

## **PENANG CHINESE CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS<sup>1</sup>**

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*The Chinese first settled in Penang about two centuries ago bringing along with them their cultural practices from China. However, with the passing of time their cultural practices had undergone significant changes especially among the Hokkien Chinese who comprise the majority of the Chinese community in Penang. This essay examines the customs and traditions of the Penang Chinese from the aspects of beliefs and prayer ceremonies, festive celebrations, artefacts and daily activities in a more comprehensive manner. The influences of modern education and geographical environments have resulted in the evolution of their own unique and distinctive variation of Chinese customs. Their festive celebrations, beliefs, practices and daily activities reveal the inheritance from their ancestors from China besides the incorporation of Malay sociocultural elements. In fact, some customs are peculiar only to the Penang Hokkien who had to survive in an environment that was different from China although these customs are still based on traditional Chinese concepts and philosophy. The difference is the way in which these customs and traditions are celebrated. Present day Penang Chinese remain loyal to traditional customs brought by their ancestors from China although there is evidence of assimilation with Malay elements.*

Keywords: Penang Chinese, customs, heritage, Malay elements

### **INTRODUCTION**

As early as the 15th century, Penang (known to the Chinese as *Bin Lang Yu*) had already existed on the map used by Admiral Cheng Ho in his expeditions to Southeast and Central Asia (Tan, 2007: 17). However, the large scale Chinese migration to Penang was a more recent phenomenon following social unrests, economic recession, natural disasters, war and China's rapid population growth in the late 18th century. The Chinese came either independently or as slaves. Tan (2007: 17) claimed the persistence of the early settlers had attracted Francis Light who described them as invaluable dwellers. The rapid development of Penang at the end of the 19th century had caused a rapid surge in the entry of labourers from China. Uneducated and unskilled, they were nevertheless hardworking and able to work independently to earn their livelihood and to ensure their social

wellbeing. Such characteristics were no less crucial to the preservation of Chinese customs.

The arrival of the Chinese of Hokkien and Cantonese descent took place at the same time (Teoh, 2005: 9). A gravestone marked 1795 was proof of their arrival on the island. To protect the welfare of the Chinese during the early days, various associations and schools were established such as the Penang Teochew Association which was formed in 1864 and the Penang Chinese Town hall which was established in 1881 (known as *Ping Zhang Huiguan* before 1974) while the Chung Hua Liang Deng primary school was set up in 1904. These institutions were part of the Chinese efforts to sustain their tradition and culture. Both the Cantonese and Hokkien formed the main groups during the initial phase of Chinese migration (Teoh, 2005: 10). Their background as labourers and farmers had more or less become the basis of Penang Chinese customs. Hardship and poverty prompted the Chinese to place a high value on their source of income, wealth and safety. Hence, Chinese customs are closely linked with elements of fortune and prosperity.

In Penang, the "Five Major Family Names" refer to associations formed by members who were of the same descent, had blood relations and spoke the same dialect namely Hew, Lim, Cheah, Yeoh, and Chen. According to Teoh (2005:10), the clustering based on family names is still evident in the social structure of the Penang Chinese. Associations of clans based on family names have become a unique trait among the Penang Chinese community. Their traditions also vary according to the different clans. The establishment of these five associations based on dialects portray the variance of customs and traditions practised among them. They might share the same beliefs but their method of celebration and practices differed from one clan to another.

Teoh Shiaw Kuan had looked into various aspects of the Penang Chinese. He had studied the inscriptions on the graves of the Chinese and Hokkien families in Penang to discover the history of Chinese migration to the island (Teoh, 2003). He (Teoh, 2002) had also undertaken extensive research on family ancestral shrines, deity shrines, scholar's achievements and historical events of the 1970s. He had completed a study on the clan associations, Daoist temple, and prominent figures in the history of the Penang Chinese. Teoh Shiaw Kuan (2005) had also discussed the history of influential figures among the Penang Chinese while his 2007 publication describes the life history, customs and traditions, artwork as well as the cultures of the Chinese who had left China for Nanyang about 400 years ago.

Another researcher Tan Kim Hong (1987) had collected pictures that portray the history of the Chinese in Penang followed by a book with even more pictures which was published in 2007. This book presented an overview of the early life, customs, beliefs, shrines and education of the Penang Chinese.

Wong (1967), meanwhile, described the festive celebrations of the Chinese in Malaysia by utilising the disciplines of sociology, history and

literature. By tracing back the origins, traditions and beliefs of every celebration in China, he revealed the modifications that had been made and the factors responsible for these modifications. Kuang (1958; 1971) on the other hand had documented the customs and traditions as well as the celebrations observed by Penang Chinese while Tan (1983) and Ackerman and Lee (1982) had undertaken research on the beliefs and religions of Malaysian Chinese and the influence of local elements on such practices.

