

Traditional Culture of the Peranakan Chinese Community in Tirok, Terengganu: An Ethnographic Study

Mohammad Syafiq Nasaruddin., WN Jazmina W. Ariffin*

Faculty of Applied Social Science, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The Peranakan Chinese constitute a distinctive minority community in Malaysia whose cultural life has developed through sustained interaction between Chinese cultural heritage and the local social environment. This study explores and describes the traditional cultural practices of the Peranakan Chinese community in Tirok, Terengganu, using an ethnographic approach. A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Ten informants were purposively selected from among the Peranakan Chinese residents of Kampung Tirok who possessed knowledge and experience related to the history, culture, and everyday life of the community. Interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo, while observations and secondary sources were used to support the interpretation of the findings. The findings indicate that the traditional culture of the Peranakan Chinese community remains evident in several aspects, including language, clothing, food, rituals and celebrations, socioeconomic activities, and house architecture. The continued use of Hokkien within the family, alongside the use of the Terengganu Malay dialect in broader social interactions, reflects the simultaneous processes of cultural preservation and adaptation to the local environment. A similar pattern can be observed in clothing practices, dietary practices, celebrations, economic activities, and house architecture. These conditions do not indicate the disappearance of Chinese cultural heritage; rather, they demonstrate how cultural traditions are maintained and reshaped within a predominantly Malay cultural environment. This study contributes to documenting the cultural diversity of the Peranakan Chinese community in Malaysia, particularly in the East Coast region, while highlighting the importance of family, community interaction, and everyday practices in ensuring the continuity of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Peranakan Chinese Tirok, traditional culture, ethnography, Terengganu, cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Culture is continuously shaped by social interaction, historical experiences, and environmental conditions (Tran et al., 2025). In multicultural societies, cultural practices may be maintained, modified, or combined as communities interact with different social and cultural environments. Thus, culture should not be understood as static or completely preserved, but as a dynamic process in which continuity and change are negotiated within everyday social life. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Peranakan Chinese communities in Malaysia, whose cultural practices have developed through prolonged interaction between Chinese cultural heritage and local social environments.

The Peranakan Chinese community in Malaysia represents a culturally diverse population whose traditions and identities have developed differently according to their respective historical and geographical contexts. Studies have highlighted variations among Peranakan Chinese communities in Melaka, Penang, Kelantan, and Terengganu, demonstrating that Peranakan culture is not homogeneous but is shaped by local histories, social relationships, and cultural environments (Huang et al., 2024; Loo et al., 2021). Neo (2025) similarly highlights the diversity of Peranakan Chinese identities within the Malay Archipelago, suggesting that cultural identity

needs to be understood in relation to particular local contexts rather than through a single generalised representation of Peranakan culture.

The cultural characteristics of Peranakan Chinese communities can be observed through both tangible and intangible practices, including language, foodways, clothing, rituals, domestic practices, and house architecture. Huang et al. (2024), through their thematic examination of Peranakan Chinese culture, demonstrate that these cultural dimensions may vary according to geographical location, historical development, and patterns of social interaction. Therefore, examining cultural continuity requires attention to the specific community and social environment in which cultural practices are reproduced and transformed.

This situation is particularly evident among the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu, which is situated within a predominantly Malay rural social environment. The prolonged interaction between the Peranakan Chinese community and the surrounding Malay community has contributed to processes of cultural adaptation and acculturation. Tan (2011) demonstrates that interaction between the Peranakan Chinese and the local Malay environment has influenced various aspects of cultural life, including language, architecture, clothing, cuisine, and eating practices. At the same time, elements of Chinese cultural heritage, including Chinese dialects, continue to be maintained within the community (Tan, 2011; Sua & Ngah, 2013).

The process of acculturation provides an important conceptual lens for understanding these cultural changes. Berry (1997) conceptualises acculturation as a process that occurs when individuals or groups come into continuous contact with another cultural group, resulting in changes in cultural practices, behaviours, and patterns of interaction. In the context of Kampung Tirok, this perspective helps explain how prolonged interaction with the Malay social environment may influence the community's everyday cultural practices without necessarily resulting in the complete replacement of its Chinese cultural heritage. Thus, acculturation in this study is understood as a process of cultural adaptation in which selected practices may change while other elements continue to be maintained.

