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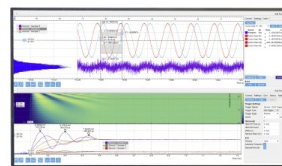
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# The Identity of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese Through Clothing: An Aesthetic Morphology Approach

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**Abstract.** The term, ‘peranakan’ refers to a community that traces its lineage to the first waves of Hoklo (Han Chinese) settlers who interacted, especially through marriage, with the local people of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago. There are various types of the Peranakans in Malaysia such as the Baba-Nyonya, Chitty, Kristang (mostly in Melaka) and other Peranakan Muslims of Indian, Malay and Arab descent known as Jawi Peranakan. The Kelantan Peranakan Chinese (also known as *Cina Peranakan Kelantan* in Malay) is another unique ethnic group of Peranakans characterised by its mixture of three cultures: the local Malay of Kelantan, Chinese and Thai. However, this acculturated ethnicity seems to be less appreciated by the younger generation of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. One of the reasons is perhaps due to a general perception of the Kelantanese people that label them as *cina kampung* or *cina bukit*. To the older generation of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, they are proud to be called *cina kampung* whereas the younger generation may view this term as derogatory, implying that they are not advanced or modern people. The dwindling sense of pride among the younger generation may have resulted in the dying culture of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. A diluting image in their cultural artefacts is a case in point. Clothing, which is one of the important cultural artefacts, is gradually forgotten by the younger generation. Modern clothing is more appealing to them compared to the simplicity of clothing worn by their elder folks in the *kampung* (village). This study is aimed at examining the clothing of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, particularly, by studying its components of design elements using the aesthetic morphology approach. The formalistic aspect of the clothing, for instance, the ubiquitous paired blouse and sarong are a reflection of three cultural amalgamation of Malay, Chinese and Thai. The aesthetic aspect is also shown through their humble way of clothing hence symbolising a simple way of life of the community of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. The finding thus concludes that the form and style of clothing worn by the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese is distinctive from other Peranakans in different states of Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

Culture in an anthropological definition refers to the ‘whole system of idea/vision, action and artefacts made by human by going through the process of learning. There are seven elements or system in culture which includes knowledge, language, society, technology, economy, religion and arts. The existence of culture can be seen through the inspiration of idea, their activities and the artefacts or cultural objects that one produced. The cultural objects can be in the form of tangible or intangible product. In this study, the researchers focus on the tangible product of the Peranakan Chinese of Kelantan which reflect their way of learning own culture through clothing.

The distinctiveness of Kelantan Peranakan Chinese is characterised by its strong infusion of the Malay culture in particular, and also influenced by Thai culture due to Kelantan’s close proximity to Thailand. The acculturated combination of these three different cultures, namely, Malay, Chinese and Thai, has given rise to the emergence of a

unique Peranakan community in Malaysia. This research aims at investigating the clothing of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese, regarded as a cultural artefact that reflects a mixture of the three cultures. This study further examines the aesthetical aspects of the clothing of this particular group of Peranakan ethnicity.

Chinese community in Kelantan is labelled as Peranakan Chinese [1]. Based on the description of Kelantan that the Malays (natives) are not allowed to marry the Chinese [1]. However, in some cases, the marriage between Malay and Chinese happens but rarely. They are more likely to marry Siamese women due to the religious similarity, mostly Buddhism, which facilitates easier intermarriage between these two communities. Chinese–Thai marriage marks the beginning of the Peranakan Chinese family in Kelantan. The history of intermarriage usually happens between Chinese Buddhism, while Malay Muslims often rare. In many cases, their children grow up as Thai rather than Chinese under the influence of their mother. In this manner, Thai culture has somewhat ‘infused’ in their daily lives.

Most of the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan live in the rural areas as farmers or rubber tappers. Even though the later generations have slowly opted for a different way of running their source of income (by doing businesses like retails), they still live within the vicinity of their village. It is commonly observed that the community can easily be found on the outskirts of Kelantan. They blend their lifestyle with the locals while adapting local customs. They have their own language system, but they have a mixture of Thai vocabulary in their daily conversation as well. In their daily conversation, one can notice the mixture of three different languages (Malay, Chinese and Thai) which makes it trickier to understand.