There is yet a holistic study on the customs and traditions of the Penang Chinese. Most of the existing research inclined towards the culture and customs of Malaysian Chinese with little reference to the customs of the Penang Chinese. This research is based on the available literature on the subject and observation of the Penang Chinese community, their customs and the historical places associated with them.

Customs have been variously defined by scholars. Johnson (2000: 74) for instance defines customs as "a cultural idea that describes a regular, patterned way of appearing or behaving that is considered characteristic of life in a social system" while Calhaun defined it as "any practice or tradition that is characteristic of a social group." Shashi (2007: 1185), on the other hand, claims customs are "generally accepted practice or behaviour developed over time." In short, customs are practices and behaviour that are inherited from one generation to the next. Perceived as the norm of the said society, these practices and behaviour made up an identity that distinguishes the society which practices them from other societies. Hence, the customs and traditions of the Penang Chinese are practices and behaviour which are not only inherited from the early migrants from China, but had become the identity marker that separates the Penang Chinese from other Chinese in Malaysia.

## **CHINESE NEW YEAR CELEBRATION**

The Chinese New Year celebration is very significant to the Penang Chinese. It begins on the first day of the first month in the Chinese lunar calendar and lasts until the Yuen Xiao celebration which is also known as Chap Goh Meh in the Hokkien dialect. Chinese New Year is celebrated for 15 days.

It is believed that Chinese New Year has been celebrated since the Neolithic age (Qian and Huang, 2009: 267). Legend has it that the tradition of celebrating Chinese New Year began with the struggle against a mythical dragon called Nien (*nien* means "year" in Chinese) ([baike.baidu.com](http://baike.baidu.com)). It was believed that Nien would appear on the first day of the New Year to devour livestock and humans and destroy the crops. To protect their lives, the villagers would put food in front of their doors on the eve of the New Year. They believed the dragon would not attack people after it had enjoyed the food prepared. It was also believed that Nien was successfully chased away by a young boy in red attire

who was screaming in fright at the sight of the creature. It was then the villagers realised that Nien was afraid of the colour red. Since then, as New Year approached, villagers would hang lanterns and paired Chinese characters painted in red on the door and window of their homes. They would also play fireworks to scare the dragon away. Every household would prepare food beforehand and hide in the house. Fearing that they might be confined to their homes for days, they prepared food in excess. Before a household sat down to a family dinner, prayers would be offered to their ancestors for blessing and protection from misfortune. Since then, Nien was successfully banished and its reign of terror ended. Until today, the Penang Chinese still practised this tradition of preparing a feast on New Year. "Having a big feast" with the family is a must on the eve of the New Year to signify solidarity and harmony. The dishes prepared carry certain symbolic meaning. Before the feast, most Chinese families still practised the worship of ancestral spirits and deities to seek their blessings.

Nien was also associated with the practice of the night vigil. Out of fear for the dragon, the villagers had to keep watch the whole night. Following this, it is now a common practice to keep the night vigil during New Year's eve. It is believed that such a tradition could contribute to the longevity of one's parents. Today, this belief and tradition are gradually abandoned by the younger generations.

Married couples will distribute angpows which are red envelopes filled with a certain amount of money to children or unmarried relatives. Angpow is also known as "ya sui qian" which means "money that hinders bad spirit" (Qian and Huang, 2009: 280). The colour red signifies good fortune. The amount of money in the angpow is usually in even number except for the number four which in Chinese, has the same pronunciation with the word "death". On the second day of the New Year, married daughters would come and visit their parents and relatives. The traditional practices during Chinese New Year are still preserved by the Penang Chinese although many taboos have been abandoned by the younger generations due to the different environments.

## **THE GREAT JADE EMPEROR'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION**

The birthday of the Great Jade Emperor falls on the 9th of the first month in the Chinese calendar. It is a very important day for the Hokkien Chinese and is celebrated on a grand scale. The Jade Emperor is believed to be the emperor of all of heaven (Qian and Huang, 2009: 46). There was an interesting tale about this Emperor. At the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the Hokkiens in China failed to defeat the army of the Qing dynasty. To escape death, they ran and hid in a sugar cane field. Strangely enough, when the Qing army arrived at the field, they failed to find the refugees hiding among the sugar cane. When the soldiers left, the refugees came out. Coincidentally, it was the 9th day of the first

month and they believed the Jade Emperor was protecting them from being discovered by the soldiers. Since then, the 9th day of the first month is observed as the Jade Emperor's birthday. Apart from prayers and giving thanks to the Jade Emperor for protecting them, the Hokkien accepted it as the first day of their Chinese New Year. They believed the 9th day is more significant than the first day as during their hiding, they were unable to celebrate it.

