

# FOLK-CULTURE DEVELOPMENT UNDER SURROUNDING-ZONES THEORY PERSPECTIVE: AN OBSERVATION OF HAKKA'S CHINESE NEW YEAR CUSTOM IN BANGKA ISLAND INDONESIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Hakkanese experienced several major migrations and ultimately distributed in every corner of the world. From the earlier period, the Hakkanese believed that someone should return to their origin until they settled down. Among much Chinese folklore, the most notable moment of the Hakanese was the transition between the old and the new, commonly called the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival custom. New Year custom roughly started from the beginning of the twelfth of the 23rd lunar month has been extended into the Lantern Festival. From the twelfth of the 23rd lunar month, it began to enter the Small Year festivals, and the Chinese were beginning to prepare series of activities which deals with throwing away the old while welcoming the new. Until New Year Eve, which was the culmination of the Year's custom, the whole family gathered happily to meet the spring season. New Year activities would continue until the Lantern Festival. But for the Hakka people, the festive atmosphere and activities would continue until the 20th day of the first lunar month, which was called Tian Chuan Festival. After that, the New Year was ended completely. The research method applied was the qualitative method with observation and library research regarding Bangkanese Chinese festival. The observed population in this research is the Hakkanese community in Bangka. This article finds that the Chinese community in several regions in Indonesia still maintains and preserves the original form of the indigenous culture. It can be seen from the Lunar New Year tradition runs by the Hakkanese in Bangka. At the same time, it also reflects the vitality of folk culture and the values of its existence.*

**Keywords:** Bangka island, hakka, Chinese new year, folk-custom

## INTRODUCTION

An old Hakka proverb says "better sell ancestral land, but never forget the ancestral language." For the Hakkanese, who regard their traditional culture in the highest position, the tradition left by the ancestors is a priceless heritage. But with the continuous flow of idea of mass culture, rising living standard, and changes in the mind of the society, the lifestyle of the Hakkanese people are changing too. Many of the traditional legacies have lost its original pattern and spirit. Nowadays, few people are starting to pay attention to these traditional cultures, which was fading because of the influence of the modern popular culture. This phenomenon can be seen from the action to conserve the culture and also the growing awareness of the preserve it. In the middle of modern society, which is multi-cultural, and multi-value, people should keep these traditional customs alive. This is the important issue to consider. This article is trying to trace back the old and forgotten traditions. Hopefully, people can recall their cultural memories, to feel the beauty and its functions to the human being.

The Sino-traditional feast is not only limited to the Lunar New Year celebrations. For Chinese community, the Chinese Lunar New Year is the biggest festival of the year. However, the tradition of the New Year is also not entirely similar in every province. With a vast archipelago territory, the change of traditions can obviously be seen. The old proverb says "10 miles of different wind, can be 100 miles of different traditions," which illustrates the variety of difference available in various regions. The tradition is not only different between different sub-ethnic groups in different areas, but it can also be seen even in the sub-ethnic Hakka from different areas where the traditions are obviously different. The difference can also be seen if the Hakka traditional New Year festival on the island of Bangka Indonesia if it is compared with the Meizhou Hakka tradition in China. These differences happen because of the long journey of hereditary succession process and also it is brought and widely spread by the Hakkinese people who work in different regions of the country. The most distinctive characteristics of the Hakkinese culture cover these features, namely succession process, distribution, stability, change, collective, normative, and service. The Bangka Island as one of the regions with the highest concentration of Hakka community in Indonesia has shown its own unique characters. In the middle of a multi-cultural society, people should be able to perceive those characteristics objectively and act against it appropriately. People should be aware that those traditions have their own values. But this does not mean that people accept those traditions without filtering or criticizing it. People should re-select of the traditions that were incompatible with the concept of modern life. Thus, the value of succession of a new tradition will be more apparent, closer, and better serving the people.

Humans from their birth until death, starting from the traditional New Year in the early years until the *Dong Zhi* festival at the end of the year is tightly bound in their custom. On the contrary, consciously or unconsciously, the tradition itself is already absorbed into many details of life. Therefore, research on tradition is also a study of patterns human life's behavior. When we want to see human life objectively, then we should also look objectively at their traditions.

## METHODS

The research method used in this paper is qualitative method with observation and library research regarding Bangkanese Chinese festival. The observed population in this research is Hakkinese community in Bangka.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The term "Surrounding - zones Theory" was first coined by the father of Japanese folkloristic Yanagita Kunio. Based on the following illustration of the ripple-shaped pattern, Yanagita Kunio has proposed the surrounding zones dialect theory, which used to be very popular. Although at the beginning, this theory was used to explain the pattern of a dialect, but the concept is ageneralized to cover the cultural and custom patterns. It can be seen in following Figure.