Their social system is similar to the Malays but they still practice certain Thai ceremonies and Chinese rituals. Due to the mixture of the three distinct cultures, the varieties of their culture can be seen through their artefacts such as food, performing arts, language and clothing. At the group level, acculturation entails the widespread adoption of the values, practices, forms of art, and technologies of other cultures. These can be reflected through the adoption of ideas, beliefs, and ideology which changed their attitude due to intercultural characteristic thus further creating their own identity. Since most of them speak in the local Kelantanese dialect, their identity is closer to Malay than to Chinese. Even during the interview sessions, most of them (especially the older ones) cannot speak Chinese at all. Their taste in food is similar to the Malays as they even have their own version of *budu* – a local fish sauce commonly enjoyed by the Malays in Kelantan.

According to previous researcher focus on the Peranakan Chinese community in contemporary Kelantan, Malaysia’, mentioned that:

*“Peranakan cultures are generously peppered with various elements of native culture via acculturation process while still retaining its original ethnic ‘mould’. These are visible from their Peranakan identity markers such as clothes, food, leisure and entertainment activities” [2].*

Unlike Peranakans in Melaka, who are proud of their heritage, the Peranakans in Kelantan are ashamed of their roots, reluctant to be addressed as ‘village Chinese’ (*Cina kampung*) which is usually translated as unsophisticated farmers in rural areas in Kelantan. As a result, the younger generation prefers to work elsewhere but the *kampung*, so as to avoid being labelled as *Cina kampung*. Such sentiment is reiterated by the spokesman of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese Association or *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Kelantan* (PPCK):

*“...one can't help but noticing similar patterns emerging from remarks that the sub-ethnic group is doomed to extinction in near future. This is mainly due to two main culprits, viz., modernization/globalization and the domination of ethnic demarcation in Malaysian setting.”*

It can be summed up that Peranakanness in Peranakan Chinese identity is said to have become 'diluted', 'more Chinese' and 'less Malay'. While some may have lamented that the Peranakan identity is 'gradually fading from the scene', some even crudely predict the extinction of 'this unfortunate group' within 30 to 40 years [3].

Thus, there are two basic problems which need to be addressed. Firstly, it is not always possible, without in-depth research to be certain who is and who is not a Peranakan. Secondly, the Peranakan community in this country has a history of at least 200 years. But like most communities, it is not sociologically static. Over the years the community’s identity has become increasingly vague due to numerous changes as a result of the boundary that divides the Peranakan from the rest of the Chinese. In more recent years, differences between the two are not easily identifiable.

In a conference proceedings titled ‘Discourse on 'Peranakanness' with focus on the Peranakan Chinese community in contemporary Kelantan, Malaysia’ it has the following commentary:

*“With regards of clothes, Older Generation's romantic Peranakan image of tight, long kebaya worn with sarong for the females, and shirtless males wearing only sarong and semutar, have been long immortalised in various literature review.”[2].*

Donning kebaya and batik sarong among the Peranakan women has often been generalised as a Peranakan identity. However, this is not necessarily applicable to the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. In this study, the researchers examine the visual appearance of the Peranakan costumes especially on among women to see if they stereotypically wear kebaya and batik sarong. Numerous changes in cultural elements among the Peranakan Community have contributed to the ‘dilution’ of identity, especially in terms of physical appearance. The identity can be visual or spiritual. It can be seen that the diluted visual identity of the Peranakans will undermine their uniqueness by being an ethnic that has three acculturated cultures. In addition, the acculturation of the cultures among the young Peranakans has become increasingly vague. Therefore, there is an urgency to spread the beauty of Peranakan appearance so that the artefact of Peranakan clothing can still be adapted by the younger generation.

In order to solve the underlining problems, the objectives of this study are to understand the cultural amalgams behind the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese’s clothing especially among the women. It is also to comprehend the form and style of the Peranakan women’s clothing in order to preserve the traditional elements.