The birthday celebration begins on the eve of the 8th day. A red altar is prepared in front of the house covered with red patterned cloth. On the altar are presented offerings like meat, fruits, red buns in the shape of a tortoise, sweets and so forth. The most essential components are the barbecued pork called "the golden pig" and 2 sticks of sugar cane speared at both corners of the altar. Paper replicas are burnt during the ceremony which lasts until early the following morning. Owing to the influence of Buddhism many of the offerings have now gone vegetarian.

This celebration is still practised among the Penang Chinese community which follows strictly the traditional practice including the offerings, putting on new attires during the ceremony and playing fire crackers.

## **YUEN XIAO FESTIVAL**

Yuen Xiao falls on the 15th day of the first month (Qian and Huang, 2009: 269) which is also the last day of the Chinese New Year. In Penang, the celebration is also known as Chap Goh Meh. Chap Goh Meh literally means the 15th night in Hokkien. The Yuen Xiao festival is also celebrated as Chinese Valentine's Day where they would throw Mandarin oranges at the seaside or river. Conservative Chinese community believes this day provides the opportunity for singles to look for a life partner. Hence, the orange throwing activity is an opportunity for them to meet and to know one another. The women will throw the oranges into the sea or river while the men would pick the oranges by boat. Before the Mandarins are thrown, names and other details are written on the oranges. These days, some would write messages hoping for good fortune and prosperity. In recent years, Chap Goh Meh created an opportunity for charity groups to collect donations through the sale of oranges sold for the celebration. The money collected is then channel to charity groups.

## **QING MING**

Qing Ming is a traditional practice of the Penang Chinese when they visit ancestral graves to remember their ancestors or deceased family members. They would make the visit 10 days before or after the actual Qing Ming day. For this

purpose they need to refer to the Chinese calendar as the date changes each year (Qian and Huang, 2009: 272).

The first thing to do when visiting the graves is to spruce up the surrounding area that include cutting grass, sweeping rubbish and repainting faded letters on tombstones. Red and gold paint are used for the letters. After the completion of the cleaning work, food is "served" for the "occupant" of the grave. The food is arranged on a "table" placed before the grave while red candles and incense are lit up and placed before the tombstone. This is followed by serving three cups of tea or wine followed by two bowls of rice and other types of food. The types of food served are not fixed and these are selected based on the worshippers' discretion. Usually they would take into account the preference of the deceased when making the selection. Nowadays, many Penang Chinese prefer to use vegetarian food for the offering as it is consistent with the teachings of Buddhism.

Family members will take some time to reminisce about departed relations. Before leaving they would ask permission for leave from the dead. They would use the following special method to get the answer from the dead: two pieces of wood shaped like a shell known as "tap bui" in Hokkien is tossed after the request is made. This method is also used to determine whether the dead has finished "enjoying" the offerings. If the piece of wood shows an "open" and "close" position, the answer is a "yes". The wood can also be replaced with two coins.

Qing Ming fosters togetherness among family members as the whole family will visit their ancestor's grave together. If this is not done, it is believed the family will not stay together. However, pregnant women, babies and young children are not encouraged to visit the cemetery as it is believed their spirits may be taken over by spirits that roam the cemetery area.

It is important to note that there are many taboos to observe when sprucing up the cemetery. Visitors are not allowed to step on "paper replicas" or its ashes as a sign of respect. Visitors should also avoid walking across other graves and if need be, they have to apologise to the "occupant" of the grave for such action. They must also refrain from giving comments while reading tombstone inscriptions as this may be misinterpreted by the spirits and may bring misfortune to visitors. The visitors may not collect things or money found on the grave as this will invite the spirits to follow them home. Money scattered on the grave is believed to belong to the spirits. Curry or food cooked with coconut milk and spices are also among the food given as offering and this indicate the assimilation of Malay and Indians culinary habits. The taboos and practices vary according to the different dialect descent but the practice of visiting graves shows the concept of loyalty and gratefulness of the Penang Chinese is still relevant even in this modern age.

## DUAN WU FESTIVAL

Duan Wu falls on the 5th day of the 5th month of the Chinese calendar. Duan Wu is a traditional celebration which began in the time of Chun Qiu (770 BC–221 BC) in China. To date, the celebration has a history of more than 2,000 years and there are many versions of the celebration.

According to Guo and Liu (2007: 221), Duan Wu was to commemorate China's patriotic poet named Qu Yuan. According to records called the *Shi Ji*, Qu Yuan was an officer who served Emperor Chu Huai during the Chun Qiu dynasty. He proposed the dissemination of moral values, recommended those with noble characters to be government officials, to increase wealth and strengthen the country's military, as well as to join forces with the state of Qi in opposing the state of Qin. However, the nobility rejected his proposals and later betrayed him. In the end, Qu Yuan was stripped of his title and exiled. In exile, he wrote several poetries which voiced his concern on the wellbeing of the state. In 278 BC, the state of Qin conquered the state of Chu. Qu Yuan could not bear to see his homeland being occupied and so wrote a final poem called *Huai Sha* before drowning himself in the Gu Luo River.

