Negotiating Cultural Adaptation and Hybrid Identity among the Peranakan Chinese Community of Kampung Tirok, Terengganu

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ABSTRACT

The Peranakan Chinese community of Kampung Tirok, Terengganu, represents a long-standing minority community whose cultural identity has developed through sustained interaction between Chinese heritage and the local Malay socio-cultural environment. Although earlier studies have documented acculturation, identity maintenance, and foodway negotiation among the Tirok Peranakan Chinese, less attention has been given to the cross-domain mechanisms through which cultural elements are selectively retained, adopted, and modified in everyday life. This study examines cultural adaptation and hybrid identity formation among the Kampung Tirok Peranakan Chinese. A qualitative ethnographic design was employed, with fieldwork conducted from May to July 2026. Ten participants aged from their twenties to sixties were selected purposively. Data were generated through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and analysed thematically with the support of NVivo 12. The findings show that hybrid identity was produced through three interrelated processes: selective retention of Chinese heritage, selective adoption of local cultural elements, and modification of practices according to contemporary needs. Hokkien remained the principal language within family life, while the Terengganu Malay dialect was used in interactions with Malay neighbours and the wider local community. Local foods, clothing practices, social interaction, economic activities, and domestic space showed substantial adaptation, while Chinese New Year, ancestral practices, Hokkien, and Chinese cultural symbols sustained heritage attachment. The study conceptualises these cross-domain processes as selective cultural adaptation, thereby extending earlier Tirok scholarship from documenting coexistence and identity maintenance to explaining how hybridity is organised in everyday practice. It argues that acculturation does not necessarily imply cultural loss; continuity can be achieved through adaptive selection, contextual use, and modification of cultural practices.

Keywords: Peranakan Chinese; cultural adaptation; hybrid identity; acculturation; cultural sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is characterised by substantial ethnic and cultural diversity, in which communities maintain distinctive cultural traditions while participating in shared social environments. Within this multicultural setting, Peranakan Chinese communities are particularly important for understanding how cultural identities are produced through prolonged contact between Chinese heritage and local societies. The Peranakan experience is not uniform across Malaysia; communities in Melaka, Penang, Kelantan, and Terengganu have developed different cultural configurations according to their particular histories, local relationships, and social environments (Teo, 2004; Hassan et al., 2021). Recent scholarship further demonstrates that Malaysian Chinese identities are negotiated through cultural heritage, place, language, memory, and everyday practice rather than being reproduced as fixed categories (Mei, 2023; Tan & Tan, 2024; Lyu et al., 2026).

Acculturation provides one important conceptual route for understanding these processes. Berry (1997) describes acculturation as the cultural and psychological change associated with continuous intercultural contact. Such contact does not necessarily result in the complete replacement of one cultural system by another. Individuals and communities may retain valued dimensions of their heritage while adopting practices

that facilitate participation in a wider social environment. For minority communities, therefore, adaptation may involve simultaneous continuity and change rather than a simple movement from one identity to another.

Hybrid identity provides a complementary perspective. Bhabha (1994) conceptualises hybridity as emerging through an in-between cultural space in which meanings and practices are negotiated, translated, and rearticulated. Hall (1990) similarly argues that cultural identity should not be treated as permanently fixed, but

as historically and socially produced. These perspectives are especially relevant to Peranakan communities whose everyday life contains overlapping cultural references and whose sense of belonging is shaped by both heritage and locality. Rocha and Yeoh (2022), for example, show that Peranakan identity in Singapore is connected to ancestry, belonging, mixedness, authenticity, and generational change, while Huang et al. (2024) identify cultural identity, conservation, heritage, and cultural transmission as central themes in recent Peranakan scholarship.

The Peranakan Chinese community of Tirok offers a particularly significant case. Tan and Ngah (2013) identify Tirok as an acculturated rural Chinese community in a predominantly Malay environment. Their research shows strong Malay cultural influence in spoken language, architecture, dress, cuisine, eating practices, and other aspects of daily life, while Chinese religious practices, Chinese dialect use in the home, and other forms of ethnic identification remain important. Tan et al. (2015) similarly demonstrate, through foodways, that daily food practices can display local influence while ancestral ritual foods retain stronger links to Chinese identity. Earlier work on Kuala Terengganu also highlights the institutional role of Chinese associations in maintaining and propagating Chinese culture within a Malay-majority state (Tan et al., 2012).

