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the Cultural Heritage of Malay**

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Emotional Pleasantness of Malaysian Chinese towards the Cultural Heritage of Malay

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Abstract

It is believed that the socio-cultural of the Chinese community in Malaysia evolved from the culture of the Malays, the major ethnic group in the country. This study aimed to examine the emotional pleasantness of the Chinese towards the cultural heritage of Malay. Five pieces of images (*wau bulan*, *baju melayu/baju kurung*, *ketupat*, *tepak sireh* and *sultan*) were presented to undergraduate students in a local institution (62 Malay and 48 Chinese). Participants rated their emotional pleasantness using The Self-assessment Manikin – a non-verbal pictorial single measure scale with ratings from one (low valence) to nine (high valence). Malay and Chinese indicated significant differences in their emotional pleasantness towards the cultural heritage of Malay. Specifically, the Chinese participants exhibited lower mean of emotional pleasantness than the Malays in all the presented images. Factors such as the historical background of the Chinese participants might greatly contribute to their psychosocial development especially in relation to the culture of the Malays, the population majority.

Keywords: Malay cultural heritage, emotion, valence, ethnicity

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Introduction

Malaysia comprises of three main ethnicities – Malay, Chinese and Indian. The Malays are the majority and are considered the main ethnicity that makes up 67% of the population followed by the Chinese which makes up 25% of the total number of Malaysians. The Indians denote a small proportion of approximately 7.3% from the total population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2016). Although some parts of their traditions might have been adapted from other traditions, each ethnic group maintains some of their original traditional customs or beliefs especially in relation to religious events like *eidul fitri* (Islam celebration) in the Malay community and the tradition of wearing *cheongsam* in the Chinese community.

It is believed that the Chinese community migrated to Malaysia (formerly known as Tanah Melayu) thousands of years ago. Documentation of the history of Tanah Melayu stated that the growth of the Chinese population in Tanah Melayu began from the marriage of the China princess (Hang Li Poh) with the Sultan of Malacca that happened around the 15th century. It was also stated that the economic factor had given huge influence on the emergence of the Chinese during that time. It was documented that many Chinese were brought from mainland China to carry out the tin mining operated in Tanah Melayu by the British colonialist. During that time, Malacca – a famous state in Tanah Melayu due to its strategic location in connecting many traders around the world especially the traders from China, had contributed to the continuous growth of the Chinese community in Tanah Melayu over generations in a harmonious manner (Othman 2002; Rostam 1984; Shafie and Zainudin 2000).

The National Heritage Department (2018) has listed *wau bulan*, *baju kurung/baju melayu*, *ketupat*, *tepak sireh* and the King ceremony as tangible national cultural heritages originated from the Malay tradition.

The *wau bulan* (Figure 1) is a traditional kite that is usually played by people from the East Coast of Malaysia. Due to its crescent moon-like shape, it was named as '*wau bulan*'. Its charming appearance has attracted the government of Malaysia to use its image in representing several national symbols such as on the tail of the coin and on the logo of Malaysia Airlines (MAS).

Figure 1. *The Wau Bulan*



The *baju kurung* (for women) (Figure 2) and *baju melayu* (for men) (Figure 3) are the famous traditional dresses among the Malay community. The *baju kurung* is usually made of *songket* or *batik* materials, which are the Malay traditional fabrics. It is believed that the *baju kurung* was made popular as a Malay female dress in the late 19th century, which was during the administration of the king of Johor, Sultan Abu Bakar. It is also believed that the *baju kurung* was greatly influenced by the Islamization factor in Tanah Melayu that happened around the 1970s and 1980s. Not only in Malaysia, the *baju kurung* can also be found in other Southeast Asia countries such as Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.

Figure 2. *The Baju Kurung*



Meanwhile, *baju melayu* is a well-known traditional dress among the Malay men in Malaysia that is also popular in other countries such as Indonesia and

Singapore. Usually paired with trousers and a complementary *sampin* (a sarong wrapped at the waist), the *baju melayu* has recently become popular not only in traditional and religious events such as weddings and religious celebrations but also in official national events. Malay men usually match *baju melayu* with *songket* (worn on the waist above the pants) and *songkok* (as the headdress) (Amirul Ihsan 2009; Fuller 2000). The *songket* (a hand-woven clothing material using silk or cotton with intricate patterns in gold or silver) is known as a luxurious and prestigious traditional fabric that is popular among the royal families and is heavily worn during ceremonial occasions.

Figure 3. The *Baju Melayu*



The *ketupat* (Figure 4), another symbolism in the Malay tradition is a popular traditional food that can be found not only in Malaysia, but in some other Southeast Asia countries with different names. Made from rice, the *ketupat* is usually eaten with chicken or beef *rendang* (a kind of Malay-styled curry) and served as a main menu (among other main menus) during Islamic celebration such as *lebaran* (Eid ul-Fitr). The popularity of the *ketupat* is speculated to have taken place during the Sultanate of Demak, which is around the 15th century, together with the spread of Islam in Java (Akbar 2013; Heriyono 2013).