After his death, the people of Chu were devastated and rushed to look for his body in the Gu Luo River. A fisherman threw rice, eggs and several types of food into the river to prevent fish from devouring Qu Yuan's body. Meanwhile an old physician poured realgar wine (Xiong Huang) into the river to intoxicate the water dragon so as to prevent it from harming Qu Yuan. From then on, dragon boat race, eating of Zong Zi rice dumpling and drinking Xiong Huang wine became part of the Duan Wu celebration with the dragon boat racing the most popular. The people of Chu did not want Qu Yuan to commit suicide and everyone raced their boat to save him. Since then, every year on the 5th day of the 5th month of the lunar calendar, people would row boats with dragon carvings to scare the fish away to symbolise the act of protecting Qu Yuan's body.

During the festival, people will host dragon boat racing, eat Zong Zi rice dumplings and hang Asiatic wormwood leaves to deter evil (Qian and Huang, 2009: 273). There are many traditional activities carried out to celebrate Duan Wu festival but the most popular and regular activity is the dragon boat race. This activity is not restricted to the Chinese community but also popular among the other races. There is also an international dragon boat regatta held in Penang with participation from various countries.

The Zong Zi rice dumpling is shaped like a *ketupat* (Malay *ketupat* made from rice packed into a diamond-shaped receptacle of woven coconut leaf). Among the Penang Chinese it is known as *Bak Zhang* (in Hokkien). According to historical records, Zong Zi was first made during the Chun Qiu period. In the Jin era, Zong Zi was recognised as the official food on Duan Wu day. Apart from glutinous rice, the additional ingredient used to weave Zong Zi contains herbal

medicine that could reinvigorate the body. The Zong Zi prepared in this way is called Yi Zhi Zong which means "good for wisdom". During the Southern and Northern dynasties (420–581), Zong Zi was given as gifts during visitations. During the Tang period (618–907), rice used to make Zong Zi was jade white in colour while Zong Zi was shaped like a cone or diamond. Until today, every family will eat Zong Zi during Duan Wu festival. In Penang, there are Nyonya Zong Zi which has a sweet and spicy flavour. This shows the influence of local delicacies. Apart from eating Zong Zi, a Zong Zi weaving competition is also organised.

## **ZHONG YUAN FESTIVAL**

The 7th month in the Chinese calendar carries a special meaning. During this month, the Chinese believe that the gates of hell will open and the hungry spirits will be set loose on the earth to feast. Hence, the Chinese would carry out a ritual to signify the giving of alms to the ancestor spirits. They would also carry out ceremonies to invoke their ancestors as a sign of gratitude and appreciation for their deeds and kindness (Qian and Huang, 2009: 276).

According to Daoism, this month is also known as Zhong Yuan. The followers of Daoism believe that the world is based on three basic elements which are the sky, earth and water known as the "San Yuan" or "Guan" which means officer. Earth is controlled by the Great Emperor Qing Xu who will pardon the sins of humans to enable the rebirth of their spirits on the 15th day of the 7th month. On Zhong Yuan day, the Great Emperor Qing Xu will appear in this world to help the roaming spirits and absolve the sins of mankind.

Although the most important day of the month falls on the 15th, the festival is celebrated throughout the month spiced by traditional opera performances. Prayers are held at the temple, by the roadside and even within the house compound with the excitement very much in evident throughout the month in Penang. Giant flags are erected around locations where a specific ceremony is held to signify the celebration of worship. Giant incense is also burnt during this time. The materials used for prayers include replicas of clothes and money, food, fruits, daily amenities and so forth while the spirits are invoked as if they are living persons. Every material used for worship will be prodded with a special flag for invoking the spirits. To attract the younger generations the worship ritual has changed. These days the traditional opera performance is replaced with a pop concert which includes Malay pop songs sung by singers clad in sexy outfits to attract visitors.



## **MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL**

The Mid-Autumn festival is a traditional Chinese celebration which falls on the 15th of the 8th month of the Chinese calendar. It coincides with the full moon during the middle of autumn in China. The Mid-Autumn Festival is also known as the Moon Cake and Lantern Festival. Hence moon cake and lantern have become symbols of this celebration.

The Mid-Autumn celebration has a long history (Qian and Huang, 2009: 276). The practice of moon worship had existed in China since the Shang and Xia Dynasty (2000 BC–1066 BC). During the Zhou Dynasty (1066 BC–221 BC), many ceremonies were held to celebrate the coming of the season including moon worship during the celebration in mid-autumn. Appreciation of the moon and worship of the full moon was wide-spread during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). During the South Song Dynasty (1127–1279), people would give round-shaped cakes to relatives as symbol of family reunion whereas on the night of the celebration, they would enjoy the scenic beauty of the full moon or go for walks by the lake. Mid-Autumn festival became very popular during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Specific customs such as incense burning, tree planting, lantern lighting and dragon dance have accompanied this festival in many parts of China.