These studies establish that cultural maintenance and acculturation coexist among the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese. However, the coexistence of Chinese and local elements does not by itself explain how hybrid identity is actually produced in contemporary everyday life. A key analytical question therefore remains: how do community members decide, consciously or practically, which cultural elements are retained, which local elements are adopted, and which practices are modified as social circumstances change? Addressing this question is important because hybrid identity should not be understood merely as the presence of two cultural influences; it is a process through which cultural resources are selected, situated, and given meaning across different social domains.

Compared with Tan and Ngah (2013), which established patterns of identity maintenance and identity shift, and Tan et al. (2015), which demonstrated identity negotiation through foodways, the present study makes two specific advances. First, it analyses multiple everyday domains within a single contemporary ethnographic framework rather than treating acculturation as a general condition or focusing on one cultural domain. Second, it specifies a cross-domain acculturation mechanism, involving selective retention, selective adoption, and modification, through which hybridity is reproduced while cultural continuity is maintained. The contribution is therefore not the claim that Tirok is culturally hybrid, which earlier scholarship has already established, but an explanation of how that hybridity is organised in everyday practice.

Accordingly, this study examines cultural adaptation and hybrid identity formation among the Peranakan Chinese community of Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. It focuses on everyday domains including language, family life, food, clothing, celebrations, economic interaction, and domestic space. The study advances the concept of selective cultural adaptation to describe the empirical pattern through which Chinese heritage is selectively retained, local cultural elements are selectively adopted, and existing practices are modified according to contemporary circumstances. This approach allows the study to move beyond the general claim that Peranakan identity is hybrid by showing the mechanisms through which hybridity is continually produced and sustained.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL POSITIONING

The Terengganu Peranakan Chinese occupy a distinctive position within the cultural landscape of the state. Loo et al. (2021) show that Peranakan identity in Kuala Terengganu has been produced through the relationship between locality, heritage, urban space, and the cultural naming of the community. This reminds

us that identity is not only carried through inherited practices; it is also shaped by the social spaces in which communities are recognised and recognise themselves. For a minority community living amid a Malay-majority social environment, everyday encounters with neighbours, schools, markets, workplaces, and local institutions provide repeated contexts for cultural learning and adjustment.

The Tirok case is especially valuable because earlier scholarship provides a historical point of comparison. Tan and Ngah (2013) found that older generations displayed a strong Peranakan identity with substantial Malay influence, while younger generations showed varying degrees of identity shift. Importantly, their study also recorded the continued use of a Chinese dialect as the home language. The present study therefore does not assume that increasing interaction with the local environment automatically produces language loss or assimilation. Instead, it investigates how different cultural practices may follow different trajectories: some remain strongly associated with family and heritage, others become highly localised, and still others are modified over time.

Foodways illustrate this domain-specific pattern. Tan et al. (2015) found contrasting identity expressions between everyday food and ancestral-prayer food among Terengganu and Kelantan Peranakan Chinese. More recent work by Tan and Tan (2024) similarly demonstrates that food, place, and identity among Malaysian Chinese are linked through processes of mixing, negotiation, and meaningful attachment. These studies indicate that everyday practices provide a productive analytical site for examining how identity is formed through action rather than only through self-description.

This study uses Cultural Ecology, associated with Julian H. Steward (1955), as its primary theoretical lens. Cultural Ecology focuses on relationships between cultural patterns and the environments within which communities organise their lives. Although Steward's original formulation paid particular attention to ecological and material adaptation, the approach is useful here as a framework for examining how a community's cultural practices are shaped through sustained engagement with a specific local setting. Kampung Tirok is not treated as a passive backdrop; it is understood as a social and cultural environment that structures opportunities for interaction, adaptation, continuity, and cultural reproduction.

Acculturation and cultural hybridity operate as supporting analytical concepts within this framework. Berry's (1997) acculturation perspective helps explain the changes that emerge through continuous intercultural contact, while Bhabha's (1994) and Hall's (1990) approaches to cultural identity help interpret the negotiated and non-static character of the resulting identity. This theoretical arrangement is deliberately hierarchical: Cultural Ecology explains the importance of context and adaptation; acculturation explains intercultural change; and hybridity helps interpret the identity configurations that emerge from the coexistence, negotiation, and reworking of different cultural elements.

