

An Analysis of the Linkage Function of Malaysian Chinese in Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange

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Abstract: Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange is the core carrier of people-to-people and cultural exchanges between the two countries, and also the cultural foundation for building a China-Malaysia community with a shared future. As a special group with both Chinese cultural genes and Malaysian social attributes, Malaysian Chinese play an irreplaceable linking role in the cross-border communication, mutual learning and integration of Sino-Malaysian folk customs. Based on the perspectives of cross-cultural education theory and folk custom communication, this paper systematically explores the specific functions of Malaysian Chinese in inheriting folk custom symbols, constructing exchange platforms, resolving cultural differences and promoting coordinated industrial development. It analyzes their cultural genes and identity characteristics, reveals practical difficulties such as weakened cultural inheritance and restricted social environment, and puts forward optimization paths from four aspects: cultural inheritance, social integration, mechanism construction and youth empowerment, so as to provide theoretical support and practical enlightenment for the in-depth development of Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange.

Keywords: Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange; Malaysian Chinese; Linkage Function; Cross-Cultural Mutual Learning

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Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Malaysia in 1974, bilateral political and economic cooperation has continued to deepen, and people-to-people and cultural exchanges have become increasingly important as the “soft power foundation” of bilateral relations. With its vivid feature of daily penetration, folk culture has become a natural carrier for cross-cultural communication. As the “natural intermediaries” in Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange, the specific role of Malaysian Chinese has not been systematically sorted out in academic circles. Theoretically, this study can make up for the imbalance of existing research that “emphasizes macroscopy while neglecting microscopy”, enrich the micro-practical perspective of Sino-Malaysian people-to-people and cultural exchange research, and respond to the limitation that previous studies have paid insufficient attention to the specific role of Chinese in the field of folk customs; practically, it can provide reference for the formulation of China’s cultural exchange policies and the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture under the background of the “Belt and Road” Initiative.

1. Historical Evolution and Three Dimensions of Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange

1.1 Historical Evolution: From Maritime Silk Road to Two-Way Mutual Learning

The exchange of folk customs between China and Malaysia can be traced back to the Maritime Silk Road in the Tang and Song dynasties. When merchants from Quanzhou and Guangzhou traded in the Malay Archipelago, they introduced customs such as pasting Spring Festival couplets and making zongzi. The rubbings of Song Dynasty Spring Festival couplets collected by the Penang Museum are important physical evidence. The Ming and Qing dynasties were a peak period of Chinese migration. A large number of Chinese went to Malaysia due to wars and famines, forming settlements, building ancestral halls and guild halls to consolidate folk customs such as ancestor worship. At the same time, they interacted bidirectionally with local people, learned from each other in production skills and diet, and realized the two-way communication of folk culture. After the proposal of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, forms such as folk custom tourism and cultural and creative industries have developed rapidly, forming an exchange pattern of “the government sets the stage and the people perform”.

1.2 Three Dimensions: Integration of Material, Social and Spiritual Aspects

Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange focuses on three specific aspects: material, social and spiritual, and builds an in-depth interactive pattern through vivid cases of multi-cultural integration. At the material folk custom level, the cross-cultural integration of diet and architecture is the most typical. Malaysian bak kut teh originated from the health-preserving wisdom of Chinese miners, and later integrated local ingredients such as coconut milk and lemongrass, becoming a national delicacy; while Malay characteristic foods such as satay and nasi lemak were also introduced to Guangzhou and Xiamen, becoming popular among Chinese young people^[1]. In the field of architecture, Khoo Kongsi in Penang is highly representative. It retains the curved eaves and Chinese couplets of Minnan architecture, and integrates Malay wood carving craftsmanship and traditional patterns, which can be called a “model of Sino-Malaysian architectural integration”. At the social folk custom level, the mutual tolerance of festivals and etiquette reflects cultural warmth. Malaysia has listed the Spring Festival as a statutory holiday, and the government holds flower markets and fireworks displays. Malay people take the initiative to participate in New Year greetings and learn to write Spring Festival couplets; during Eid al-Fitr, Chinese people also visit Malay neighbors with pastries to congratulate them. Penang Chinese weddings not only follow the traditional “Three Letters and Six Rites” but also integrate the Malay “sedan chair riding” link, with relatives and friends of all ethnic groups celebrating together without any cultural estrangement. At the spiritual folk custom level, folk beliefs and art have become important links.