## METHODOLOGY

The approach used in this research is qualitative data, since the objective is to examine data using the aesthetical analysis. The visual data will later be transferred to findings of this study after a triangulation process has been done using multiple sources of data as stated in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Data Collection

Data	Source of data	Types of data	Instrument	Location
Documentation	Internet/ library Museums	Journal/ book/ catalogues/ etc	Computer/ wifi	Online, Museum of Peranakan library, Pasir Mas Kelantan
Observation & Visual documentation	On site visit	Pictures/ video Visual data	Video Camera	Pasir Mas, Bachok Kelantan
Interviews	Matron Sik, Wee Kiok Eia (respondents)	Voice / video recording and notes on site	Recorder/ Video	Tanah Merah, Kota Bharu, Bachok Kelantan

Based on the methods above, the research team went to a few places to collect data in a few Peranakan villages located in Tanah Merah, Pasir Mas and Bachok as shown in Figs. 1 to 4. The documentation data such as journal articles, books and conference proceedings will set the base for this research, whereby the on-site data will lead to the major findings of this research. From the data gathered, the researcher will make a conclusion based on the data analysed using the theory of aesthetic morphology which was introduced by Munro in 1970 in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Data analysis



Visual & location	Elements	Indication
 <p><b>FIGURE 1.</b> Respondent from Pasir Mas</p> <p>Description: Kebaya Kota Bharu (KB) with Batik sarong. The top blouse is slightly above the hipline.</p>	<p><b>Form:</b> The shape of the top blouse is hourglass, like most kebaya.</p> <p><b>Texture:</b> Plain top with floral embroidery as surface embellishment. <b>Motif:</b> Mostly floral</p> <p><b>Colours:</b> Purple (top) with brownish based batik, most probably not local.</p> <p><b>Lines</b> The top blouse embroidered as organic lines as it resembles floral motifs.</p>	<p>Hourglass shape came later, after the Western influence had demonstrated the body shape using dart. Therefore, kebaya KB is derived from neither Malay nor Chinese culture, since both cultures have a tube-shaped dress historically, unlike the body fitting fashion in the west [4].</p> <p>Floral textures are very famous among the Malays since Islamic teaching forbids the usage of fauna motifs [5]</p> <p>Colours such as purple are very synonym in Malay cultures, thus the name of <i>ungu biji kundang</i> had been around for hundreds of years [6]</p> <p>The dull colour of batik however is not something familiar among the locals, since Kelantanese prefer vibrant colours. The respondent admitted that she likes batik from Indonesia, therefore many of her collections are batik from Java.</p>
 <p><b>FIGURE 2.</b> Respondent from Chekok, Pasir Mas.</p> <p>Description: Short sleeves blouse (floral) with Batik sarong. The top is short, above the hipline.</p>	<p><b>Form</b> The shape of the top and bottom of the dress is tube.</p> <p><b>Texture</b> Floral top made from textured lace and Malay batik design as sarong.</p> <p><b>Colours</b> White base with red and black motifs for the top. As for the batik sarong, it has black and red as dominant colours. Other colours include brown, yellowish hues and green.</p> <p><b>Lines</b> The top blouse has organic lines as it resembles floral motifs</p>	<p>The tube-like shape is very common among the Malays, since Islam forbids showing of the body or the wearer especially among women.</p> <p>The short-sleeved blouse is similar to the Thai top worn by the women, that it can either be short sleeved or sleeveless, which is commonly seen in their traditional costumes like <i>Dusit</i> and <i>Chakkri</i> dresses [7].</p> <p>The batik worn is the one made by locals since it has vibrant contrasting colours. The usage of black is uncommon among the Chinese since it is considered taboo among them. But the combination between black and red shows the tolerance of colours among the Peranakans whereby it is okay to use black, as long as it is paired with the red, which is considered a prosperous colour in their culture [8].</p> <p>Again, floral motifs are common among the Malays, but the motifs can also be found in many cultures in SEA [9].</p>

TABLE 2. Data analysis (Continued...)