The concept of selective cultural adaptation is positioned here as a cross-domain mechanism rather than as a synonym for existing concepts. Situational ethnicity explains how ethnic identity may be foregrounded or backgrounded according to social context (Okamura, 1981), which is relevant to the differentiated use of Hokkien and the Terengganu Malay dialect. Code-switching similarly illuminates contextual language alternation in interaction (Gumperz, 1982), but it cannot by itself account for patterned adaptation in food, clothing, celebrations, economic interaction, or domestic space. Segmented assimilation addresses divergent incorporation trajectories among immigrant and second-generation populations (Portes & Zhou, 1993); by contrast, the Tirok case concerns a long-established Peranakan community whose adaptation occurs within an inherited local setting rather than a recent immigrant incorporation pathway. Selective cultural adaptation therefore focuses on how retention, adoption, and modification operate across multiple cultural domains under conditions of sustained local interaction.

The resulting framework proposes that the local social and cultural environment enables sustained Chinese-Malay interaction, which creates conditions for acculturation and adaptation. Adaptation then occurs through choices and practices involving retention, adoption, and modification. These processes contribute to hybrid identity while also creating possibilities for cultural continuity. The model therefore avoids treating adaptation and cultural sustainability as opposites.

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Figure 1. Kampung Tirok, Terengganu research site.

Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

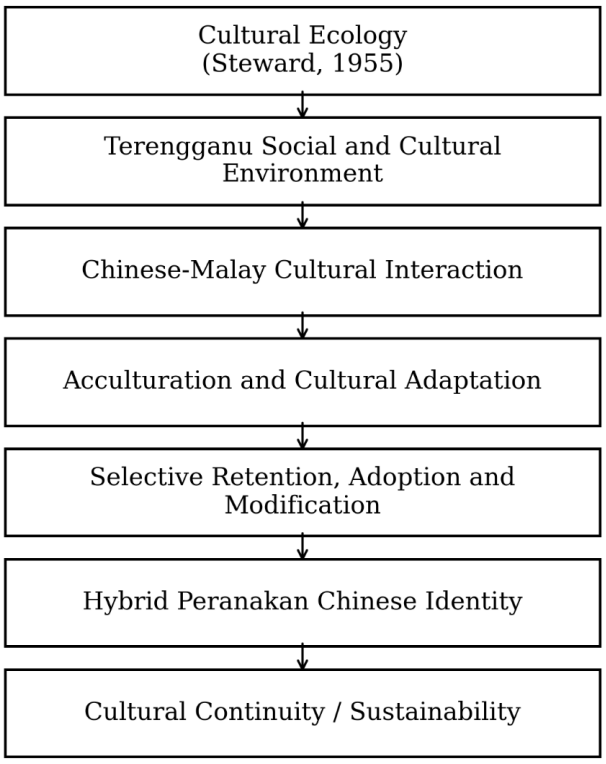


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the study.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on Steward (1955), Berry (1997), Bhabha (1994), and Hall (1990).

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METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design to understand cultural practices, adaptation, and identity formation among the Peranakan Chinese community of Kampung Tirok. Ethnography was appropriate because the study focused on lived experience, everyday practices, social interaction, and the meanings attached to culture within the community's own social setting. The fieldwork was conducted from May to July 2026. This period enabled the researcher to combine participants' accounts with observation of everyday cultural practices and interactions. Ethnographic inquiry was therefore used not simply to collect opinions but to situate those accounts within the social contexts in which cultural meanings were produced (Case et al., 2014).

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. The location was selected because of its long-established Peranakan Chinese community and its proximity to Malay settlements, which provides an important context for examining sustained intercultural contact. Ten participants were selected through purposive sampling. They included men and women aged from their twenties to sixties and represented older, middle, and younger generations. This range enabled the study to capture variation in cultural experience while retaining a focused community-level ethnographic design.

Table 1. Participant profile

Code	Gender	Age	Generation	Marital status	Occupation	Years in Terengganu
I1	Male	60-69	Older	Married	Not employed	65 years
I2	Female	60-69	Older	Widowed	Homemaker	62 years
I3	Male	50-59	Middle	Married	Self-employed	55 years
I4	Female	50-59	Middle	Married	Homemaker	52 years
I5	Male	40-49	Middle	Married	Factory worker	48 years
I6	Female	40-49	Middle	Married	Factory worker	45 years
I7	Male	30-39	Younger	Single	Book seller	35 years
I8	Female	30-39	Younger	Married	Factory worker	32 years
I9	Male	20-29	Younger	Single	Business	25 years
I10	Female	20-29	Younger	Single	Factory worker	22 years

Sampling Adequacy and Saturation

Sampling and analysis proceeded iteratively. The adequacy of ten participants was assessed through thematic recurrence within this bounded ethnographic case rather than through statistical representativeness. By the later interviews, the coding structure for the focal domains, including language, food, clothing, celebrations, economic interaction, and domestic space, had stabilised. Additional accounts primarily elaborated patterns already identified rather than requiring the development of new themes at a higher analytical level. Following Hennink et al. (2017), this was treated as code and thematic saturation for the study's focused analytic aims, rather than as a claim that every possible meaning within the community had been exhausted. Triangulation with participant observation and documentary sources was then used to test, contextualise, and enrich these recurring patterns.

