs revealed through dreams or inherited tradition. In ethnic studies, such processes illustrate how cultural knowledge is preserved and reproduced through embodied practices rather than written texts. The weaver, traditionally an Iban woman, assumes the role of cultural bearer, ensuring continuity of ancestral values and reinforcing ethnic identity through artistic production. Thus, aesthetic formation becomes a form of cultural pedagogy that sustains ethnic consciousness across generations. Second, the communal dimension of Pua Kumbu production and use highlights its role in strengthening social cohesion. The textile is not merely a personal artistic expression but a communal cultural object embedded in collective rituals such as Gawai, healing ceremonies, and rites of passage. Its presence signifies shared belief systems and mutual recognition of social roles within the longhouse community. From an ethnic studies perspective, this reflects how material culture contributes to social integration by reinforcing shared meanings and collective memory. The textile becomes a medium through which community members affirm their belonging, cultural continuity, and spiritual interconnectedness. Third, Pua Kumbu reflects the relationship between aesthetics and indigenous epistemology. The motifs woven into the textile—often representing spirits, ancestors, and cosmological beings—encode knowledge about the Iban worldview and their



relationship with the spiritual and natural realms. Ethnic studies recognizes such artistic systems as legitimate knowledge frameworks rather than mere decorative traditions. This challenges dominant Eurocentric definitions of art that prioritize visual form over symbolic and social function. By situating Pua Kumbu within its cultural and ritual context, ethnic studies affirms the intellectual and philosophical depth of indigenous aesthetic systems. Furthermore, the study of Pua Kumbu has broader implications for understanding ethnic resilience in the context of modernization and globalization. As indigenous communities face pressures of cultural assimilation, commodification, and cultural erosion, traditional textiles such as Pua Kumbu become important markers of ethnic survival and cultural resistance. The continued practice of weaving and ritual use reinforces ethnic identity and strengthens collective pride. Ethnic studies highlights how such cultural expressions serve as tools of cultural empowerment, enabling indigenous communities to assert their presence and maintain cultural sovereignty. Finally, Pua Kumbu contributes to contemporary discussions on cultural sustainability and decolonizing knowledge. Recognizing indigenous aesthetic systems as complex cultural texts encourages more inclusive academic frameworks that value indigenous perspectives. It underscores the importance of protecting intangible cultural heritage not only as artistic tradition but as a living system of social knowledge and identity. In brief, the ethnic studies implications of Pua Kumbu extend beyond its aesthetic value to encompass its role as a cultural archive, social integrator, and symbol of ethnic continuity. Its aesthetic formation reflects a deeply embedded cultural logic that reinforces social cohesion, preserves indigenous knowledge, and affirms Iban identity. Through this lens, Pua Kumbu emerges not merely as a textile, but as a vital cultural institution that sustains the social and cultural fabric of the Iban community.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Pua Kumbu is not merely a traditional textile or an object of visual refinement, but a culturally embedded aesthetic infrastructure that actively sustains communal values and social cohesion within Iban society. By examining Pua Kumbu through the integrated lenses of material culture theory, indigenous aesthetic theory, and social cohesion theory, the research advances a holistic understanding of indigenous aesthetics as a socially operative system rather than a passive cultural expression. In doing so, it challenges conventional art historical and aesthetic paradigms that isolate form from function and visuality from social life.The findings reveal that the aesthetic formation of Pua Kumbu—manifested through its motifs, colour symbolism, spatial composition, weaving practices, and ritual protocols—constitutes a culturally regulated process through which Iban cultural values are materially encoded, socially reproduced, and intergenerationally transmitted. Aesthetic legitimacy within this context is determined not by individual creativity or innovation but by cultural authority, spiritual sanctioning, and communal recognition. This positions indigenous aesthetics as fundamentally relational, ethical, and collective.The study further establishes that Pua Kumbu plays a critical role in fostering social cohesion by structuring communal identity, regulating social hierarchy, reinforcing spiritual consciousness, and facilitating intergenerational integration. Through its ritual deployment and everyday cultural circulation,



the textile serves as a symbolic and practical mechanism that maintains harmony, solidarity, and moral order within Iban longhouse communities. In this respect, Pua Kumbu exemplifies how visual culture operates as social infrastructure, actively shaping relationships and sustaining cultural continuity.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research carries important implications for cultural policy and heritage conservation. Current heritage frameworks often prioritise the preservation of physical artefacts while neglecting the cultural processes, knowledge systems, and social relations that give these artefacts meaning. This study underscores the necessity of adopting process-oriented heritage policies that safeguard not only the material object of Pua Kumbu but also the cultural protocols, weaving practices, ritual knowledge, and aesthetic principles that sustain its social significance. Without protecting these intangible dimensions, conservation efforts risk reducing Pua Kumbu to a decontextualised museum object rather than a living cultural practice.In terms of cultural sustainability, this research highlights the vital role of community-based cultural transmission in ensuring the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems. Supporting master weavers, facilitating intergenerational learning, and recognising women's cultural authority are crucial strategies for sustaining the aesthetic and social vitality of Pua Kumbu. Policy initiatives should therefore move beyond commodification-driven craft promotion and instead invest in culturally grounded educational programmes, ethical heritage tourism, and local cultural institutions that empower Iban communities as custodians of their own heritage.Furthermore, this study contributes to broader discourses on indigenous knowledge and community development by demonstrating that aesthetic practices are not peripheral cultural expressions but central mechanisms for social governance, moral education, and communal integrity. Recognising indigenous aesthetics as a form of epistemological and social infrastructure invites a rethinking of how cultural development, heritage management, and social cohesion are conceptualised in plural societies. In conclusion, Pua Kumbu stands as a powerful testament to the inseparability of aesthetics, culture, and social life in indigenous contexts. By foregrounding its role in shaping communal values and sustaining social cohesion, this study affirms the necessity of integrating indigenous visual culture into contemporary debates on heritage, sustainability, and cultural policy. In doing so, it advocates for a more culturally responsive and socially grounded approach to heritage conservation—one that respects not only what is preserved, but how and why it continues to live.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to the Research Centre of Conservation for Sustainable Ethnic Heritage (CaSEH- PERZIM) for their valuable support and assistance in providing access to relevant information throughout the course of this study.



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