The origin of Mid-Autumn Festival is associated with many myths and legends. The story of its origin explained the symbolic meaning associated with the festival. The most famous Mid-Autumn Festival myth is the tale of Chang'er and Hou Yi. Many versions exist but they all have a common basis. Hou Yi was a famous archer who was said to have shot down nine suns while Chang'er was his beautiful wife well known for her kind heart.

Hou Yi was bestowed with an elixir for immortality by the goddess Wang Mu Niang Niang. However, he refused to consume it because he did not want to leave his wife Chang'er, to whom he gave the elixir for safekeeping. One day, a thief tried to steal the elixir. To prevent theft Chang'er was forced to swallow the elixir and as a result, she disappeared from the earth. She was filled with longing for her husband and chose to stay on the moon which was closest to earth. Although Hou Yi failed to get his wife back, he ordered his men to commemorate Chang'er by laying her favourite food and fruits in her beloved garden behind their house. When people learnt about the tragedy that befell Chang'er, they began to worship the moon the following year as a sign of commemoration.

The Mid-Autumn Festival also commemorates the Mongol defeat by the Chinese during the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368). Liu Bowen, an advisor to the rebel chief Zhu Yuanzhang, used the moon cake to communicate with his men. During the night, the rebels successfully attacked and overthrew the Yuan government. The rebellion was followed by the establishment of the

Ming Dynasty under Emperor Zhu. This myth is still widespread among the Penang Chinese community.

The moon cake is a type of traditional delicacy made from a mixture of flour with fillings of red bean or lotus seed and usually stuffed with salted egg yolk. The moon cake is commonly round in shape and usually the size of a fist.

In Penang some Chinese worship the moon using water caltrop (water chestnut) as it is believed that their wishes will be granted. Water caltrop is fed to children as its consumption is believed to make them more intelligent. Lanterns are an important symbol in the Mid-Autumn Festival celebration. Among the old Chinese community, lanterns were hung across the town to amplify the festive atmosphere. Today, the Penang Chinese celebrate by conducting lantern parades along the sidewalk and organising lantern making competitions.

## **DONG ZHI FESTIVAL**

"Dong" means "winter" while "Zhi" means "arrival". Thus the name of this festival literally means "the coming of winter". This festival usually falls on the 21st, 22nd or 23rd December which marks the furthest position of the earth from the sun. During this period, the day time is the shortest while night times the longest. Day and night signify the "Yin" and "Yang" philosophy in Chinese culture. According to ancient Chinese beliefs, "Yang" represents positive energy. After Dongzhi, the day time will stretch longer while positive energy, "Yang" will increase (Qian and Huang, 2009: 278).

The festival was first celebrated by the Chinese approximately 2,500 years ago during the Zhou Dynasty (1045 BC–256 BC). The Chinese had discovered Dongzhi (the coming of winter) after observing the movement of the sun. Dong Zhi was declared an official celebration during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 BC). The citizens of Han regarded Dong Zhi as the Winter Festival and would take a break from work to celebrate Dong Zhi with their family members. The coming of winter also became a sign for farmers to cease work and celebrate the day of reaping. There would be feasts of thanksgiving and according to old traditions, those who have family names must gather at their ancestral shrine to honour their ancestors.

Generally, the Penang Chinese no longer practice all the old traditions of Dong Zhi. As there is no winter in Malaysia, Dong Zhi is not celebrated on a large scale. However, certain practices are still carried out by the local Chinese such as the making of "tangyuen" (sweet dumplings made from glutinous rice flour which represents reunion and unity) and spending time with the family. Ancestral worship is also practiced to signify gratitude.

## **WEDDING CEREMONY**

For the Penang Chinese community, wedding customs and traditions are inherited from one generation to the next. According to Chinese beliefs, the matrimony of a couple is deemed valid if the customary proceedings were followed even if the official marriage registration is yet to be undertaken (Ji Wei, 2008: 170–177). There are two types of weddings practised by the Chinese community. The first is a traditional wedding arranged by parents or matchmaker whilst the second is a modern one where couples are given the freedom to choose their partner. These days, the first type of wedding is rarely practised by Penang Chinese.

Wedding customs and traditions are given much emphasis because they are believed to bring happiness to the household of the married couple. The correct wedding ceremony and the precise selection of wedding date are believed to bring happiness to the couple. Apart from that, the custom of fortune-telling and observing age differential are important when selecting a marriage partner. Couples with a five year age differential are thought to be the most compatible pair while couples with odd differentials like three, six and nine are less compatible. The Chinese believed arguments will occur frequently after the wedding.