However, cultural adaptation in Kampung Tirok cannot be adequately explained through acculturation alone. The coexistence of Chinese cultural elements with local Terengganu cultural influences also reflects the process of cultural hybridity, whereby cultural practices may be combined, adapted, and expressed through new forms. Tan et al. (2015), for example, demonstrate how foodways among Peranakan Chinese communities in Terengganu and Kelantan reflect interaction between Chinese cultural traditions and local culinary practices. Such cultural combinations illustrate that cultural change does not necessarily involve the disappearance of one culture and the complete adoption of another. Instead, different cultural elements may coexist and become incorporated into everyday practices.

The issue of cultural identity is also closely connected to these processes. Sua and Ngah (2013) show that the Peranakan Chinese community may maintain elements of Chinese identity while simultaneously adapting to the Malay cultural environment. Tan et al. (2018) further demonstrate that cultural identity may involve the coexistence and negotiation of different cultural influences, while Pue et al. (2019) indicate that the use of the Malay language and proficiency in the local language can coexist with the continuation of Peranakan Chinese identity. These findings suggest that identity is not necessarily fixed, but may be maintained, adapted, and expressed according to social and cultural contexts.

Accordingly, the concept of identity negotiation provides a further analytical perspective for this study. Identity negotiation refers to the ways in which individuals and communities maintain, adapt, and express aspects of identity through interaction with different cultural environments. In the context of Kampung Tirok, identity negotiation can be observed when community members continue to identify with their Chinese cultural heritage while adopting or incorporating elements of the surrounding Malay and Terengganu cultural environment (Sua & Ngah, 2013; Tan et al., 2018; Pue et al., 2019). The interaction between acculturation, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation therefore provides a complementary framework for examining how cultural continuity and cultural change occur simultaneously within the community.

From this perspective, the traditional culture of the Peranakan Chinese in Kampung Tirok should not be understood simply as a distinction between cultural preservation and cultural adoption. Instead, cultural

continuity may occur alongside adaptation, modification, and the incorporation of local cultural influences. For example, the continued use of Chinese dialects within family contexts may exist alongside the use of the Terengganu Malay dialect in interactions with neighbours, while food, clothing, rituals, and house architecture may demonstrate combinations of Chinese cultural heritage and local cultural influences (Sua & Ngah, 2013; Tan et al., 2015). These practices illustrate how cultural sustainability may involve selective maintenance and adaptation rather than the unchanged preservation of traditional practices.

Previous studies have examined different dimensions of Peranakan Chinese culture in Malaysia. Tan (2011) examined processes of acculturation among the Peranakan Chinese, while Sua and Ngah (2013) discussed issues relating to cultural identity maintenance and change. Tan et al. (2015) focused particularly on foodways among Peranakan Chinese communities in Terengganu and Kelantan. Although these studies provide important insights, there remains a need for an integrated ethnographic examination of multiple everyday cultural practices within a specific local community. Huang et al. (2024) also highlight the importance of context-specific studies in understanding the diversity of Peranakan Chinese cultural practices.

Therefore, this study examines six aspects of traditional culture among the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu: language, clothing, food, rituals and celebrations, socioeconomic activities, and house architecture. These aspects were selected because they represent important dimensions through which cultural practices are maintained, adapted, and transmitted in everyday life. The study applies the interconnected perspectives of acculturation, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation to examine not only what cultural practices are maintained or changed, but also how and why such processes occur within the local social environment.

An ethnographic approach was adopted because cultural practices are embedded within everyday social interactions and cannot be fully understood through isolated accounts of individual practices. Ethnographic research enables the researcher to examine cultural practices within their natural social setting and to understand the meanings attached to those practices by community members. Through interviews and participant observation, this study explores how cultural traditions are practised, adapted, and transmitted across generations within the community.

The study contributes to the understanding of Peranakan Chinese cultural sustainability by providing a community-level ethnographic examination of cultural practices in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. Rather than viewing cultural sustainability as the simple preservation of traditional practices, the study considers sustainability as a process involving continuity, adaptation, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation. In doing so, the study highlights how the Peranakan Chinese community responds to its local Malay cultural environment while continuing to reproduce selected elements of its Chinese cultural heritage.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using an ethnographic research design to explore and describe the traditional culture of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on the experiences, practices, perspectives, and meanings associated with cultural life within the community. Ethnography was selected because it enables cultural practices to be examined within their natural social setting and through the everyday experiences of community members (Case et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Study Setting and Fieldwork

The study was conducted in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu, which is associated with the Peranakan Chinese community living within a predominantly Malay social environment. Fieldwork was conducted from May 2026 to July 2026. During this period, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. These methods were used to obtain information on the community's traditional cultural practices and their continuity within the local social environment.