2. Cultural Foundation and Identity Characteristics of Malaysian Chinese in Playing the Linkage Role

2.1 Inheritance of Cultural Genes: Preservation and Continuity of Chinese Culture in Malaysia

The key reason why Malaysian Chinese can become the core link in Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange lies in their construction of a “family-society-school” trinity inheritance system. The family is the basic position for folk custom inheritance. Chinese families in Kuala Lumpur complete intergenerational transmission through festival practices: worshipping ancestors and pasting Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival while telling the legend of “Nian Beast”, sitting around making mooncakes and interpreting the meaning of “reunion” during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which lays a solid cultural foundation through daily influence and keeps the folk custom genes from fading from generation to generation. Chinese societies are the core support for inheritance. Penang Chinese Town Hall offers training courses on Chinese culture such as calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting and opera, integrating cultural interpretation into teaching, allowing students to learn skills and understand connotations, and providing a solid platform for Chinese culture to take root locally. As the only country in Southeast Asia with a complete Chinese education system, Malaysia incorporates “Chinese culture” into the curriculum of Chinese schools, systematically teaching traditional festivals and folk crafts, and organizing students to carry out “root-seeking trips” to Fujian and Guangdong in China.

2.2 Adaptation to Social Integration: Acceptance and Adjustment of Local Culture by Malaysian Chinese

Centering on “two-way communication”, Malaysian Chinese take the initiative to integrate into the local area from three aspects: language, customs and social participation, laying a solid foundation for folk custom exchange. Linguistically, most Chinese are proficient in multiple languages such as Chinese, Malay and English, and some also understand basic Hindi. They

deliberately adapt to local vocabulary during communication to reduce the threshold for understanding folk customs. In terms of customs, Chinese respect multiculturalism: visiting Malay friends with halal pastries during Eid al-Fitr, participating in Indian lighting ceremonies during Diwali, and seeking resonance while adhering to their own culture. In social participation, Chinese actively engage in local decision-making, folk industry cooperation and charitable relief. People of all ethnic groups act together to deepen feelings, creating a good atmosphere for cross-cultural communication.

2.3 Characteristics of Dual Identity: Unity of “Inheritors of Chinese Culture” and “Members of Malaysian Society”

The dual identity of Malaysian Chinese as “both Chinese and Malaysian” is their core advantage in playing the linkage role, enabling them to switch flexibly and connect accurately between the two cultures. As inheritors of Chinese culture, they have a deep understanding of cultural roots, can explain the origin and connotation of folk customs in detail, and interpret the profound significance of Spring Festival ancestor worship as “gratitude to ancestors and inheritance of family style” to Malay people, rather than just superficial displays. As members of Malaysian society, they accurately grasp the local context: focusing on the core of “gratitude and sharing” when introducing Eid al-Fitr to Chinese tourists, avoiding sensitive details; considering religious taboos and dietary needs when organizing activities, and being able to mediate cultural conflicts in a timely manner. This dual identity gives birth to an open and inclusive attitude. Penang Chinese designers integrate dragon patterns with Malaysian orchids, and chefs improve Malay cuisine with Chinese techniques, creating widely recognized cross-cultural products based on a deep understanding of the essence of both cultures.

3. Specific Linkage Functions of Malaysian Chinese in Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange

3.1 Disseminators of Folk Symbols: Cross-Border Activation of Cultural Genes

As the core disseminators of Sino-Malaysian folk symbols, Malaysian Chinese do not simply copy culture, but realize the cross-border continuity and activation of folk genes through “local adaptation”, “cultural adaptation and connotation interpretation” and “creation of new symbols”. The dissemination of Chinese folk customs in Malaysia shows the characteristic of “adapting to local conditions”: Spring Festival flower markets integrate tropical flowers and Malay handicrafts, allowing people of all ethnic groups to exchange goods; dragon boat races add Malay music, with Chinese knots and traditional Malay ribbons hanging at the finish line, and participants sharing nasi lemak and zongzi after the race to achieve cultural empathy^[2]. The dissemination of Malaysian folk customs in China focuses on cultural adaptation and connotation interpretation. After bak kut teh was introduced, Chinese bosses adjusted the formula to reduce greasiness, and explained its origin and health-preserving effects in detail through menus, helping Chinese people understand the cultural core and injecting lasting vitality into Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange.