Data Collection

Three methods were used: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The use of multiple sources allowed the study to compare what participants said about their cultural practices with practices and interactions observed in the community, while documentary sources helped situate the field data within the historical and scholarly context of the Terengganu Peranakan Chinese.

Table 2. Data collection methods

Method	Purpose	Primary focus
In-depth interviews	To obtain participants' experiences and interpretations	Cultural adaptation, identity, language, food, family practices, and social relations
Participant observation	To examine practices in everyday settings	Daily practices, social interaction, language use, material culture, and domestic space
Document analysis	To contextualise and triangulate field data	History, cultural development, and prior studies of Peranakan Chinese communities

In-depth interviews followed a guide developed from the study objectives, while allowing follow-up questions to explore participants' own experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participant observation focused on everyday cultural practice and social interaction, including language use, clothing, food, social relations, and the use of cultural symbols. Documentary materials were used to support contextual interpretation and to compare current findings with earlier research.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically. Analysis involved familiarisation with the transcripts and other materials, coding, grouping related codes into categories, generating themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and interpreting them in relation to the research objective. NVivo 12 was used to organise the qualitative material and support coding and retrieval. Interpretation remained a researcher-led process grounded in the content and context of the data. The analytic strategy combined inductive and deductive elements: inductive coding allowed patterns to emerge from participants' experiences, while deductive attention was given to the study's concerns with cultural adaptation, acculturation, cultural continuity, and hybrid identity. This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on methodological clarity in thematic analysis.

Table 3. Analytic process

Stage	Process
1	Data preparation and organisation
2	Repeated reading and familiarisation
3	Coding
4	Grouping codes into categories
5	Theme development
6	Theme review and refinement
7	Interpretation in relation to the research objective

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement before data collection. Oral informed consent was obtained, and participants are identified only by codes (I1-I10) in the reporting of findings. Personally identifying information was not included in the manuscript. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, participant observation, and documentary sources. The relationship between codes, themes, and the original data was also reviewed during analysis to ensure that interpretations remained empirically grounded.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified a set of closely connected patterns through which cultural adaptation and hybrid identity were produced. Rather than showing a simple shift from Chinese culture to Malay culture, the findings reveal patterned variation across social domains. Chinese heritage was especially visible in family life, ancestral practices, celebration, and symbolic objects; local cultural influence was highly visible in everyday language use outside the family, food, clothing, economic interaction, and aspects of domestic space; and several practices were modified to remain meaningful under contemporary conditions.

Table 4. Main themes and analytical interpretation

Main theme	Subthemes	Analytical significance
Cultural adaptation	Adaptation across social domains; modification of practices; selective adoption of local elements	Adaptation is contextual rather than uniform.
Hybrid identity formation	Retention of Chinese identity; local cultural use; language and communication; everyday hybridity	Chinese and local cultural resources coexist but carry different functions across domains.
Dynamic identity	Generational variation; context-dependent expression	Identity is reproduced through ongoing negotiation rather than as a fixed cultural category.

Cultural Adaptation across Social Domains

The clearest example of domain-based adaptation concerned language. Hokkien remained strongly associated with family communication and intergenerational cultural transmission. Participant I1 explained:

"At home, we still speak Hokkien. My parents used to speak Hokkien with us, and now we also speak it with our children. That is how we grew up."

(Informant I1, male, 60-69 years old)

This account shows that Hokkien functions as more than a communication tool. It connects present family life with previous generations and provides a routine mechanism for the transmission of cultural belonging. Importantly, the data do not indicate language shift within the family domain. Hokkien remains present across generations in family communication. The linguistic pattern changes when participants interact beyond the family. I3 stated:

"When we talk to our neighbours, we usually speak in the Terengganu Malay dialect. We have been living here for a long time, so speaking the local dialect is natural for us, especially when communicating with the Malay community around us."