Informant Selection and Sampling

Ten informants were selected using purposive sampling. The selection focused on members of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok who could provide relevant information about the traditional cultural practices examined in this study. The informants represented different age groups, genders, marital statuses, and occupational backgrounds, allowing the study to obtain varied perspectives on cultural practices within the community. The profile of the informants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Informants

Informant Code	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Length of Residence in Terengganu
I1	Male	60–69	Married	Unemployed	65 years
I2	Female	60–69	Widowed	Homemaker	62 years
I3	Male	50–59	Married	Self-employed	55 years
I4	Female	50–59	Married	Homemaker	52 years
I5	Male	40–49	Married	Factory worker	48 years
I6	Female	40–49	Married	Factory worker	45 years
I7	Female	30–39	Single	Book seller	35 years
I8	Female	30–39	Married	Factory worker	32 years
I9	Male	20–29	Single	Businessperson	25 years
I10	Female	20–29	Single	Factory worker	22 years

The inclusion of informants from different age groups provided perspectives from both older and younger members of the community. Their varied backgrounds also supported the examination of cultural practices across different aspects of everyday community life.

Interview Procedure and Topic Guide

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of data collection. The interview approach allowed the researcher to use a set of guiding topics while providing flexibility to ask follow-up and probing questions based on the responses of the informants (Patton, 2015). The interview topic guide was organized around the six cultural aspects examined in the study: language, clothing, food, rituals and celebrations, socioeconomic activities, and house architecture.

The interview questions focused on the forms of traditional cultural practices, their continuation within families and the community, changes that had occurred over time, and the influence of the local social environment. Follow-up questions were used where necessary to obtain further clarification and detailed descriptions of the informants' experiences and perspectives.

Table 2. Interview Topic Guide

Cultural Aspect	Main Interview Topics
Language	Use of Hokkien and Terengganu Malay dialect, family communication, and changes in language practices

Clothing	Traditional clothing, everyday clothing practices, and local cultural influences
Food	Traditional food, inherited food practices, and local Terengganu food
Rituals and Celebrations	Chinese New Year, ancestral practices, family rituals, and community participation
Socioeconomic Activities	Agriculture, business, employment, and interaction with the wider community
House Architecture	Traditional house features, decoration, spatial arrangements, and local architectural influence

Observation and Recording of Field Data

Participant observation was conducted during the fieldwork period to complement the information obtained through interviews. Observation focused on cultural practices and everyday activities related to the six aspects examined in the study. Attention was given to the ways cultural practices were performed, maintained, adapted, and expressed within the community's social environment.

Observational information was recorded as field observations during the fieldwork activities. The recorded observations focused on relevant cultural practices, social interactions, and contextual information that could support the interpretation of the interview data. The observation records were subsequently organized according to the themes of the study and compared with information obtained from interviews and documentary sources.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview data and observation records were reviewed and coded according to their relevance to the research focus. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes.

NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing the qualitative data. The analysis was structured around the six main cultural aspects: language, clothing, food, rituals and celebrations, socioeconomic activities, and house architecture. Data from interviews, observations, and documentary sources were compared to identify areas of convergence and differences. This process supported the interpretation of cultural continuity and change within the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok.

Data Sources and Trustworthiness

The study utilized multiple sources of qualitative data, namely semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The use of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to compare information obtained from different sources and strengthened the interpretation of the findings. Thematic analysis was conducted systematically to ensure that patterns identified in the data were grounded in the information provided by the informants and the observations made during fieldwork (Nowell et al., 2017).

The use of an ethnographic design, purposive selection of informants, multiple data collection methods, and systematic thematic analysis provided a structured approach to documenting the traditional cultural practices of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate the forms of traditional culture that continue to be practised in the daily lives of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community in Terengganu. Based on the ethnographic study conducted through in-depth interviews and participant observation, it was found that the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community continues to preserve several cultural elements inherited from previous generations. At the same time, long-standing interactions with the local Malay community have also influenced some aspects of their everyday practices. These influences can be observed in language, clothing, food, rituals and celebrations, socioeconomic activities, and house architecture. This condition demonstrates that the traditional culture of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community has developed within a social environment characterised by close relationships with the local community.