3.2 Builders of Folk Activities: Physical Support for Interactive Exchange

As builders of Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange platforms, Malaysian Chinese have created down-to-earth and warm interactive carriers, promoting direct communication between people of the two countries. The Kuala Lumpur International Spring Festival Cultural Festival gathers dragon and lion dances, operas, Malay dances and Indian lighting ceremonies, setting up folk experience areas and food areas to realize the sharing of multiculturalism; the Guangzhou Malaysia Cultural Week allows Chinese audiences to feel exotic culture up close through shadow puppet shows and Malay food sales. The China-Malaysia Dragon Boat Invitational Tournament is held alternately in the two countries every year. Players not only compete athletically but also exchange skills, and celebrate together after the game to promote lasting friendship; activities such as martial arts exchange competitions and badminton friendly matches make cultural exchange happen naturally in sports. Cultural exhibitions cover traditional handicrafts and youth cultural and creative works. Chinese interpreters explain the exhibits in detail for tourists and provide interactive experiences, making the exchange more in-depth.

3.3 Interpreters of Folk Cognition: Building Bridges for Resolving Cultural Differences

Malaysian Chinese act as “cultural translators”, resolving Sino-Malaysian folk custom differences in a popular way and building bridges for mutual understanding. They are good at simplifying and interpreting complex cultures: when explaining Chinese ancestor worship to Malay people, they focus on the core of “gratitude to ancestors and remembrance of roots”,

connecting it with their concept of “respect for elders”; when introducing Malaysian Islamic etiquette, they use the analogy of “as pious as Chinese people worshipping ancestors” to help Chinese people find resonance. Through relaxed forms such as short videos and lectures, they share details of folk custom differences, allowing cultural differences to be naturally presented in communication. They pay attention to contextual adaptation to avoid conflicts: reminding Chinese tourists to behave appropriately in religious venues, focusing on “encouraging goodness and praying for blessings” when introducing Chinese folk beliefs, and avoiding sensitive details. When facing conflicts, they take the initiative to mediate and reach consensus. They once promoted Chinese and Malaysian merchants to integrate Chinese dragon patterns with Malaysian orchids in product design, and formulated a “gentleman’s agreement” for the trade of Sino-Malaysian folk products to reduce disputes from the source.

3.4 Promoters of Folk Industry: Coordinated Development of Cultural Economy

With the support of the economy, Malaysian Chinese promote the coordinated development of Sino-Malaysian folk custom tourism, cultural and creative industries, and trade, making folk custom exchange more sustainable. Folk custom tourism is the core carrier. Malaysian Chinese travel agencies launch “Chinese Folk Custom Experience Tours” and “Multicultural Folk Custom Tours”, connecting festival activities of all ethnic groups; China and Malaysia cooperate to build the “Maritime Silk Road Folk Custom Tourism Belt” to realize in-depth cross-border cultural experience. Folk cultural and creative products highlight the characteristics of integration. Chinese designers integrate Sino-Malaysian elements into notebooks, jewelry and other products; enterprises jointly develop dragon boat and Mazu-themed cultural and creative products, and T-shirts printed with Sino-Malaysian dragon boat race patterns have become popular souvenirs among tourists.

4. Practical Difficulties in Malaysian Chinese Playing the Linkage Role

4.1 Weakened Cultural Inheritance: Fading Identification with Chinese Culture Among Young Chinese Generations

The continuous fading of identification with Chinese culture among young Malaysian Chinese, along with the significant decline in their willingness and ability to inherit folk customs, has become a core difficulty. The impact of Western culture brought by globalization is particularly prominent: most young people prefer Western festivals, have a lack of understanding of traditional customs such as the Dragon Boat Festival and “Three Letters and Six Rites”, and have little interest in Chinese opera and other forms of Chinese culture, considering them “outdated”. Chinese education is facing multiple challenges: although the system is complete, it relies heavily on donations from Chinese societies and tuition fees, with insufficient government investment, resulting in outdated teaching facilities and a shortage of teachers in many schools. Moreover, many Chinese families believe that it is easier for their children to find jobs if they are proficient in English and Malay, so they send their children to English or Malay schools, leading to a continuous loss of students in Chinese schools. In addition, the teaching content is somewhat disconnected from practice. For example, folk custom courses focus more on theory and have few practical activities, making students feel “boring” and unable to remember what they have learned. The chain of family inheritance has been broken: young Chinese parents are mostly busy with work and have no time to teach their children folk knowledge, and many families do not even celebrate traditional festivals in a proper way. An interviewed Chinese mother said that the Spring Festival is just a meal and giving red envelopes, and customs such as ancestor worship and pasting Spring Festival couplets are omitted, “children are not interested in learning, thinking it is troublesome”. Some families hire nannies to take care of their children, resulting in less time for parents to interact with their children, and the chain of folk custom inheritance is naturally broken.