Preparation for the wedding ceremony must be done carefully. Selecting a suitable wedding day is usually done based on age compatibility, year and time of birth of the couples. Basically, there are several important stages in Penang Chinese traditional weddings as practised to this day. Among the procedure is the search for a suitable bride or groom, marriage proposal, engagement, presenting betrothal gifts, presenting the dowry, distributing wedding invitations, wedding ceremony and finally, the tea ceremony. Nevertheless, the traditional wedding ceremony is now simplified as it is deemed too complicated and time consuming. There are several taboos on the wedding day. A wedding should be postponed to the following year or for 100 days should there be death of family members on either side. A pregnant woman or person in mourning is forbidden from attending or involved in the ceremony so as to prevent any untoward incidence. A "bed positioning" ceremony is done in the hopes that the couple will be promptly blessed with a baby.

The hair combing ceremony is done separately the night before the wedding by older relatives on both sides of the family. The ceremony symbolises the couple has reached a mature age and will receive congratulatory wishes from the others. There are rules for those who participate in this ceremony. Parents and their heir must be healthy and have a blissful marriage. The groom is expected to conduct the ceremony an hour before the bride does. Expressions of well wishes are uttered during the hair combing ceremony. This step is carried out so that the bride will be as happy and blissful as the one who combs her hair.

A tea ceremony for the groom's family is also conducted and expressions of good fortune for the couple will be expressed while serving tea to parents and relatives. The purpose of the tea ceremony is to introduce relatives of both sides. After the tea ceremony, the newlywed will give out angpow to the children. The next step involves a young boy opening a pail wrapped with red paper which is filled with oranges and angpow. After that, the wedding reception will be held in the evening and it is usually done in a grand manner in accordance to the couple's financial means.

The wedding guests will give angpow filled with money in return for the invitation and also as congratulatory token to the married couple. The number of dishes served during the wedding dinner comes in even number as even numbers indicate pairing. Only dishes with well-meaning names are served.

The bride's and groom's wedding attire are very westernised. Modern couples today no longer wear traditional Chinese wedding attire like the cheongsam for the bride and samfu for the groom on their wedding day and during the reception. The attire may only be worn during photo-taking sessions.

## **FUNERAL CEREMONY**

The Penang Chinese still uphold the concept of loyalty towards their parents. This means children are responsible for their parents' funeral. When carrying out this duty, unique customs and taboos must be scrupulously observed. Every ceremony has its peculiar meaning while funerals also depended on their beliefs. The customs and taboos vary according to dialectal descent and religion. In the traditional practice, a medium plays an important mediator on many important matters. The service includes selecting the appropriate time to place the deceased into the coffin, selecting the time for burial and choosing the right place for the grave (Ji Wei, 2008: 190–197).

In Penang, there are many funeral rites that the family and close relatives of the deceased need to take note of. The rites before a burial vary depending on the location of death. If the death occurred at home, the idols at home must be covered with red paper and must not come into contact with the deceased or the coffin. Apart from that, all mirrors or reflective surfaces (such as television screen) at home must be covered as it is believed anyone who see the coffin's shadow in the mirror will bring death to his or her family. A white cloth will be hung on the front door to indicate the house is in mourning. As for deaths which occurred outside the house, the deceased will not be brought back home but taken to the funeral parlour prior to burial.

Funeral preparations begin when the family members gather on the deathbed. During this time family members would reserve a coffin for the dying individual. A traditional Chinese coffin is long and rectangular with an arched

cover. However, coffins with western characteristics are now commonly used. In terms of colour, Daoists and Buddhists choose brown coloured coffins.

Before the deceased is laid in the coffin, the family members or morticians will clean the deceased with wet cloth sprinkled with talcum powder and change the deceased's clothes. All of the deceased's remaining clothes will be burnt as they believe it can be worn by the deceased in the afterlife. These days, dressing the deceased in traditional burial costumes is rarely practised and is only done for those within a certain age. If the deceased is young, they will be dressed in normal attire. The deceased will be laid in the coffin at an appropriately selected time. A deceased woman will be given make up while victims of accidents will be given cosmetic service to mask any visible damage to the face. It is forbidden to dress the deceased in red as it is believed it will invoke feelings of vengeance within the deceased. Black clothing is also forbidden as it will bring bad omen and cause the deceased to be reincarnated as a mute. White, brown or blue clothing are normally used to dress the deceased. Today, the male deceased is usually dressed in shirt and coat. After the preparation is done, the coffin will be placed at home or left at the funeral parlour for three, five or seven days to allow friends and family to pay their last respects as well as for religious ceremonies.