Table 3. Summary of Major Themes of Traditional Culture

Cultural Aspect	Key Finding	Evident from Fieldwork
Language	Use of Hokkien within family and Terengganu Malay dialect in wider social interactions	Interviews & Participant observation
Clothing	Use of batik and kain pelikat in daily life	Participant observation
Food	Consumption of Laksa Terengganu alongside Chinese-influenced food	Interviews & Participant observation
Rituals and Celebrations	Continuation of Chinese New Year and ancestral worship among some families	Interviews
Socioeconomic Activities	Agriculture, small businesses and industrial employment	Interviews
House Architecture	Traditional features combined with local architectural influences	Participant observation

Table 4. Summary of Informant Quotations and Thematic Interpretation

Theme	Informant Quotation	Interpretation/Analysis
Language	“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.” (<i>Informant I1, male, 60–69 years old</i>)	Hokkien is maintained within the family as an intergenerational cultural practice, while the Terengganu Malay dialect is used in wider social interactions. This reflects acculturation and identity negotiation.
Clothing	“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.” (<i>Informant I2, female, 60–69 years old</i>)	Everyday clothing reflects adaptation to local practices and practical needs. Chinese-associated clothing is retained mainly in particular cultural contexts, demonstrating selective cultural continuity.
Food	“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	The incorporation of local food alongside inherited Chinese-influenced food demonstrates cultural hybridity and adaptation to the local social environment.

	everyday food.” (<i>Informant I3, male, 50–59 years old</i>)	
Rituals and Celebrations	“We still celebrate Chinese New Year with our family. We gather together, prepare food and visit relatives. Even though the celebration is not exactly the same as before, it is still important to us.” (<i>Informant I6, female, 40–49 years old</i>)	Chinese New Year remains meaningful because it is associated with family, cultural memory and collective identity. Cultural continuity is maintained while the form of celebration may change over time.
Socioeconomic Activities	“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.” (<i>Informant I9, male, 20–29 years old</i>)	Economic activities create regular interaction with different cultural groups. This encourages social and cultural adaptation without necessarily replacing the community’s cultural identity.
House Architecture	“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.” (<i>Informant I10, female, 20–29 years old</i>)	The combination of local architectural adaptation and retained Chinese decorative elements demonstrates cultural hybridity. The home functions as a space for maintaining cultural symbols and identity.

Language

Language represents one of the clearest examples of cultural continuity and adaptation among the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok. The findings indicate that Hokkien continues to be used within family communication, while the Terengganu Malay dialect is commonly used when interacting with neighbours and the wider Malay community. This pattern demonstrates that the community has adapted to the local linguistic environment while continuing to maintain an element of its Chinese linguistic heritage. The original fieldwork findings similarly identified Hokkien as an important family language and the Terengganu Malay dialect as part of everyday communication outside the family setting. One older informant explained the continued use of Hokkien within the family:

“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)

The statement illustrates that Hokkien is maintained particularly within the family environment, where it functions as a form of intergenerational cultural transmission. Its continued use can therefore be understood not simply as a linguistic practice but also as a means of maintaining cultural familiarity and connection with previous generations. At the same time, another informant described the use of the Terengganu Malay dialect when communicating with neighbours and members of the wider community:

“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)

This demonstrates that language practices are influenced by the social context in which communication takes place. The use of the local dialect facilitates interaction with the surrounding community, while Hokkien remains

relevant within family communication. Such language switching can be interpreted as a form of cultural adaptation rather than complete linguistic replacement.

From the perspective of acculturation, the use of Terengganu Malay reflects the influence of prolonged interaction with the surrounding Malay community. However, the continued use of Hokkien indicates that acculturation has not resulted in the complete abandonment of Chinese linguistic heritage. Instead, both linguistic practices coexist and serve different social functions. This coexistence represents cultural hybridity, as elements associated with Chinese heritage and the local Malay environment operate within the everyday life of the same community.

The findings are consistent with Sua and Ngah (2013), who identified language as one of the cultural areas influenced by the Malay social environment among the Tirok Peranakan Chinese while noting the continued use of Chinese dialects within the family. The present findings further suggest that language provides a space for identity negotiation: community members can participate in the wider Malay-speaking social environment while retaining Hokkien as part of their family and cultural heritage.