4.2 Restrictions from Social Environment: Tensions in Malaysia’s Multiculturalism

The hidden tensions in Malaysia’s multicultural pattern have brought multiple restrictions to Chinese folk custom exchange. The “Malay First” policy puts Chinese in a passive position: Chinese education receives limited government support, and Chinese societies face great difficulties in applying for venues and funds when organizing folk activities. It is understood that a Penang Chinese society took 3 months to apply for a government venue for a large-scale dragon boat race and did not receive any financial subsidies, and finally relied entirely on corporate sponsorship to hold the event. Some Malay politicians deliberately exaggerate ethnic conflicts, claiming that Chinese “overemphasizing Chinese culture will threaten Malay

culture”, which puts great pressure on Chinese when organizing folk exchange activities. Religious and cultural differences also bring many troubles: Malaysia takes Islam as the state religion, and Islamic culture has a profound impact on daily life. However, some elements in Chinese folk customs, such as burning paper money during ancestor worship, pork in diet, and idol worship in folk beliefs, are in conflict with Islamic culture. When Chinese organize folk food exchanges, they cannot include pork or alcohol, otherwise Malay people will feel disgusted; when promoting folk beliefs, they can only talk about “encouraging goodness”, and cannot mention idol worship, otherwise they will be accused of “spreading heresy”.

4.3 Insufficient Exchange Mechanisms: Low Institutionalization of Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange

Most Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchanges are spontaneous at the grassroots level, lacking long-term and stable mechanisms, making it difficult for Malaysian Chinese to give full play to their linkage role. There is a lack of stable cooperation platforms: there is no special coordination agency for Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange in the two countries, official cooperation platforms are scarce, and grassroots platforms are mostly temporarily organized, which disperse after activities and are difficult to form sustainable effects. For example, although the China-Malaysia Dragon Boat Race is held every year, there is no long-term cooperation agreement, and it may be interrupted due to funding or venue issues^[3]. Moreover, most exchange platforms are concentrated in festivals and sports, with few in-depth cooperation platforms in fields such as folk industry, education and research, resulting in insufficient depth of exchange. Financial support is inadequate: the funds for activities mainly rely on donations from Chinese societies and corporate sponsorship, which are unstable. Sometimes, when wanting to hold large-scale activities, the scale has to be reduced due to insufficient funds. The government also does not have special funds for folk custom exchange. For example, when Chinese societies want to organize young Chinese to carry out “root-seeking trips” to China, only a few people can be selected each year due to limited funds, resulting in a narrow coverage. The coordination mechanism is lacking: Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange involves multiple subjects such as governments, societies, enterprises and grassroots organizations, but they act independently without effective communication and coordination. For example, when tourism enterprises promote folk custom routes, they compete with each other, leading to serious homogenization of routes; Chinese societies have poor communication with the government, the approval process for activities is cumbersome, and policy barriers are sometimes encountered. In addition, there are no unified industry norms. In the trade of folk products, some merchants pass off inferior products as high-quality ones, affecting the overall reputation.

5. Practical Paths to Optimize the Linkage Function of Malaysian Chinese

5.1 Strengthen Cultural Inheritance: Enrich Localized Folk Culture Education Content

To address the problem of weakened inheritance, it is necessary to build a “family-society-school-society” four-in-one education system to reshape the cultural identity of young Chinese generations. At the family level, Chinese societies can try to set up “family folk custom inheritance training courses” to guide parents in organizing folk activities and telling folk stories; carry out “model folk custom family selection” to set examples, and encourage families to establish “folk custom files” to lay a solid foundation for intergenerational inheritance. At the society level, innovate activity forms to adapt to young people’s interests: hold “folk culture carnivals”, teach traditional skills through short videos and live broadcasts, organize “root-seeking trips”, and establish folk custom inheritance bases. At the school level, Chinese schools can strengthen the integration of folk culture into formal courses, compile localized textbooks, set up more practical activities, establish folk custom societies, and invite folk artists and experts to enter the campus. At the social level, Chinese societies cooperate with local media to set up folk custom columns and broadcast documentaries, build “folk culture streets” to display traditional handicrafts and folk food, and hold “Chinese Folk Culture Festivals” inviting people of all ethnic groups to participate.

