

Explore the Traditional Malaysian Chinese Values behind “Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin”

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ABSTRACT

“Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin” is a short story by Mohd. Helmi Ahmad and is included in the Malay literature selection for Form 1 of National Secondary Schools in Malaysia “KURINGIN Berterima Kasih” (2024). The story focuses on the Lim family, a Chinese family: daughter Lim Meng, long branded a “jinx,” is blamed by her father, Lim Pooi, for the death of her eldest son, Lim Foong, and the family's decline. She endures her father's misunderstanding and rejection. It's not until her mother, Sim Pau, steps forward and reveals the truth: her eldest son drowned to avoid gambling debts, and the family's decline stems from their father's mismanagement. Lim Pooi repents, and the family reunites before Chinese New Year, rediscovering their family's warmth.

This article goes beyond the conventional appreciation of the novel's plot and characters, and instead takes a Chinese cultural perspective, using the unique textual attribute of “an outside observer writing about a Chinese family” as a starting point to delve deeply into the traditional Malaysian Chinese values hidden behind the story. This article employs a close reading of the text, focusing on family relationships, character behaviors, and cultural symbols such as rice cakes and tangerines in the novel, exploring the underlying traditional Chinese values. It also incorporates a literature review approach to provide theoretical support and cultural context for interpreting these values. Through this research, Mohd. Helmi Ahmad's cross-ethnic perspective not only accurately captures the uniqueness of Chinese values but also uncovers common cross-cultural concepts such as “valuing family” and “pursuing harmony,” making traditional Chinese values a spiritual treasure that transcends family ethnic groups and confirms the important role of literature in fostering cultural exchange across diverse ethnic groups.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Values; Cross-Cultural Literature; Malaysian Chinese Culture; Family Ethics; Cultural Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

The soil of multicultural coexistence in Malaysia has bred many literary creations that transcend ethnic perspectives. Kasih, Mohd. Helmi Ahmad's short story Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin is a particularly representative work. Using rice cakes and mandarin oranges, a culmination of Chinese culinary and gustatory memories, it tells the story of Limau, a daughter of a Chinese family, who faces injustice after her father, Limau, mistakenly identifies her as a “jinx,” ultimately achieving family reconciliation through her mother, Sim Pau, revealing the truth. This observation and writing from a Malay author goes beyond superficial depictions of Chinese culture. Instead, it offers an external perspective into the emotional fabric and value logic of Chinese families, providing a unique textual example for interpreting the vibrant forms and cultural influence of traditional Chinese values in Malaysia.

In the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia, the traditional values of the Chinese community are not only the core of maintaining their own cultural identity, but also gradually become an significant part of Malaysia's overall cultural landscape. The choice of the Malay writer to use the Chinese family as the narrative subject itself reflects the mutual concern and understanding between different ethnic cultures. The father Lim Pooi's superstition about the “broom star” in the novel is essentially a simple expression of the traditional Chinese concept of “good and bad luck”, and a unique understanding of the relationship between fate and family. The author's indulgence

reflects the traditional Chinese family tradition of the eldest son; the rice cakes and tangerines mentioned in the title are standard Lunar New Year offerings in Malaysian Chinese society. These values are not presented through deliberate cultural preaching, but rather embedded in the everyday conflicts and warmth of families, revealing a tangible vitality through the writings of Malay writers.

It is noteworthy that Malay writers' portrayals of traditional Chinese values demonstrate both respect for cultural differences and an implicit exploration of the commonalities of diverse cultures. Rather than focusing on interethnic cultural conflict, the novel explores the emotional bonds within a Chinese family — the father's prejudices stemming from traditional values, the mother's mediation through traditional ethics, and the family's ultimate reconciliation through the core value of "harmony". These plots not only demonstrate the practical role of traditional Chinese values in family life but also reflect the cross-cultural universality of values like "valuing family" and "pursuing harmony." This writing style allows Chinese readers to see reflections of their own culture in the story, while also allowing readers from other ethnic groups to understand that traditional Chinese values are not abstract cultural symbols but rather a life logic woven into everyday choices and emotional expressions.