Clothing

The findings show that clothing practices among the Tirok Peranakan Chinese reflect both local adaptation and the continued recognition of Chinese cultural elements. Clothing and fashion also form an important component of Peranakan cultural expression, particularly through the development and use of decorative motifs associated with Peranakan heritage (Wang, 2023). Batik and kain pelikat are used in everyday life, particularly when staying at home and engaging in daily activities. At the same time, Chinese-associated clothing elements remain recognised during celebrations and certain cultural events. One informant described the use of batik or kain pelikat in everyday life:

“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 old)

The statement indicates that everyday clothing is influenced by the surrounding local cultural environment. Such practices may be more easily adapted because clothing is closely related to comfort, practicality, social expectations, and participation in everyday activities. Another informant described clothing associated with Chinese cultural occasions:

“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 old)

This illustrates that clothing associated with cultural celebrations may carry stronger symbolic meanings than everyday clothing. Consequently, certain Chinese clothing elements can remain meaningful even when everyday clothing practices have become more locally oriented.

The coexistence of local and Chinese clothing practices demonstrates cultural hybridity. It also illustrates selective acculturation, whereby community members adopt certain local practices without completely abandoning cultural elements associated with their heritage. Therefore, cultural continuity in clothing does not necessarily require traditional clothing to be worn every day. Instead, continuity may occur through the preservation of culturally meaningful clothing practices in particular social contexts.

Food

Food represents another important area in which cultural continuity and cultural adaptation occur simultaneously (Lillekroken et al., 2024). The findings indicate that members of the community continue to prepare and consume

food inherited from family traditions while also consuming local Terengganu food. Laksa Terengganu, for example, forms part of the community's dietary practices alongside food influenced by Chinese culinary traditions. An informant described the continuation of inherited family food:

“Some of the food we prepare today is the same food that our parents and grandparents used to make. We learned how to prepare it from our family, so even though our food habits have changed, there are still certain dishes that we continue to make.”

(Informant I5, female, 40–49 years old)



Figure 1. Terengganu Laksa at a Peranakan Chinese Residence in Tirok

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

This demonstrates the role of family in maintaining food heritage. Food that is transmitted through family practice may remain meaningful because it is connected to memory, family identity, and intergenerational transmission. At the same time, an informant discussed the consumption of local Terengganu food:

“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 old)

The incorporation of local food demonstrates the influence of the surrounding social environment on everyday dietary practices. Unlike some ritual foods that may carry strong symbolic associations, everyday food is more exposed to local availability, social interaction, shared eating practices, and changing preferences. This finding demonstrates cultural hybridity because inherited Chinese-influenced food and local Terengganu food coexist within the same community. It also reflects identity negotiation, as community members can participate in local food culture while continuing to maintain selected food practices associated with their family heritage.

The finding is consistent with Tan, Ngah and Lim Abdullah (2015), who examined the foodways of Peranakan Chinese communities in Terengganu and Kelantan and identified the negotiation between Chinese and local cultural influences. The Tirok case therefore illustrates that food culture can function as a space where cultural continuity and adaptation occur simultaneously.

Rituals and Celebrations

Rituals and celebrations demonstrate a stronger degree of cultural continuity (Silva et al., 2026). The findings indicate that Chinese New Year continues to be celebrated, while ancestral worship is practised by some families. Festive visits and invitations to neighbours also form part of the community's social life. One informant explained the continued practice of Chinese New Year:

“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 old)

Another informant described ancestral-related practices within the family:

“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, female, 30–39 years old)



Figure 2. Chinese New Year Celebration Involving Chinese, Malay, and Indian Communities

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

These practices appear to remain meaningful because rituals are closely connected to family, ancestry, cultural memory, and collective identity. Their symbolic significance provides a stronger basis for continuity than practices that are primarily determined by everyday practical needs. At the same time, the involvement of neighbours from the surrounding community demonstrates that cultural continuity does not require social isolation. Festive occasions provide opportunities for maintaining Chinese cultural practices while simultaneously strengthening relationships with the wider local community (Peng, 2025). The findings therefore illustrate identity negotiation within a shared social environment.