(Informant I3, male, 50-59 years old)

The coexistence of Hokkien and the Terengganu Malay dialect is best interpreted as domain-specific multilingual practice rather than as the replacement of a heritage language. Hokkien anchors family heritage, while the local dialect enables participation in everyday social life. This finding confirms Tan and Ngah's (2013) observation that Chinese dialect use can remain important in the home despite extensive Malay cultural influence. It also extends earlier work by showing the functional organisation of language across social domains in the current community. From a cultural ecological perspective, linguistic adaptation can therefore be understood as an adjustment to the local social environment that preserves rather than necessarily erodes heritage continuity.

Modification of Cultural Practices in Contemporary Life

Adaptation also occurred through modification. Participants did not describe tradition as the exact repetition of

practices from the past. Instead, certain forms changed while their social and symbolic significance remained. This was visible in the celebration of Chinese New Year. I6 explained:

"We still celebrate Chinese New Year with our family. We gather together, prepare food and visit relatives. Even though our way of celebrating may not be exactly the same as in the past, Chinese New Year is still an important celebration for our family."

(Informant I6, female, 40-49 years)

The significance of this account lies in the distinction between form and meaning. The celebration may not be reproduced identically across generations, yet family gathering, food preparation, visiting relatives, and the cultural importance of the occasion continue. Cultural continuity is therefore not dependent on complete formal preservation. Modification can itself function as a mechanism of continuity when core meanings and relationships remain socially important.

This interpretation corresponds with Huang et al. (2024), who identify both challenges and new possibilities for Peranakan cultural conservation in contemporary society. The Tirok case further suggests that cultural sustainability should not be equated with immobility. Practices may remain culturally meaningful because they can be adjusted to the conditions of contemporary life.

Selective Adoption of Local Cultural Elements

A third pattern concerned the selective adoption of local cultural elements. Participants incorporated local practices into everyday life without describing this as a rejection of Chinese heritage. Clothing provided one example. I2 stated:

"At home, I usually wear batik or kain pelikat. It is comfortable and easy to wear. We do not usually wear traditional Chinese clothes every day."

(Informant I2, female, 60-69 years)

In the field data, local clothing was associated with comfort, familiarity, and everyday practicality. Yet the use of local clothing did not mean that Chinese-linked attire had lost all significance. I4 explained:

"During Chinese New Year or other important celebrations, we still wear clothes that are associated with Chinese culture. We may not wear them every day, but during celebrations, wearing them makes the occasion feel more meaningful and reminds us of our culture."

(Informant I4, female, 50-59 years)

The contrast shows that cultural elements carried different meanings across contexts. Local attire was normalised in daily life, while Chinese-linked clothing was retained for contexts in which symbolic cultural expression was particularly important. Hassan et al. (2021), in a different Peranakan context, similarly show how clothing can embody culturally layered identities. In Tirok, however, the key finding was not merely hybridity in dress but the domain-specific organisation of cultural significance.

Food revealed the same selective process. I3 stated:

"We also eat local Terengganu food. Laksa Terengganu is something we are familiar with and enjoy. Since we live here and mix with the local community, local food has become part of our everyday food."

(Informant I3, male, 50-59 years)

The incorporation of local food into everyday life is consistent with Tan et al. (2015), who found strong local influence in daily Peranakan foodways. It also resonates with Tan and Tan's (2024) argument that food and place are involved in the formation and reformation of Malaysian Chinese identities. The present findings add

that adoption was selective: local foods had become normalised through familiarity and social interaction, while other food practices continued to carry specific family or ritual meanings connected to Chinese heritage.

Family as a Domain of Cultural Retention

Family life emerged as the strongest domain for cultural retention. Hokkien, Chinese New Year, ancestral practices, and inherited cultural meanings were repeatedly associated with family transmission. I7 described ancestral practice as follows:

"In our family, we still remember and honour our ancestors. During certain occasions, we will carry out the practices that were taught to us by our parents. We continue doing them because they are part of what our family has inherited from the older generation."

(Informant I7, male, 30-39 years)

The statement illustrates cultural transmission as an active family process. Heritage is reproduced through teaching, remembrance, repeated practice, and the social importance attached to inheritance from older generations. Family can therefore be understood as a cultural retention domain: a social space in which selected forms of heritage are given sufficient significance to be reproduced across generations.

This point is important for interpreting hybrid identity. Hybridity does not imply that every cultural element becomes equally mixed in every setting. Some practices remain more strongly associated with Chinese heritage, while others are more open to local adaptation. The family acts as a site where cultural boundaries are not necessarily rigid, but where certain heritage practices continue to receive particular symbolic value.