This article is based on the *Bakul*. This study focuses on the Chinese family relationships, behaviors, and cultural symbols depicted by Malay writers, delving into traditional Chinese values such as the Lunar New Year, superstition, and the role of the eldest son. The study explores how these values are observed and presented from a cross-ethnic perspective, and their unique significance within the multicultural context of Malaysia. By interpreting this text from a Malay writer, the study not only enriches the research on interethnic literary creation in Malaysia but also deepens our understanding of the cultural influence of traditional Chinese values in a diverse society, as well as the potential for cultural exchange among different ethnic groups through literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a diverse society with three major ethnic groups, Malaysia should have a rich practical foundation and academic space for cross-cultural research. However, daily interactions between ethnic groups are currently limited to "transactional" exchanges such as work and business, and in-depth cultural dialogue is seriously lacking. Language differences further limit Malays' direct access to Chinese culture, exacerbating the gap in ethnic cognition and resulting in relatively limited cross-cultural research results. Furthermore, ethnic groups' understanding of each other's cultures often remains at the surface level, such as festivals and celebrations, failing to delve into the core cultural values.

One key path to breaking this impasse lies in mastering multilingualism. Lacking this skill, translation becomes a cultural medium. The lack of large-scale, systematic translations of Chinese literature into Malay has been a key factor contributing to Malays' superficial understanding of the Chinese world. While some Peranakans pioneered the practice of translating Chinese literature into Malay in the late 19th century (e.g., Zeng Jinwen), these translations primarily focused on popular novels such as "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," "Journey to the West," and "Water Margin," many of these translations were abridged and overly focused on the "storytelling" aspect, neglecting the interpretation of cultural connotations. For example, the translation of "Water Margin" focused solely on the dramatic conflict of the chivalrous plot, failing to address the Confucian ethics and social order underlying the concept of "righteousness." Furthermore, translations were often disseminated through serialized newspapers and periodicals, lacking systematic compilation and publication. This ultimately led Malays to form a superficial understanding of "Chinese classics as fascinating stories," failing to grasp the Chinese values and cultural logic embedded in these literary works.

Meanwhile, the Malay translation of Chinese literary classics has been severely delayed. The full Malay translation of *Journey to the West* (2015) was not officially released until 2015. The complete translation of the Four Great Classics was only completed in recent years, thanks to the work of translators like Wu Hengcan (2001, 2012, 2015, and 2019). Furthermore, Malay translations of modern and contemporary literary works reflecting China's social transformation and the lives of modern Chinese people are not only scarce, but many of these translations have also failed to reach mainstream distribution channels, such as public libraries and popular bookstores. This lag in translation has long left Malays' understanding of the Chinese world at the level of

"ancient stories," making it difficult for them to understand the logic of modern Chinese life, identity, and cultural changes through literary mediums.

Finally, early Malay translations of Chinese literature primarily targeted the Peranakan community, failing to reach the mainstream Malay population. While official institutions such as the Malaysian National Language and Literature Bureau have been involved in translation efforts in recent years, their dissemination remains limited to cultural exchange activities and niche reading circles, and has not been integrated into the daily Malay education system (e.g., not included in the national secondary school curriculum). Most Malays lack convenient access to translated Chinese literature, preventing them from gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese culture through this immersive medium, further solidifying cognitive barriers between ethnic groups.

In summary, the inadequacy of Malay translations of Chinese literature has indeed caused Malays to lose an significant way to "understand the core of Chinese culture through literature."

In addition to cross-cultural research on Chinese and Malay, Malaysia's unique NyoNya culture is also worthy of attention. Xiaoyan Wang et al. (2024) provided new ideas for the integration and dissemination of NyoNya culture in a digital context, and also provided a unique perspective for the dissemination of traditional culture by Malaysian Chinese media.