Visual & location	Elements	Indication
 <p><b>FIGURE 3.</b> Respondent from Tawang, Kelantan</p> <p>Description: Short sleeves blouse (plain) with Batik sarong. The top is slightly lower than the hipline.</p>	<p><b>Form</b> The shape of the top and bottom of the dress is tube.</p> <p><b>Texture</b> Plain top with batik sarong with floral motifs.</p> <p><b>Colours</b> Red blouse as the top, commonly used by the Chinese during the new year.</p> <p>The batik paired with the blouse inclusive of red based with the accent colours of green, white and brown.</p> <p><b>Lines</b> The motifs on the batik sarong resembles organic lines with floral motifs.</p>	<p>Similar to the above respondent, the tube-like shape is very common among the Malays, since Islam forbids showing of the body or the wearer especially among women.</p> <p>The short-sleeved blouse is similar to the Thai blouse which is commonly found among the people (Seo, 2014). Since the picture is taken during CNY, the respondent had chosen a red blouse and paired it with red batik sarong because the colour red is said to bring good luck to the Chinese [8]</p> <p>The bright coloured batik also indicates the local culture of Kelantanese who likes bright colours. Unlike the Peranakans in Melaka, they prefer lighter tones or brownish based which has influences from Indonesian batik.</p>
 <p><b>FIGURE 4.</b> Old picture from a respondent house in Tawang</p> <p>Description: Picture on the right: plain long sleeves blouse with batik sarong. The top is slightly higher than the hipline.</p>	<p><b>Form</b> The shape of the top is slightly hourglass with the bottom shape of tube.</p> <p><b>Texture</b> The top appeared to be plain with a see-through lace for the sleeves, lined with a plain coloured bodice.</p> <p><b>Colours</b> Since the picture is in grey scale, the top looks white with slightly darker hues for the bottom sarong.</p> <p><b>Lines</b> The motifs on the batik sarong resembles organic lines with floral motifs.</p>	<p>The old picture indicates that wearing a blouse and batik are common in the Kelantanese peranakan culture. The respondent mentioned that the picture was taken by the 4<sup>th</sup> generation above them. It shows that, wearing a blouse and sarong had been in their culture for many generations. Therefore, it conforms that the Peranakans did not wear kebaya and sarong like the Malaccan Peranakans, but wearing a blouse and batik is their culture. The use of long sleeves blouse is similar to Malay dresses since most of the Malay clothing among women are long sleeved. The batik sarong however is quite difficult to determine since the colour and motifs are quite vague due to the old source.</p>

Based on the data obtained from the visits to the Peranakan villages, even during their biggest cultural celebration which is Chinese New Year, it is rare to see them wearing kebaya, unlike the Peranakans in Melaka. Most of the time, the women especially the older generations (above 50 years old) opt to wear blouse and batik sarong. The blouse is normally short (on the hipline or slightly lower) with short sleeves. The men however will wear t-shirt and sarong (batik or *pelikat*) at home. When they go out to do their daily chores, the men can also be seen wearing the *semutar* (local head dress). Therefore, we should not generalise that Peranakan women in Malaysia always wear kebaya. It is proven that there is a variety where women of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese prefer to wear batik sarong, instead, unlike the ones in Melaka.

The observation of the Kelantanese Peranakan's clothing as earlier, where elements of form, texture, colour and line, may contribute to the aesthetic feeling or experience. The aesthetic morphology describes the nature, varieties [sic] of forms and ingredient in art and used to stimulate the aesthetic experience. Such findings are resonant with Thomas Munro's ideas in which form and style are the main contributing factors in the aesthetic morphology, as shown in his book, *Form and Style in the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetic Morphology* (1970). Thus, the aesthetic morphology of Kelantanese Peranakan women's fashion can be examined through its formalistic and stylistic attributes as discussed above.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis showed that the elements in the Kelantanese Peranakans has three major cultural influences: Chinese, Malay and Thai. It can be summarised as as shown in Table 3:

**TABLE 3.** Identifying the cultural origin based on the design elements in Peranakan's clothing

Elements	Cultural origins	Chinese	Malay	Thai
Form	The tube liked blouses are common among the Malays. But normally the top must cover the hip for the Malays, only then this will be considered noble in their custom. The loose-fitting top is also common among the Chinese, whereby they only switched to hourglass shape when the British introduced dart in their dresses. The short blouse has similarity with the Thai society.	/	/	/
Shape	The short sleeves blouse is very common in Chinese culture, so does the Thai. Therefore, the similarity does reflect the combination of both cultures.	/		/
2D Texture: Floral motifs	Malay and many SEA origins. The motifs are more prominent among the Malay since Islam forbids the usage of fauna motifs in their patterns.	/	/	/
Colours	Chinese love red and yellow hues, since they resemble prosperity and good luck.	/		/
	Colours like black and purple have been around for ages among the Malay culture. After Islam had been introduced, colours do not represent any meaning or rank anymore.		/	
	Bright colours in batik normally represent the local preferences among the Kelantanese since vibrant colours can be found throughout the local artefacts such as dwelling, food and local textiles. Bright colours like red and yellow are the preferred ones.		/	
Lines	Organic lines are very popular among the Malay culture. This can also be found in the Malay woodcarving motifs, which selects only the best flora to be engraved as motifs at their houses.		/	

The common form shared by all three cultures are tube-like blouses, which can be seen among the Thais, the Malays and the rural Chinese. The only difference is that the sleeve length varies, from sleeveless among the Thais to short sleeved among the Chinese. But for Malays, after Islam was introduced, the women started wearing long sleeves. The 2-Dimensional textures or motifs which are similar by the three cultures are floral, even though the Thais and Chinese normally have their own mystical creatures such as dragon or *Makara* (among the Thai) that are popular. But when it is translated into motifs of batik, the Kelantanese Peranakan rather blend with the local Malay culture which embed floral as their main source of inspiration. Therefore, the motifs that commonly found on local batik worn by them are mostly floral.

As for the colour preference, the Chinese prefer red or similar shades such as pink or gold like hues such as yellow, orange or gold as it represents auspicious colours. The bright coloured template is also shared by the Thais, as it can be seen in its traditional woven textiles. The Malays in Kelantan may expose to these cultures, that has also similar liking of bright coloured textiles that can be seen on its local batik. Therefore, it is not quite surprising to see the colours of Kelantanese batik is rather bright compared to other states in Malaysia.

Lines that resemble motifs in local batik are still dominated by organic curves. Similar lines can also be found in the Malay traditional woodcarvings which inspired the local batik motifs. Unlike the Thais, which have more triangular geometrical patterns representing fire or mountains normally seen in temple or *wat* [10]. Motifs seen in traditional Chinese pattern however do have organic lines especially for the altar that resembles mythical motifs like dragon and fire (see Figs. 5 and 6).



**FIGURE 5.** Dragon pictures seen on textiles at the Peranakan house, put on the altar.



**FIGURE 6.** Motifs seen on *wat* or Buddhist temples  
Source: <https://www.thaiworldview.com/wat/wat2.htm>

To sum up, it is shown that the aesthetic morphology focusing on various forms and styles of the clothing, has further enhance understanding the cultural artefact, in particular, the women's clothing of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. This method reechoes what the task of aesthetic morphology is to distinguish this variety of forms, in term [sic] of elements, details, parts, materials, ideas or other ingredient involved and also the way they are interrelated to each other [11].

## CONCLUSIONS

Through this study on Peranakan clothing, it can be concluded that the clothing worn by the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan is not similar to the Peranakans in Melaka or Penang. Many researches usually focus on the kebaya *nyonya*, that is considered to be their common costume. However, the Kelantanese Peranakan may offer a variation as reflected in their preferences of choosing simple blouses and batik sarongs, which also symbolises the simplicity of life that may define them as simple villagers. In their simple life as the village folks, they have different set of social interactions with the locals and their economy activities in the village. Therefore, extravagant clothing is not their preference, hence simplicity of their lifestyle is shown through their looks in clothing.

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