Socioeconomic Activities

The findings demonstrate that socioeconomic activities among the Tirok Peranakan Chinese include agriculture, fruit production, small businesses, industrial employment, and other forms of local employment. Some community members are involved in activities such as rambutan cultivation, while others operate small businesses such as Pustaka Dagang. One informant involved in agricultural activity explained:

“We have been involved in agriculture for many years. We grow fruits such as rambutan, and this has been part of our livelihood. Through this work, we also interact with people from the surrounding villages because we depend on the local community for different activities related to our work.”

(Informant I8, male, 30–39 years old)



Figure 3. Pustaka Dagang Managed by a Peranakan Chinese Owner

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Another informant involved in business or employment described their interaction with the wider community:

“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 old)

These accounts demonstrate that socioeconomic activities provide important spaces for interaction between the Peranakan Chinese community and people from different cultural backgrounds. Economic participation therefore contributes to cultural adaptation through regular social contact and shared local activities. However, participation in the wider economy does not necessarily result in the disappearance of cultural identity. Community members can participate in shared economic spaces while maintaining selected cultural practices within family and community settings. This illustrates the difference between social integration and complete cultural assimilation.

House Architecture



Figure 4. Peranakan Chinese Wooden House in Kampung Tirok

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

House architecture provides a material expression of cultural continuity and adaptation (Hao & Shinohara, 2026). Observations in Kampung Tirok identified traditional architectural features alongside influences from the surrounding local environment. Chinese cultural elements were also visible through decorations such as tanglong, Chinese poetic inscriptions, pokok bunga angkua, paper fans, and other wall decorations. An informant described the characteristics or decorations of the family house:

“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 old)

The continued presence of Chinese decorative elements indicates that the home functions as a space for cultural expression. At the same time, architectural forms and spatial arrangements have been influenced by the local environment and surrounding architectural practices. The combination of local architectural influences and Chinese cultural decorations demonstrates cultural hybridity at the material level. Architectural adaptation may occur because of practical and environmental considerations, whereas decorative symbols may be retained because of their cultural and identity-related meanings. Therefore, the home provides an important space in which cultural continuity and adaptation can exist simultaneously.

Across the six cultural aspects, the findings suggest that cultural continuity and cultural change are influenced by the social function and symbolic meaning of particular practices. Practices associated with family transmission, ancestry, cultural memory, and collective identity appear to have stronger mechanisms for continuity. These include the continued use of Hokkien within family settings, Chinese New Year, ancestral-related practices, inherited food practices, and Chinese cultural elements within the home. In contrast, practices that are closely connected to everyday interaction and practical social participation are more open to adaptation. The use of the Terengganu Malay dialect in wider social interaction, the use of batik and kain pelikat, consumption of local food, participation in local socioeconomic activities, and aspects of house architecture demonstrate adaptation to the surrounding environment.

The findings therefore indicate that cultural sustainability in Tirok does not mean preserving every traditional practice in an unchanged form. Instead, cultural sustainability occurs through selective maintenance and adaptation. Community members retain practices that continue to carry cultural and symbolic meaning while adapting practices that are more strongly shaped by everyday social and environmental conditions. This process can be understood through the combined concepts of acculturation, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation. Acculturation explains the influence of the surrounding Malay social environment; cultural hybridity explains the coexistence of Chinese and local cultural elements; and identity negotiation explains how community members maintain selected aspects of Peranakan Chinese identity while participating in the wider local society.

The experience of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese can be compared with other Peranakan Chinese communities in Malaysia. Previous research on Tirok has demonstrated that prolonged interaction with the surrounding Malay community influenced language, clothing, food, architecture, and everyday practices while selected Chinese cultural elements continued to be maintained (Sua & Ngah, 2013). Similar processes can be observed among the Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan. Research on Peranakan Chinese language and identity demonstrates the importance of Malay linguistic practices within the community while Peranakan Chinese identity continues to be maintained (Mohd Nor & Hasan, 2010). Tan, Ngah and Lim Abdullah (2015) likewise identified processes of cultural negotiation and hybridisation in the foodways of Peranakan Chinese communities in Terengganu and Kelantan.

The comparison indicates that Peranakan Chinese communities living within predominantly Malay social environments share broader processes of cultural adaptation. However, the specific cultural forms that emerge are shaped by local histories and social environments. In Tirok, for example, the use of the Terengganu Malay dialect, consumption of local Terengganu food, and adaptation of clothing and house architecture reflect the particular local context of Terengganu. The comparison also demonstrates that Peranakan Chinese culture should not be treated as a uniform cultural category throughout Malaysia. Instead, cultural practices are locally situated and continuously shaped through interaction between inherited traditions and surrounding communities. The Tirok case therefore contributes to a broader understanding of Peranakan Chinese culture by demonstrating how cultural sustainability can occur through selective maintenance, adaptation, and the combination of cultural elements.