Research Methods

This article employs a close reading of the text to deeply analyze the novel's plot and details, such as the Lim family's rice cake making, the father's differing attitudes toward his children, and the mother's revelation of the truth. This analysis draws upon the specific content to shed light on values such as "Chinese New Year reunion," "superstition," and the concept of the eldest son, avoiding superficial cultural interpretations. It also employs a documentary approach to clarify the distinction between "folk custom" and "superstition," explaining the historical context of traditional concepts. Applying Saussure's linguistic semiotic theory, the term "rice cake" is defined as a "folk symbol," interpreting its metaphorical meanings of "stickiness, roundness, and sweetness," further enhancing the theoretical depth of the research. Finally, a cross-cultural perspective analysis, drawing on the external perspective of a Malay author, contrasts the differences between internal perceptions and external representations of Chinese culture, highlighting the text's unique value within a multicultural context and avoiding the subjective bias of a single cultural perspective.

(1) The traditional Chinese concept of "Chinese New Year": an annual ritual of bloodline and culture

The Chinese New Year is one of the most solemn and deeply rooted traditional customs in the Chinese world. It is not just a milestone, but an annual ritual that strengthens family bonds and passes on cultural heritage. From the reunion lights lit on New Year's Eve to the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month, every custom in this month-long celebration carries the Chinese people's aspirations for life and their recognition of their roots.

For the Chinese, the core of the Lunar New Year is reunion. No matter where they are, those who wander the world will find ways to return home, just to sit around the table with their families on New Year's Eve and enjoy a steaming hot New Year's Eve dinner. This meal, filled with delicious food, is also filled with the elders' nagging advice and the younger generations' chatter. The aroma of food intertwined with the warmth of family affection creates the most heartwarming "Chinese New Year" feeling in the hearts of the Chinese.

The article is titled "Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin" is the title of the short story, which points out the time of this short story. Baked rice cakes and Mandarin oranges are the iconic foods for Chinese New Year in Malaysia. Among them, rice cakes hold a special significance in the Chinese community in Malaysia.

In Chinese cultural memory, rice cakes are more than just a soft, sweet treat; they are symbols of emotion etched over time, a heartwarming secret woven into family stories. The steaming heat of rice cakes, laced with the scorching aroma of glutinous rice and brown sugar, always evokes anticipation for reunion. The story of the Lim family in "Nian Gao" lends this allegory a tangible warmth. The stickiness, roundness, and sweetness of rice

cakes are the simplest metaphors for reunion for the Chinese. Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, explained language and symbols in his linguistic theory: "Language is a system of symbols for expressing ideas. Therefore, it can be compared to writing, alphabets for the deaf and dumb, symbolic rituals, ceremonial rituals, military signals, and so on." (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1980) In this sense, rice cakes are a folk symbol.

The process of glutinous rice being ground into powder, mixed with sugar, and then slowly expanding in the steamer is like the scene of separated family members overcoming barriers and getting closer again. Lim Meng was once regarded as a "jinx" by her father. The rift between father and daughter was like an invisible wall, which reduced the warmth of the family. It was not until her mother Sim Pau told the truth and her father Lim Pooi repented that this long-standing conflict was finally resolved before the Chinese New Year - and the Chinese New Year is the season for rice cakes. After returning home, Lim Meng suggested to her mother that they create rice cakes together, "Nanti bolehlah dijamu Kepada tetamu yang hadir . Tentu jiran-jiran kita akan bertandang." Then, sharing it with friends and family is the true meaning of Chinese New Year. Perhaps on that night of reconciliation, a plate of freshly steamed rice cakes sat on the Lim family table. The strands of sugar that ripped through the chopsticks resembled the renewed bond between father and daughter, uniting past misunderstandings and alienation into a reunion.