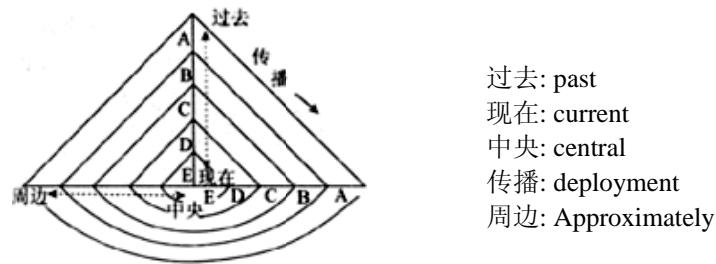


Figure Surrounding-Zones Theory  
(Source: Zhou, 2008)

Following the image pattern in the Figure, E is the central region of the formation and it is the central spreading of culture. The central region is continued to produce new language and culture, which is then extended to cover national level. The A, which is the farthest from the central region, is also the region that maintains the initial manifestation of culture. The D, C, B, which is located between E to A, is expressing a gradual change of a cultural phenomenon, which happened over time. At the same time, it also shows the changes in the cultural phenomenon that is both temporal and gradual within the scope of the real society, which refers to the existence of the geographical location (Zhou, 2008).

Although some scientists have criticized Yanagita surrounding – zones theory because, in the wider scope, this theory shows its shortcomings and problems, in the context of the inheritance conditions and the spread of Chinese culture in Indonesia, the pattern of the surrounding-zones theory is considered suitable to explain the issue. If Figure 1 shows the conditions of the preservation of Chinese culture in Indonesia, then E is the birth of Chinese culture, which is China. A is the Indonesian regions that still preserve its traditional cultural form. Currently, the Chinese culture as the central region has been continuously renewing its culture, but this emergence of a new culture is not extended to regions, which is quite distant from the central culture of Indonesia. Chinese communities in various regions in Indonesia still preserve the traditional form of the indigenous culture.

By looking at Hakka's Chinese New Year traditions in Bangka, people can see that some of the traditions that have never been observed in China are still preserved and maintained its presence, such as festivals of Tian Chuan, which is widely known in the Hakka areas. The Tian Chuan is a very old festival, even in China nowadays this festival is never observed anymore. In fact, it can be said that the Tian Chuan festival is only observed in the Hakka communities outside the mainland China, such as Taiwan, Indonesia, and other regions. The Meizhou Hakka communities in the area are not familiar with this festival, and they have never even celebrated it. This strengthened the inheritance patterns and the spread of customs based on the surrounding - zones theory. Now many scientists come to Southeast Asia to conduct research because this is where the highest concentration of Chinese population lives. This region can be said as the growing soil of the Chinese traditional culture.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of 12<sup>th</sup> month, the Lunar Year entered the small year festival or also usually called "Passing through a small new year". The small year marks the time when people start preparing activities related to the Spring Festival or New Year, such as cleaning the house thoroughly, buy equipment or ornament for the New Year, sticking the "Door Gods", preparing basket cake, carrying the "Kitchen God", etc. Among those traditions, the most interesting are the tradition of leading the Kitchen God.

Kitchen God (*Zao Shen*) also called *Zao Jun*, the *Wangye Zao*, or *Zao Jun Pusa*, is the God who control everything about food, eating, and drinking. The kitchen God has a very important position for Hakka community in Bangka. The Hakkanese in Bangka has a tradition when they move

to a new house. First, they must turn on the kitchen fire, which symbolizes the invitation of the host to the Kitchen God to present and in charge of the new house. They consider the Kitchen God as the "head of the family", sometimes people prepare an altar for the Kitchen God in their kitchen. Although the God is not considered as the important character, his function is closed to people's life. Every day people are going to the kitchen, lighting fire, and making food. Every movement of the people at home is supervised by the Kitchen God. He will record the goodness and badness of each member of the house. The Hakkanese in Bangka believes that someone should not use sleepwear when they cook in the kitchen. They should not steal food and have to finish all household tasks completely, neatly, and orderly. Otherwise, it will be recorded as an error by the Kitchen God. Qi Xinfang in *Minjian Guonian* says about a note from Ge Hong "Bao Pu Zi · Wei Zhi" of the Jin Dynasty. It says "the last night of the lunar month, and the Kitchen God also rises to heaven to report the sins and human errors" (Zou & Gao, 2011).