Language as a Mechanism of Hybrid Identity Formation

Taken together, the language data provided a particularly clear example of how hybrid identity was organised in practice. Hokkien was retained as the principal language of family interaction, whereas the Terengganu Malay dialect was used in communication with Malay neighbours and the surrounding community. This arrangement demonstrates contextual linguistic adaptation rather than a straightforward shift from one language to another.

The analytical significance is that hybrid identity can be produced through differentiated use rather than through literal linguistic mixing. Hokkien links speakers to family memory and Chinese heritage; the Terengganu Malay dialect indexes local familiarity, social participation, and belonging within the surrounding community. Both linguistic resources are therefore part of the community's cultural repertoire, but they perform different social functions.

This finding also refines the interpretation of acculturation. If acculturation were measured only by visible use of the local dialect, the continuity of Hokkien within the family could be overlooked. Conversely, if identity were assessed only through home language, the depth of local social integration would be underestimated. The ethnographic perspective makes it possible to see both processes operating simultaneously.

Everyday Life as a Site of Hybrid Identity

Hybrid identity was also visible in everyday economic and domestic life. Economic activity created regular contact across ethnic boundaries. I9 explained:

"When we run our business, we deal with people from different backgrounds. Our customers and the people we work with are not only Chinese. We communicate with the Malay community every day."

(Informant I9, male, 20-29 years)

These economic encounters did not erase ethnic identification; instead, they embedded intercultural communication within ordinary livelihood routines. This pattern is consistent with Mei's (2023) emphasis on

personal and family experience in Malaysian Chinese cultural identity and with Su's (2024) account of selective incorporation of cultural resources in response to particular environments. From a broader regional perspective, it also resonates with Februandari (2026), who shows that Chinese Indonesian identity in Semarang is negotiated through cultural adaptation, spatial practices, and heritage preservation. Although the socio-cultural setting differs, both cases indicate that minority Chinese identities can be reproduced through simultaneous continuity and adaptation. Domestic space provided another example. I10 stated:

"The house has changed over the years because we also follow what is suitable for the local environment and our daily needs. But inside the house, we still keep Chinese decorations such as tanglong and other traditional items."

(Informant I10, female, 20-29 years)

The house embodied adaptation and retention simultaneously. Changes to the dwelling responded to environmental and everyday practical needs, while Chinese decorative objects continued to mark cultural attachment. Cultural Ecology is especially useful here because it directs attention to the relationship between environment, practical adaptation, and cultural form. The result was neither simple preservation nor cultural replacement, but an adapted domestic space in which local suitability and Chinese symbolism coexisted.

Dynamic Hybrid Identity and Selective Cultural Adaptation

Across the themes, three interrelated processes were identified. First, selective cultural retention refers to the continued importance of cultural elements that carry strong family, symbolic, or heritage value, including Hokkien, Chinese New Year, ancestral practices, and Chinese cultural symbols. Second, selective cultural adoption refers to the incorporation of local cultural elements that have become meaningful or practical within everyday life, including the Terengganu Malay dialect, local food, clothing, and forms of social interaction. Third, cultural modification refers to changes in the form of inherited practices so that they remain workable and meaningful under contemporary conditions.

This study uses the term selective cultural adaptation to describe the combined operation of these processes. The concept does not imply that every cultural choice is explicitly conscious. Rather, it identifies an observable pattern in which cultural practices follow different trajectories depending on social domain, function, symbolic value, and everyday relevance. Selective cultural adaptation therefore provides an empirical explanation for how hybrid identity is produced rather than merely labelling the outcome as hybrid.

Viewed against established concepts, selective cultural adaptation operates at a different analytical level rather than replacing them. Situational ethnicity helps explain why particular ethnic markers become more salient in some settings than in others, while code-switching explains one linguistic mechanism through which contextual adaptation is enacted. Segmented assimilation, meanwhile, addresses broader trajectories of incorporation. The Tirok findings showed a more fine-grained, cross-domain process within a long-established community: heritage-linked practices were retained where family and symbolic value was strong, local practices were adopted where they facilitated everyday participation, and inherited forms were modified when contemporary conditions required adjustment. The conceptual value of selective cultural adaptation therefore lies in connecting these differentiated trajectories within one empirically observable mechanism.