The sweetness of rice cake embodies the Chinese people's hope for a better life, while its stickiness embodies the bond that binds a family together. From selecting ingredients to steaming, every step reflects a yearning for a "sweet life": white glutinous rice symbolizes purity and success, brown sugar signifies prosperity, and the meticulous control of the heat during steaming meticulously nurtures a sense of fulfillment. In the Lim family story, a father's repentance and his daughter's forgiveness restore sweetness to a once -fractured family, much like the taste of rice cake upon tasting it —the initial sip is the smoothness of the glutinous rice, followed by the richness of the brown sugar, and a lingering aftertaste of peace and happiness. This sweetness isn't a fleeting sensory experience, but rather a cherished emotional sweetness that grows even more precious after weathering hardships. This is the heartfelt sentiment expressed by the Chinese when steaming rice cake at the end of the year: no matter how difficult the past year may have been, the rice cake is always the way to end, hoping for family harmony and prosperity in the new year.

For thousands of years, rice cakes have been a fixture in Chinese life. They've witnessed countless families' joys and sorrows, carrying the longing for home from generation to generation. The story of "Nian Gao" ends happily, and the reunion of the Lim family vividly embodies the symbolism of rice cakes—no matter how many misunderstandings and estrangements there may be, as long as the cherishment of family remains in one's heart, one can always resolve conflicts with patience and warmth, just like steaming rice cakes, allowing the taste of reunion to grow richer with time. A small piece of rice cake embodies not only Chinese culinary culture but also the deep-seated love of family: as long as home and reunion are there, sweet days will always be there.

"Reunion" is like an invisible bond that closely connects Chinese people scattered around the world, reminding everyone of their "roots" and allowing Chinese culture to radiate lasting vitality as it is passed down from generation to generation.

2. Superstition in Traditional Chinese Concepts: The Clash of Traditional Cognition and Modern Rationality

When discussing "superstition" in Chinese tradition, it's significant to first clarify its distinction from "folk custom". Although Shi Xue's book "Folk Custom and Superstition" argues that "feudal political influence manifests itself in folk custom, primarily through the superstitious overtones of various folk customs. Modern religious beliefs aside, even marriage, funerals, house-building, life rituals, and the various beliefs and taboos associated with production and daily life are imbued with feudal superstition" (Shi Xue, 2002), folk custom is not entirely feudal dregs. Rather, it represents a system of ideas formed in ancient societies, when cognitive levels were limited, to explain natural phenomena and seek spiritual comfort. These ideas still linger among some populations today, presenting a complex collision between traditional cognition and modern rationality. As Gao Bingzhong observes, "For individuals, the repetition of the same behavior forms habits; for groups, the repetition of the same behavior forms customs, and the repetition of the activity patterns and procedures within customs forms the rituals within folk custom" (Gao Bingzhong, 1994).

Common Chinese superstitious beliefs often relate to everyday life. For example, taboos around weddings and funerals include: brides are forbidden from wearing white wedding dresses (traditionally, white is the color of mourning), and seeing pregnant women is forbidden, as it is believed to bring good luck; wearing red clothing during funerals, and joking and playing during the mourning period are taboos, as doing so is considered disrespectful to the deceased. Another example is the concept of omens in daily life: "left eye twitching" (fortune) and "right eye twitching" (fortune) are believed to signal good or bad luck; breaking dishes requires quick recitation of "sui sui ping ping" (peace be upon you every year) to dispel "bad luck"; and during the Lunar New Year, unlucky words like "death" and "poverty" are forbidden. At the core of these beliefs is the attempt to control the unpredictable future by avoiding taboos and following omens, essentially reflecting a desire for a peaceful and smooth life.

The protagonist of the story, Lim Pooi, is such a superstitious man. He believes that the birth of his daughter has turned his life upside down. He blames the birth of his daughter, Lim Meng, for all the misfortunes in his family (his son Lim Foong drowned) and the decline in his business (his shop burned down). "Dia lahir, semuanya jadi haru-biru Perniagaan aku lingkup . Banyak kecurian yang berlaku Hidup aku tak tenang dan kerana dialah Lim Foong meninggal dunia." But in fact, this has nothing to do with his daughter Lim Meng. The author tells the truth through his wife Sim Pau: Lim Foong's death was because he owed a gambling debt and he fell into the river to avoid the debt collector. "lemas bukan kerana nak menyelamatkan Lim Meng tapi cuba nak bersembunyi daripada orang yang mengejanya, yang memintanya membayar hutang kalah judi". The poor business was due to Lim Pooi's unscrupulous behavior of changing prices and hoarding goods and then selling them at high prices, which was discovered by the villagers. "Kaunaikkan harga sesuka hati. Kausorokkan barang-barang sesuk hati. Apabila orang kampung datang nak beli kau cakap gula dah habis. Padahal kau sorokkan barang-barang itu di dalam stor dekat belakang kedai tapi pada suatu masa pula, kaukeluarkan dan menjualnya dengan harga yang tinggi."