Taken together, the six cultural aspects demonstrate that cultural sustainability among the Tirok Peranakan Chinese is a dynamic process involving both continuity and change. Cultural practices that are strongly associated with family, ancestry, cultural memory, and symbolic identity tend to be maintained, while practices embedded in everyday social interaction are more likely to undergo adaptation. The findings consequently suggest that cultural sustainability should not be understood as the preservation of culture in an unchanged form. In Tirok, sustainability is achieved through the ability of community members to retain meaningful cultural elements while adapting other practices to the local social environment. Acculturation contributes to cultural transformation, cultural hybridity explains the coexistence of Chinese and local elements, and identity negotiation explains how Peranakan Chinese identity continues to be expressed within a changing social environment.

The Tirok community therefore demonstrates that cultural continuity and cultural change are not necessarily opposing processes. Instead, they operate simultaneously in everyday life. The continued use of Hokkien, Chinese rituals, inherited food practices, and Chinese cultural symbols represents cultural continuity, while the adoption of the Terengganu Malay dialect, local food, clothing practices, socioeconomic participation, and architectural influences demonstrates cultural adaptation.

Limitations Of The Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of ten informants. Although purposive sampling enabled the researcher to obtain information from informants with relevant knowledge and experience of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, the small number of participants limits the generalisation of the findings to other Peranakan Chinese communities.

Second, although the study was conducted over the period from May 2026 to July 2026, the fieldwork period remained relatively limited for an ethnographic study. The duration may have restricted the researcher's opportunity to observe cultural practices across different occasions and periods, particularly seasonal rituals, celebrations, and other cultural activities that may not occur during the fieldwork period. Longer-term ethnographic engagement could provide a more comprehensive understanding of cultural continuity, adaptation, and change within the community.

Third, the study may be subject to social desirability bias, whereby informants may present their cultural practices, experiences, or views in ways that they perceive as socially acceptable or culturally appropriate. Consequently, some responses may not fully reflect the complexity and diversity of cultural practices within the community. The use of participant observation and document analysis alongside interviews helped to address this potential limitation by providing additional sources of information for understanding the cultural practices observed in the community.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a contextualised ethnographic account of the traditional culture of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kampung Tirok, Terengganu. Future research could involve a larger number of participants, longer periods of ethnographic fieldwork, and comparative studies involving Peranakan Chinese communities in different regions of Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the traditional culture of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community in Terengganu remains evident in various aspects of everyday life. The preservation of Hokkien within the family, the practice of rituals and celebrations, and the continuation of some traditional foods demonstrate the continuity of cultural elements inherited from previous generations. These practices indicate that cultural heritage continues to hold an important position in the everyday lives of community members, particularly through family practices and community activities.

At the same time, the use of the Terengganu Malay dialect, local clothing practices, acceptance of local food, participation in economic activities, and local influences on house architecture demonstrate cultural development

within a plural social environment. The findings show that the traditional culture of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community is not static but continues to develop through everyday experiences and social relationships with the local community. The combination of inherited cultural practices and locally influenced practices reflects the community's ability to maintain elements of its cultural heritage while adapting to the surrounding social and cultural environment.

The presence of Malay cultural influences in several aspects of life does not indicate that Chinese cultural heritage has been completely lost. Instead, elements of cultural heritage and local culture coexist within the community's everyday life. This condition reflects the distinctive characteristics of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community, which have been shaped by historical experiences, shared living, and continuous interaction with the local community. The findings therefore highlight that cultural continuity does not necessarily require cultural practices to remain unchanged, as traditions may continue to exist while being adapted to changing social circumstances (Huang et al., 2024).

Overall, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the cultural diversity of Peranakan Chinese communities in Malaysia by documenting the traditional cultural practices of the Tirok community from an ethnographic perspective. It also highlights the importance of everyday practices, family relationships, and interaction with the surrounding community in maintaining cultural continuity. The findings demonstrate that the traditional culture of the Tirok Peranakan Chinese community continues to be meaningful within contemporary community life, while simultaneously reflecting the ongoing interaction between Chinese cultural heritage and the local cultural environment.

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