The Chinese still maintain the practice of keeping vigil over the deceased at night. During the vigil, family members would gather around the coffin according to their family position. The deceased must be placed with the head facing outside the house, while flowers, wreaths and picture of the deceased would be placed at the end of the coffin. Food would be placed in front of the coffin as offering to the deceased. A white candle would be placed in front of the picture while the comb of the deceased would be broken into two. One half of the comb is placed in the coffin while the other half kept by family members. The family members are not allowed to wear gold jewellery or to wear red since red signifies happiness. They are also not allowed to cut their hair for 49 days after the death although this practice is no longer followed by the younger generation.

There are specific attires that should be worn by family members during mourning. Children and in-laws of the deceased must wear black clothes to signify they are the saddest. The deceased's grandchildren must wear blue clothes and the eldest grandchild shall don clothing of a lighter shade of blue. Sons-in-law would wear light coloured clothing such as white as they are deemed outsiders while the daughters-in-law wear a mourning cloth over their head. Nevertheless, Penang Chinese nowadays prefer wearing white clothing with the appropriate coloured cloth pieces pinned to their attire in accordance to their status. The cloth pieces would be pinned on the left arm if the deceased is male and on the right arm if the deceased is female.

A donation box would be placed in front of the hall for donations by friends and relatives. The donations are given as a sign of condolence to the family and used to defray funeral expenses while the balance use to purchase

materials for future worship of the deceased. As token of appreciation and to ward off evil spirits donors are given candies and red strings.

Before the 1950's, the Penang Chinese practised funeral by burial. After the formation of the United Hokkien Cemeteries at Batu Gantung, cremation became possible. The Hokkiens are encouraged to go for cremation instead which helped to overcome shortage of burial space.

According to Chinese customs, the death of a young person is a very tragic event. For the deceased with surviving parents, their parents are not allowed to pay respect during the funeral ceremony. The deceased's parents are forbidden from offering their prayers during the ceremony; sometimes they are even forbidden from attending the funeral. Such deaths are deemed "the grey haired sending off the black haired". There will be no funeral rites performed if the deceased is a child or baby. Sometimes they would be buried immediately or cremated or otherwise placed at the funeral parlour for a day. This is because those who died young have not much life to be given condolence by the elders. In contrast, elders would receive a grand funeral ceremony known as "smiling funeral".

The seventh day after a death is called *tou qi*. For funerals by burial, the grave must be ready and family members will perform rites at the grave. As for cremation, family members will collect the ashes in a special room and keep it in an urn. The urn will then be kept in a memorial shrine. Although the funeral ceremony is completed, the mourning period continues for the family. According to traditional practices, the mourning period lasts for a hundred days. However, today's generation rarely observe such lengthy mourning period. The family members of the deceased are not allowed to give angpow or wear red clothes during Chinese New Year and must refrain from celebrating any festivals.

## **THE NINTH EMPEROR'S BIRTHDAY CEREMONY**

The Ninth Emperor's birthday falls on the first day until the ninth day of the 9th month in the lunar calendar. According to Teoh (2003), the prayer ritual was not inherited from their ancestors in China. Legend has it that the Ninth Emperor was a pirate named Lin Dao Qian during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). He once conquered the southern part of Patani in 1575 and wedded the princess of a local clan. It is believed that his men worshipped him after his death. They wore white clothes as a sign of grief and added "nine" to the emperor's title to honour him and to distinguish their leader from other kings. The worship ritual for the Ninth Emperor was introduced by the Chinese in Thailand who came to trade in Penang.

On the eve of the first day of the 9th month, the people at the temple of the Ninth Emperor and his followers must go on a vegetarian diet to cleanse themselves. They would then go out to sea to welcome the Emperor. The most

popular event during the celebration is the procession. The followers would wear a set of white or yellow attire and walk alongside the Emperor's effigy while carrying incense. A medium who is in a trance will participate in the procession as it is believed his presence could keep evil spirits at bay wherever he passes through. Some followers would also take this opportunity to seek atonement for their sins. They would go into a trance while inserting a long needle through their mouth and use all kinds of sharp objects to strike their bodies. Some followers would even walk on hot coal. On the night of the ninth day, the followers would go to the seaside and release or burn the "Royal Ship" which is made of wood or paper. This ceremony is believed to ward off bad luck.

The celebration of the Ninth Emperor is only practised by Southeast Asian Chinese. The Penang Chinese celebrates it the grandest. Hence for the first fifteen days of the 9th month, main roads would be filled with stalls and kiosks marked with yellow cloth selling vegetarian food. Penang Chinese believe that following a vegetarian diet while worshipping the Emperor will bestow blessings upon them.

## TUA PEK KONG

Zhang Li, Qiu Zhao-Jin and Ma Fu Chun were three close friends. All were of Hakka origin. In the middle of the 18th century, they sailed for the Southern Seas and made a name for themselves in this part of the world. Owing to their many contributions to the Chinese community, they were given the name Tua Pek Kong and were worshipped by the locals after their death. The site where they had landed is known as "Tanjung Hai-Zhu" (Sea Pearl) which is part of "Tanjung Tokong" and this location became the site for the main Tua Pek Kong temple.