With rising education and a more scientific mindset, most Chinese have adopted a more rational view of superstition. The younger generation believes more in human effort rather than relying on speculative omens. They choose wedding dress colors based on their preferences, no longer deliberately avoiding taboos. When faced with unexpected life situations, they approach them practically rather than dwelling on whether they have violated a taboo. However, in certain contexts, superstition still persists as folk customs, such as hanging Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival and appreciating the moon during the Mid-Autumn Festival. These practices have shed their inherent superstition and become rituals that carry cultural sentiments, reflecting a healthy respect for tradition.

When it comes to traditional Chinese superstitions, we shouldn't completely deny their historical context, nor should we blindly follow them. A rational approach is to strip away any unscientific elements, preserve cultural symbols that embody humanistic care, and transform traditional understandings into healthier, more constructive attitudes toward life, guided by modern rationality.

(3) The Concept of the Firstborn in Chinese Society: The Interweaving of Tradition and Modernity

The Chinese concept of the eldest son is a unique cultural product, rooted in thousands of years of patriarchal clan system and Confucian culture. At its core, the eldest son is viewed as the central figure that carries on the family bloodline and bears the responsibilities. Consequently, the eldest son has shaped a unique identity within Chinese society. In traditional Chinese society, the eldest son is not only the primary provider of support for his parents in their aging years, but also bears the crucial responsibility of continuing the family name, managing clan affairs, and passing on family traditions and ancestral teachings. This position imbues the eldest son with special family expectations from birth. "Due to his innate family and social status, the eldest son has no choice but to shoulder all responsibilities related to the clan and family" (Qu Yunjing, 2001).

In terms of material and power inheritance, the concept of eldest sons once had clear institutional support. For example, under the traditional patriarchal system of "primogeniture," family property, land, and family titles were often inherited preferentially by the eldest son, ensuring that family resources were not dispersed. At the ceremonial level, at significant occasions such as family sacrifices, weddings, and funerals, the eldest son was expected to represent the family, becoming the "link" connecting the family's past and present. The "Book of

Rites: Mourning Clothes " states, "The great ancestor is the respected leader." (Wang Wenjin's translation and interpretation, 2016) "Zong" means the most respected person, the main branch of the ancestors, respected by all clan members. The great ancestor presided over the ancestral temple sacrifices. (Chen Li, 1994) Behind this concept lies the agricultural society's need for "stability" and "continuity"—by clarifying the eldest son's core position, internal family disputes were reduced and the family's stable development was ensured through generational transitions.

The male protagonist Lim Pooi has a son and a daughter. It is worth noting that his son Lim Foong is the eldest son. Like a traditional father, Lim Pooi has high hopes for his son. Although his son has passed away for many years, he still insists on letting his son inherit the family business. *dia ada sekarang ini tentu dah besar. Boleh tolong aku jaga kedai*". In this context, father Lim Pooi indulged his son many times. Even when his daughter Lim Meng told him that his son stole money from the store because he had a gambling habit, he not only did not believe it, but also whipped his daughter because he thought she was falsely accusing her brother. (Kau ingat masa Lim Meng mengadu bahawa dia Nampak Lim Foong mencuri duit di kedai tapi kau cakap dia bohong, kau tak percaya Kepada dia lalu kaurotan dia sampai berbirat-birat. Kautuduh dia bercakap Bohong.) Repeated indulgence led Lim Foong to become more and more abusive, and he eventually fell into the river and drowned while trying to hide from his debts.