5.2 Promote Social Integration: Advance the Equal Coexistence of Malaysia’s Multiculturalism

To optimize the social environment, we need to aim at the equal coexistence of multiculturalism and deepen integration from multiple dimensions such as policies, culture and economy. In terms of policy advocacy, Chinese societies appeal to the government to increase investment in Chinese education through parliamentary representatives, promote the establishment of multicultural consulting institutions, and co-host cultural forums with other ethnic societies. In terms of cultural interaction,

organize “multicultural folk custom carnivals”, establish national cultural inheritance alliances, and encourage Chinese to take the initiative to participate in festivals of other ethnic groups. In terms of win-win cooperation, Chinese enterprises work with enterprises of other ethnic groups to develop folk custom tourism packages and characteristic cultural and creative products; societies of all ethnic groups jointly participate in public welfare activities such as donations and disaster relief; in community construction, Chinese and people of other ethnic groups work together to manage the environment and organize activities, creating a “harmonious neighborhood” atmosphere.

5.3 Improve Exchange Mechanisms: Build a Government-Grassroots Coordinated Sino-Malaysian Folk Custom Exchange Platform

To ensure the sustainability of exchanges, institutionalized construction is required to build a cooperation pattern of “government guidance, grassroots leadership and government-grassroots coordination”. At the government level, China and Malaysia expand channels for coordinating folk custom exchanges, incorporate folk custom exchanges into the annual people-to-people and cultural exchange plan, sign cooperation agreements, set up special funds, and simplify the approval process. At the grassroots level, Chinese societies cooperate with Chinese grassroots organizations to establish the “China-Malaysia Folk Custom Exchange Association”, regularly hold activities such as dragon boat races and folk product fairs, set up the “China-Malaysia Folk Custom Research Center”, and build online platforms using new media. In terms of government-grassroots coordination, the government supports grassroots organizations through government procurement of services and financial subsidies; grassroots organizations cooperate with government plans to undertake exchange projects such as promoting Sino-Malaysian folk custom tourism; establish an activity effect evaluation mechanism to continuously optimize activity plans based on tourist satisfaction and cultural communication effects.

5.4 Empower Young Generations: Cultivate Reserve Forces for Cross-Cultural Folk Custom Exchange

Focusing on youth empowerment, cultivate reserve forces for cross-cultural communication from three aspects: education, practice and platforms. In terms of educational empowerment, Chinese schools and societies offer courses on cross-cultural communication and folklore, organize “cross-cultural exchange training courses” and China-Malaysia youth summer/winter camps, and teach practical skills. In terms of practical empowerment, let young people deeply participate in the planning and organization of folk activities, such as serving as volunteers for dragon boat races, hosts of folk activities and designers of cultural and creative products; encourage young people to start businesses, such as opening cultural and creative stores, travel agencies or self-media accounts, to spread Sino-Malaysian folk culture in a way favored by young people; organize them to intern and study in China to deeply understand Chinese folk culture and society and broaden their horizons. In terms of platform empowerment, hold the “China-Malaysia Youth Folk Culture Creative Competition” to promote the implementation of excellent works; organize the “China-Malaysia Youth Folk Custom Forum” to provide academic exchange channels for young people; build a youth exchange network platform to support young Chinese from China and Malaysia to connect with each other and cooperate on projects such as shooting short videos and conducting online cultural exchanges.

Conclusion

The warmth and vitality of Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange are rooted in the dual identity and persistence of Malaysian Chinese as “both Chinese and Malaysian”. With multiple roles as disseminators of folk symbols, builders of exchange platforms, resolvers of cultural differences and promoters of folk industries, they have become the core link for mutual learning of folk customs between the two countries, integrating cultural exchange into daily life and laying a solid emotional foundation. By building a four-in-one cultural inheritance system, promoting the equal coexistence of multiculturalism, improving the government-grassroots coordinated exchange mechanism and empowering young generations, the linkage function of Chinese can be fully released, and Sino-Malaysian folk custom exchange can be deepened.

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Reference

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