In Penang, migrants from China in the early days faced many challenges like sickness, loneliness and the inability to adapt to the new environment. Hence, the worship of these three friends became common practice for migrants to seek blessing and protection. At first they were only known as "Pek Kong", which in the Hakka dialect refers to title of respect for an older man. The Malays referred to them as "*Datoh Pekong*" which was later shortened to become "To'Pekong". The name later became "Tua Pek Kong" when transliterated into the Hokkien dialect. Although present day Chinese still pray to "Tua Pek Kong", this god is not recorded as part of any Chinese religion.

Every year the *Chneah Hoay* or "guessing the fire" ceremony is held at the Tua Pek Kong temple at Tanjong Tokong. The ceremony which takes place on the 14th day of the Chinese New Year is also a day before the Tua Pek Kong's birthday. Through this ceremony, Penang's fortune for the following year is predicted and many believe the accuracy of this prediction. The ceremony involves kindling embers until the fire blazes. The fortune of the coming year is

forecast through the flickering flames. This tradition has been around for 120 years and the practice only exists in Malaysia, specifically in Penang.

## **DATOKONG**

Datokong is a special god for the Chinese in Penang. The god does not appear in any list of gods in China because it is not of Chinese origin. Datokong is also worshipped by Chinese from other countries including Singapore. Teoh (2002: 102) had noted that Datokong was a man who was worshipped and venerated after his death and finally became a god. He was believed to be a sailor from the Arab countries or the Indian Ocean. He came to Nanyang to trade but died in Penang.

Datokong is normally worshipped through a large stone or a piece of wood inscribed with 拿督公 (na du gong). Idols of Datokong are also worshipped and during the ritual, the use of pork was forbidden. As the followers found that their wishes would almost always be granted, the practice of worshipping this god became popular among the Penang Chinese. Worshipping Datokong was a practice started by the mainland Chinese who came to Penang; it is not inherited from China. Although Datokong is not a Chinese god, he is still worshipped by the Chinese. In fact, when going into a trance the medium at Datokong temple would converse in Malay to communicate with the spirit of Datokong. This is one of the few cases in which the influence and assimilation of Malay culture can be seen in the customs of the Penang Chinese.

## **TRADITIONAL SIGNBOARDS**

The Penang Chinese came from various districts in China and they consist of a diverse group of dialects. A traditional signboard is one of the symbols used to indicate identity and origin. Although it is fast becoming a dying practice, these signboards can still be found on the doorway of some houses in George Town. The signboards are either wood carvings or framed calligraphy. The words on the signboard either indicate the origin of the family that resides in the house or the region from which their ancestors came from.

Words representing a family's ancestral region can be checked under the "bai jia xing" (Hundreds of Family Name) section in the Chinese traditional almanac known as "tong sheng" or "tian shu". However, family names not stated as those from the same region may not necessarily have the same family name. This is because relationship between families who came from the same district but do not have the same family name are deemed closer compared to families with the same name but coming from different regions. This practice of hanging



traditional signboards shows that the Penang Chinese are an ethnic group who always remember their ancestors with gratitude.

## **TONG SHU**

Tong Shu is an encyclopaedia used by the Penang Chinese as reference on matters related to customs and traditions. The book was published in traditional Chinese and is read in the traditional way from right to left. The title for each section is written on the side of the pages. The main chapters in the book cover topics such as terms of address, weather and crops, talisman, the 28 constellations, fortune telling through body gestures and occurrences in the environment and the 26 Resistance. This book has become the main reference for the Chinese when undertaking activities associated with customs and traditions.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the last two centuries since the Chinese first came to Penang, one can still see many of the beliefs, customs and traditions inherited from their ancestors in China. The preservation of these customs and traditions rely heavily on Chinese education as well as Chinese organisations and associations which strive hard to ensure the sustainability of Chinese customs and traditions.

This discussion on customs and traditions reveals the influence of Confucianism among the Penang Chinese community is still very strong, especially when it involves loyalty towards parents. The customs and traditions of the Penang Chinese also reflect the influence of the island's local inhabitants. The worship of Datokong, a god not of Chinese descent, showed the assimilation of Penang Chinese customs with local elements. They retained their unique beliefs such as the worship of Tua Pek Kong which is not practiced in China.

Nevertheless, western influences have introduced various forms of sociocultural and western ideas to the Chinese in Penang. Even though traditional practices are still preserved, the effects of western influences manifest themselves in efforts to preserve the customs and traditions of the Chinese in Penang.

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## NOTE

1. The Malay version of the essay had appeared as "Adat resam orang Cina Pulau Pinang: Antara tradisi dan perubahan" in *Utara Semenanjung Malaysia: Esei-esei warisan*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad, 171–204. Pulau Pinang: USM Press.

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