However, with the changes in the structure of modern society, the concept of the eldest son has gradually faded. Urbanization has broken the traditional family settlement model, and small families have become the mainstream. The responsibility of support is no longer solely on the eldest son, and resource inheritance also pays more attention to fairness or personal ability. At the same time, the popularization of the concept of equality has made the special status of the "eldest son" no longer naturally recognized, and more families have begun to distribute care and responsibilities based on the personality and needs of their children. But it is undeniable that the influence of this concept still exists in a hidden way. For example, in some families, the eldest son will still unconsciously assume the responsibility of "taking care of younger siblings and sharing the worries of the family", which has become a continuation of traditional family ethics in modern society.

CONCLUSION

As a short story written by a Malay author with Chinese as the narrative subject, "Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin" does not stop at describing the cultural appearance, but uses the image of "rice cake and tangerine" full of life as a link to delve into the emotional texture and value core of the Chinese family. In the deviation and correction of patriarchal cognition, it completes the three-dimensional presentation and gentle reflection on the traditional Chinese values. The value of its text lies not only in the accuracy of cultural expression, but also in the deep questioning of human nature and ethics from a cross-cultural perspective.

From the perspective of concretely expressing values, the novel vividly showcases the core principle of family-centeredness in traditional Chinese values through the unfolding of family conflicts. Although father Lim Pooi's misunderstanding of his daughter Meng as a "jinx" leads him to irrational rejection and prejudice, his behavior is fundamentally rooted in traditional perceptions of "family fortune." In the Chinese cultural context, the family's success and honor take precedence over individual aspirations. Lim Pooi's paranoia is, in fact, a distorted practice of the traditional responsibility of "protecting the family." Mother Sim Pau's perseverance and wisdom provide positive support for these values: she consistently strives to "maintain the integrity of the family" bridging the gap between her husband's stubbornness and her daughter's grievances. She upholds the traditional role of "supporting the husband and raising the children" while also protecting the warmth of family affection with a woman's sensitivity and tolerance. Her actions reflect the Chinese philosophies of "harmony is the most precious" and "tolerance is the highest virtue," and the irreplaceable mediating role of the mother in family ethics. When Sim Pau finally told the truth, Lim Pooi's repentance and transformation further confirmed the moral consciousness of "admitting mistakes and correcting them" in traditional Chinese values, as well as the power of family ties of "blood is thicker than water" to correct individual cognition - even if there have been estrangements, the centripetal force of the family is always the ultimate destination for resolving conflicts.

More profoundly, the novel's cross-cultural perspective provides an objective and unique reference for interpreting traditional Chinese values. As a Malay author, her observational perspective, uninfluenced by the

"immersion" of Chinese culture, avoids subjective glorification or criticism of traditional values while accurately capturing their most universal core: whether it's the emphasis on family responsibility, the way family affection shapes individual cognition, or the resilient role of women in the family, these values are not confined to the "specificities" of Chinese society but rather represent "common" emotions and ethical principles that transcend cultural boundaries. The choice of "rice cakes and tangerines" as an image further serves as a metaphor for these values: the sweetness of rice cakes symbolizes the warmth that comes from family affection that bridges gaps. The fusion of the two embodies the vitality of traditional Chinese values, which perseveres through conflict and harmony, perseverance and tolerance.

In summary, Kuih Bakul Limau Mandarin is more than a simple "cultural record"; it uses literature to deeply decode traditional Chinese values. It reveals that traditional Chinese values are not rigid dogmas, but rather vibrant ethics rooted in family, affection, and responsibility. These values are understandable and relatable across cultural contexts, and through the changing times, their inclusiveness and warmth continue to influence individual emotional choices and family dynamics. This cross-cultural writing not only opens a window into Chinese society for readers from diverse backgrounds but also makes the core values of traditional Chinese values—"valuing family" and "upholding family ties"—a shared spiritual treasure that transcends cultural boundaries.

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