The findings both confirm and extend earlier scholarship. They confirm Tan and Ngah's (2013) account of strong local influence alongside continuing Chinese identification and support Tan et al.'s (2015) demonstration that different practices can communicate different identity orientations. The present study extends those works by identifying a cross-domain mechanism linking retention, adoption, and modification across language, food, clothing, celebrations, economic interaction, and domestic space. It also updates the Tirok case through contemporary ethnographic evidence rather than assuming that patterns documented more than a decade earlier remain unchanged. The findings further correspond with Rocha and Yeoh's (2022) argument that Peranakan identity is not uniform and is shaped by belonging, ancestry, authenticity, and generational experience. In Tirok, this variation was additionally visible in how cultural resources were organised across everyday domains.

The concept also speaks to recent studies of Chinese identity negotiation in Malaysia. Lyu et al. (2026) emphasise the role of cultural heritage in constructing ethnic consciousness, while Tan and Tan (2024) show how place and food contribute to the construction and reconstruction of identity. The Tirok case demonstrates that cultural heritage and local belonging can be mutually reinforcing when cultural continuity is understood as an adaptive process. Acculturation, in other words, need not be interpreted as a linear pathway toward cultural loss.

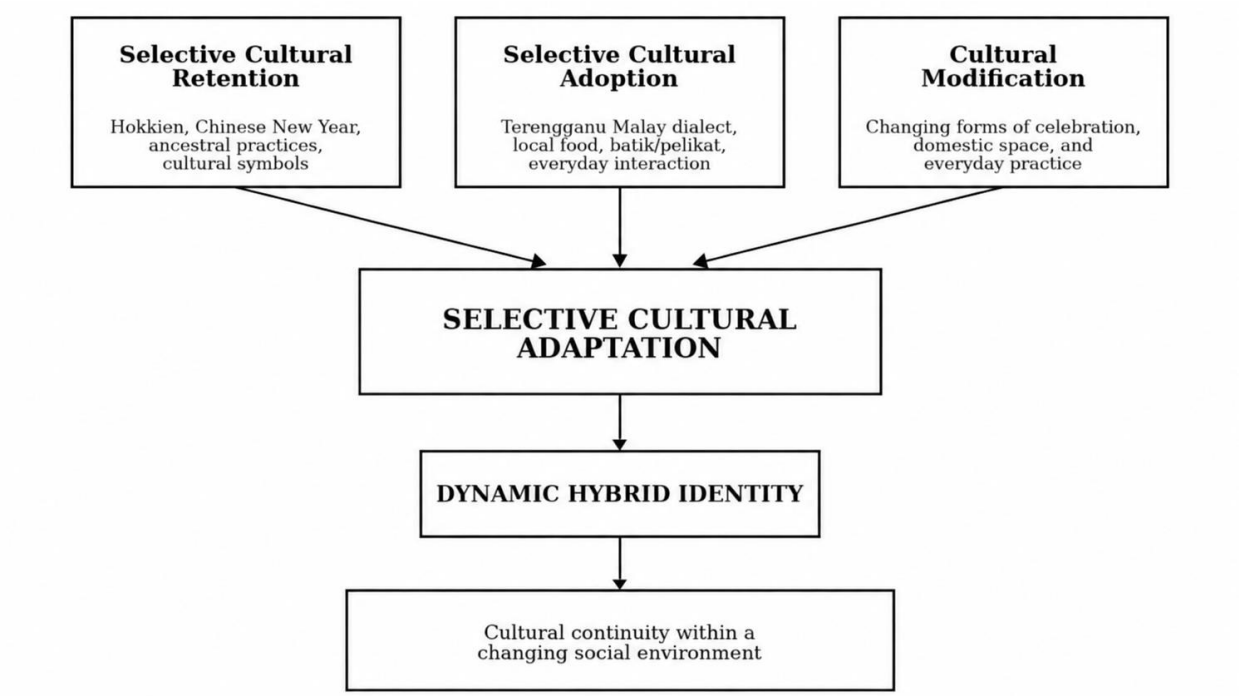


Figure 3. Empirical model of selective cultural adaptation and hybrid identity formation.

Source: Authors' synthesis from field data, 2026.

Table 5. Summary of findings and empirical evidence

Process	Primary empirical evidence	Interpretation
Selective cultural retention	Hokkien in family life; Chinese New Year; ancestral practices; Chinese decorations	Heritage is concentrated in domains with strong family and symbolic value.
Selective cultural adoption	Terengganu Malay dialect; local food; batik/pelikat; routine interaction with Malay community	Local cultural resources are integrated where they support everyday participation and familiarity.
Cultural modification	Changing forms of celebration and domestic space	Continuity is maintained through adjusted forms rather than exact reproduction.
Dynamic hybrid identity	Coexistence of heritage and local resources across differentiated domains	Hybridity is produced through the ongoing organisation of cultural practices across contexts.