Figure 4. The *Ketupat*



Other symbols of the Malay cultural heritage include the *Tepak Sireh* (Figure 5) and the King (*sultan*) ceremony (Figure 6). The *Tepak sireh* is a traditional Malay metal container for storing betel leaves that are used for chewing usually by older people. The chewing of betel leaves is also popular among the elderly from other ethnicities in Malaysia such as the Indians. The King ceremony is usually held every five years to appoint a new king of the country. During the ceremony, the king, the princesses, and all the attendees would be seen wearing traditional Malay costumes with the colour of yellow. The yellow colour has been declared as an official colour for any event related to the king ceremony.

Figure 5. *Tepak Sireh*



Figure 6. King (*Sultan*) Ceremony



Nowadays, the absorption of the Malay culture into the culture of Chinese can be seen everywhere such as in communication, clothing, economy, food and even hobbies (Abidin et al. 2016). Termed as “acculturation”, this phenomenon demonstrated its strong effect especially in the daily meals of the Chinese. It was observed that the Chinese have everyday meals that are comparable to the Malays such as curry, *nasi dagang*, *nasi lemak*, *nasi himpit*, *ketupat* and so on. Moreover, some Chinese prefer to use their hands while having food rather than practising in the traditional manner (i.e., using chopstick).

Thus, in this study, we were interested to find out whether the Chinese participants in our sample indicated similarities with the Malay participants with regards to emotional pleasantness in responding towards the Malay cultural heritage visualization, which are the Malay traditional game (i.e., *wau bulan*), Malay traditional dress (i.e., *baju melayu* and *baju kurung*), Malay traditional food (i.e., *ketupat*), Malay traditional tool (*tepak sireh*) and the Malay ceremony of the King (*sultan*).

Materials and Methods

Subjects

A total of 110 undergraduate students were invited to participate in this study. A small number of Indian participants and participants from other ethnicities (N=5) were excluded as the focus of the study was to compare between the Malay and Chinese ethnicities. The mean age of both ethnicities (Malay 21.21 ± 0.85 ; Chinese 21.31 ± 1.8) was not significantly different [$t(108) = 0.40$, $p > 0.05$]. Most of the respondents were female (N=67). Participants who had uncorrected vision, history of affective disorder and were born in a mix-marriage family (Malay and Chinese, Malay and other ethnicity, Chinese and other ethnicity) were not included in the study. More than half of the respondents (N=63) had corrected their vision using either glasses or contact lens.

Procedure

Five pieces of Malay cultural heritage pictures (the *wau bulan*, the *baju melayu* and the *baju kurung*, the *ketupat*, the *tepak sireh* and the King or *Sultan* ceremony) were displayed to the participants, which took place in a lecture hall. Participants (Malay and Chinese) responded to the displayed pictures by rating their emotional level using the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) (Bradley and Lang, 1994). All pictures were well-known uncopyrighted images that have been declared as the tangible cultural heritage of Malaysia by the National Heritage Department (2018).

The level of valence that measured the range of emotional pleasantness was determined by the SAM – a single-item scale ranging from score of nine (highly pleasantness) to score of one (minimal pleasantness) with the score at the middle of the continuum (i.e., 5) implying a neutral emotional response (Bradley and Lang 1994). As a scale that has been used widely and as a time-effective measure

(Bynion and Feldner 2017; Geethanjali et al. 2017), the SAM is a rating scale that is used to capture one’s intrinsic attraction (positive valence) or aversion (negative valence) to an event, object, or situation as a response to these emotional stimuli. During the emotional rating, participants were instructed to refer to the non-verbal pictorials provided that come with the scoring number (Lang et al. 1994).

The study protocol was endorsed by the Human Ethical Committee (Reference Number: USM/JEPeM17090391). The study objectives and procedure were fully described to all participants. Participants were required to place their signature for the informed consent upon agreement to be involved in the study. Information sheets were also distributed for their keeping.

Statistical Analysis

Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. The analysis of independent t-test was carried out to examine the differences in emotional pleasantness (in response to the Malay cultural heritage images) between the two major ethnicities in Malaysia (Malay versus Chinese).

Results

The reliability of displayed pictures as rated by 110 participants was deemed acceptable with a Cronbach’s Alpha value of more than 0.7 for each pictures.

It was observed that, the emotional pleasantness between Malay and Chinese was statistically differed [$t(108) = 6.12; p < 0.001$]. The ethnic of Malay indicated higher mean of emotional pleasantness (valence score) (7.16 ± 1.25) than the ethnic of Chinese (5.73 ± 1.15). Further analysis was carried out for each pictures in order to observe specifically the effect of ethnic on various types of Malay cultural heritage. It was observed that, the emotional pleasantness of the Chinese participants (as compared to Malay participants) were significantly lower in all pictures (Table 1).