Practical Implications for Heritage Policy and Language Maintenance

The findings suggest that heritage policy for Peranakan communities should avoid treating cultural continuity as the preservation of a fixed or 'pure' cultural form. A living-heritage approach would be more consistent with the Tirok experience because continuity was sustained through selective retention, local adoption, and modification. Community-based documentation, intergenerational cultural activities, and heritage

interpretation should therefore record not only highly visible festival practices but also everyday domains such as food, clothing, domestic space, economic interaction, and the meanings attached to these practices.

Language maintenance deserves particular attention because the findings showed complementary rather than competing functions for Hokkien and the Terengganu Malay dialect. Heritage initiatives could support family-based Hokkien transmission through oral-history recording, intergenerational storytelling, community vocabulary archives, and bilingual heritage materials, while recognising the Terengganu Malay dialect as an important resource for local belonging and social participation. Such measures would protect heritage language use without framing local linguistic adaptation as cultural decline.

CONCLUSION

This study examined cultural adaptation and hybrid identity formation among the Peranakan Chinese community of Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. The findings show that identity is not produced through the replacement of one culture by another. Instead, the community sustains an adaptive cultural repertoire in which different practices are retained, adopted, or modified according to their social function, symbolic importance, and relevance to everyday life.

One of the most significant findings concerns the organisation of language across social domains. Hokkien remains actively used within the family and continues to connect younger and older generations, while the Terengganu Malay dialect is used in interactions with the surrounding Malay community. This pattern demonstrates that acculturation does not necessarily produce language loss within the family. It may instead generate domain-specific multilingual practice that simultaneously supports heritage continuity and local social participation.

The same pattern is visible in food, clothing, celebrations, economic interaction, ancestral practice, and domestic space. Local foods and clothing have become familiar parts of everyday life, while Chinese cultural practices retain particular importance within family and symbolic contexts. Celebrations and domestic arrangements may change in form, yet they continue to carry cultural meaning. Cultural continuity therefore operates through adaptation rather than through the unchanged preservation of every inherited form.

The study's central contribution is not to re-establish that the Tirok Peranakan Chinese possess a hybrid identity, but to specify how that hybridity is reproduced. Selective cultural adaptation consists of three linked processes: selective cultural retention, selective cultural adoption, and cultural modification. Together, these processes explain how a dynamic hybrid identity was continually produced across differentiated social domains. This formulation extends earlier accounts of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese by moving from the documentation of coexistence and identity maintenance to an explicit mechanism through which Chinese heritage and local cultural resources are organised in everyday life.

Theoretically, the findings support a cultural ecological interpretation in which adaptation is shaped by the community's sustained relationship with a specific local environment. Acculturation helps explain intercultural change, while hybridity explains the negotiated identity outcomes of that change. The findings therefore caution against treating cultural adaptation and cultural sustainability as mutually exclusive. For minority communities, cultural continuity can depend precisely on the capacity to adapt selected practices while protecting those that remain important to collective memory, family transmission, and symbolic identity.

The study is limited to ten participants from Kampung Tirok and does not seek statistical generalisation to all Peranakan Chinese communities in Terengganu or Malaysia. Although thematic recurrence was sufficient for the focused domains examined here, it should not be interpreted as exhaustive meaning saturation for every aspect of community life. Future comparative ethnographic research could examine Kampung Tirok alongside other Peranakan settlements and include larger intergenerational samples to identify how locality, urbanisation, generational change, and different patterns of intercultural contact shape contrasting trajectories of adaptation and cultural continuity. Nevertheless, the present study demonstrates that the Tirok Peranakan Chinese should

not be understood simply as a community situated between Chinese and Malay cultures. Their identity is actively reproduced through selective adaptation, allowing local belonging and heritage continuity to coexist within a changing social environment.

Declarations

Ethics and consent to participate: Participants were informed about the study and provided oral informed consent prior to data collection. Participant identities are protected through anonymised codes.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no known conflict of interest.

Data availability: The qualitative data contain potentially identifiable community information and are not publicly available. De-identified supporting information may be considered upon reasonable request and subject to ethical and participant confidentiality considerations.

Author contributions: Mohammad Syafiq Nasaruddin: conceptualisation, fieldwork, data curation, analysis, and drafting. Wn Jazmina Wn Ariffin: supervision, conceptual guidance, review, and editing.

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