Table 1. *Ethnic Difference in the Emotional Pleasantness of Malay Cultural Heritage Visualization*

	Mean (SD)		t	df	p-value
	Malay	Chinese			
King - Sultan	7.0 (2.21)	5.81 (1.99)	2.92	108	0.004
Food - Ketupat	7.82 (1.81)	5.94 (1.93)	5.27	108	0.00
Games - Wau Bulan	8.02 (1.35)	6.46 (1.64)	5.47	108	0.00
Clothes - Baju Melayu/Baju Kurung	7.21 (1.95)	5.48 (1.46)	5.13	108	0.00
Tool - Tepak Sireh	5.77 (2.12)	4.96 (1.40)	2.31	108	0.023

Discussion

This study examined the ethnic differences (Malay versus Chinese) in the emotional pleasantness of the Malay cultural heritage visualization. It was found that the Chinese participants rated significantly lower in emotional pleasantness (valence score) for the visualization of Malay cultural heritage, as compared to the Malay participants. Such occasion could be seen in all the displayed pictures. This could be because the visualization was deemed less intrinsically attractive for the Chinese participants. We strongly postulated that this observation was partly due to the historical background of the Chinese community in Malaysia. As mentioned in previous literature, the Chinese generation migrated from the mainland of China thousands of years ago through intermarriages and trading activities in Malacca. At that time, the state of Malacca was documented as a very strategic place for trading activities as it had attracted many traders from around the world especially China.

Even though social psychologist suggested that acculturation (generally acculturation is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the combination of different cultures in a society to form a new or mixed culture and identity) that had taken place in the Chinese community since thousands of years ago had impacted the psychosocial and socio-cultural development of the Chinese in Malaysia, the emotional pleasantness towards one's own cultural heritage, indeed, is an internal or intrinsic dimension that is strongly related to one's original ethnicity. For example, the wearing of *cheongsam* and *changsan* – the popular traditional outfits originated from the mainland of China in the era of Qing Dynasty – is a common practice among the Chinese community in Malaysia. Another example can be seen in their practice of having meal. Most of the Chinese in Malaysia use chopsticks as the main eating utensils to cut and pick up food. This practice is also said to be adopted from their ancestors in mainland China.

Looking into the interpretation of the valence score of the Self-assessment Manikin that we used as a measure of emotion (scores of 1-4 for unpleasantness or low valence; score of 5 for feeling neutral and scores of 6-9 for pleasantness or high valence) (Lang et al., 1994), it was found that the Chinese participants responded to the displayed pictures with scores around the range of neutral (mean of 5.94 ± 1.9 for *ketupat*, 5.48 ± 1.5 for *baju melayu/baju kurung*, 5.81 ± 1.99 for the king ceremony and 4.96 ± 1.40 for *tepak sireh*). However, the picture of *wau bulan* was rated the highest (towards pleasantness) than the other four pictures (mean of 6.46 ± 1.6).

In contrast, the Malay participants rated almost all five pictures in the range of high valence as follows - mean of 7.0 ± 2.21 for the king ceremony; 8.02 ± 1.35 for *wau bulan*, 7.21 ± 1.95 for *baju melayu/kurung*; 7.82 ± 1.81 for *ketupat*. The *tepak sireh* indicated a relatively lower score of valence (with tendency towards pleasantness) than the other pictures (5.77 ± 2.12).

It is to note that kite-playing is popular in both ethnic groups - Chinese and Malay population. This similarity might explain the pleasantness of the Chinese and Malay participants in rating their subjective emotion towards the traditional kite. Perhaps, the pleasant feeling the Chinese participants had towards the Malay

traditional kite visualization was induced, in part, by their imagination of their own traditional kite. It was also said that the design of the Chinese kite was influenced by the Malay traditional kite. This social phenomenon has been recognized by social psychologists as acculturation in which it is defined as “*the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first hand contact with each other*” (Redfield et al. 1936, 146). It is to be understood that acculturation is a phenomenon in which people who get accustomed to the different cultures still retain their original cultural features while adapting to the new culture (Berry 2005; Sam and Berry 2010).

Since emotion can be attributed to the complex culture system that shared certain relations to one’s actions, beliefs and values (Abramitzky et al. 2014; Calzada et al. 2016; Rich 2005; Toegel et al. 2007), other important factors such as integration, interaction, interethnic attitudes and perceptions as well as ethnic identity should be taken into account when explaining the issue of ethnic differences (Rabuska 1969; Shamsul 1996; Yeoh 2006). Moreover, the expression of emotion has been regarded as prewired in the human brain as a result of experience whereby these emotions are further exhibited conforming to rules that are culture-specific (Burgoon et al. 1996).

Conclusion

Beside historical background, factors such as the socio-demographic and psychosocial aspects might contribute to the discrepancy observed between the two ethnicities in evoked emotion towards cultural heritage. Nonetheless, this remark should be inferred carefully as the visualization used might not have fully elucidated the phenomenon of emotion in cultural heritage.

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