People believe that each year 23 months and 12 lunardates is the day when the Kitchen God rise to heaven to report on his record for one year. On that day, people usually prepare traditional offerings at the kitchen table or clean the altar of the Kitchen God who has already there. They provide offerings in the form of sweets and fruits. People have to pay attention to these offerings. It is usually in the form of sweet food because people believe after receiving the sweet food, the Kitchen God will speak nicely when reporting his record in front of the Jade Emperor (Emperor of Heaven). Another tradition is also presenting a dish, which is not only sweet but also sticky, like cotton candy and basket cake. This kind of food is expected to stick the Kitchen God's mouth so He will not report bad things to the Jade Emperor. This report is important for the Jade Emperor to determine the luck, fortune, and misfortune that a family will receive in the following year. Therefore, people try to pleasethe Kitchen God on that day so he will speak nice things to the Jade Emperor. The tradition of worshipping the Kitchen God is an old tradition. But nowadays, this tradition is rarely found in most areas of China. Currently in Indonesia, this tradition can only be found in few areas with thick traditional culture atmosphere. Largely, this tradition is maintained its originality by the Chinese community in the area of Sumatra and Borneo.

New Year's Eve can be considered as the climax of the New Year's celebration. In that day, people generally start to get busy from morning until midnight. The main activity of that day is worshipping the ancestors and *Shou Sui* (night watch to celebrate the New Year). People prepare sets of offerings for the ancestors starting from the dawn of the day. Some slaughtered chickens and cattle days before the New Year's Eve. In that day, the Hakkanese Bangka will prepare a shrine in front of the door and put a tag with the name of the ancestors (usually it is hand written with Chinese characters on a red paper and attaching three sticks of incense on its back). People also put different items on the shrine and lighting the candles and incense. The worshipping ritual is started by the head of the family or the seniors and then followed by the grandchildren. Sometimes people put two chairs in front of the altar to provide tables and chairs for the late ancestors so they can sit down and eat things with quietly. The Ancestor's worshipping procession usually continues until the day and ended by burning the name tag of the late ancestor.

After worshipping the ancestors, people continue to work such as preparing the goods for the presentation of the ancestor worship ceremony at the night of the turn of the year. At 12 AM, each family will worship the ancestors at the first moment the New Year. The local Hakkanese often called this tradition *Ciap Sin Ngien* (New Year). Worshipping the ancestors in the middle of the night symbolizes the turn of the old to the new and deleting the old and welcoming the new. This ceremony also shows a sense of longing and devotion from the younger generation to their ancestor. Besides worshipping the ancestors, the turn of the year is also a moment for the prayer of welcoming the Kitchen God. According to legend, after the Divine Kitchen is ascended to Heaven on the 23<sup>rd</sup> months of 12th Chinese New Year, He will return to the world at the turn of the night to supervise human behavior. Ren Gengyun in his book *Chuantong Jieri* has stated "The Gods Kitchen since the night before the New Year has been presented in every home to guard and observe a family." (Ren, 2007).

After the procession of welcoming the Kitchen God, all the family is lighting the fireworks and congratulate each other for the New Year. The *Shou Sui* tradition (night watch at the turn of the year) has a special meaning. In "*Zhongguo Chuantong Jieri: Xisu Ji Qi Neihan Gaishu*" had stated a long time ago *Shou Sui* has two meanings. For the senior-age, it means to leave the old age and appreciate the meaning of love and time. While for the young people, *Shou Sui* is observed to extend the age of the parents (Yan, 2009). Although this belief cannot be proven, it shows the moral devotion of family in Chinese culture. On the other hand, it is also clear that traditions in each form continue to play its educational, social function. Through inheriting the traditions, people unconsciously has inherited the spirit of respect for the elders while protecting the younger people. They also have to educate these younger generations to uphold this spirit.

On the first day of Chinese New Year, the main activity of the day is *Bai Nian*(meeting each other). Starting from the first day to the 15th lunar day (Lantern Festival), the first words should be said when meeting another person is *Gong Xi Xin Nian* or *Kung Hi Sin Ngien* (Happy New Year). During the celebration of New Year or Spring Festival, every household is preparing small meals. Kinds of food commonly find the households are pineapple tart, *semprong* cake, Bangka crackers, eight treasures sweets, and many other dry foods. The Local Hakka community also has many taboos. On the first day of the New Year, people are not allowed to sweep the floor, doing laundry, drying clothes, breaking things, and swearing dirty words. For one Lunar month, someone is also not allowed to cut their hair, buying footwear, and spending a large amount of money. These kinds of abstinence or prohibitions are maybe considered as a pointless joke, but actually, it reflects the simplicity and innocence of the people in the past. The abstinenes show human helplessness against the unpredictable future, and they hope that they would be saved from disaster and have beautiful future.

The Ninth day of Lunar New Year is called *Tian Gong Dan* or the birthday of the Sky Emperor. On that day people make offerings to the sky. Prayer can be done in local temples or front of their house by putting the show on the offering table directly facing the open sky. Based on the notes in the book *Zhongguo Minjian Shenpu*, it is said that people believe that the ninth day of the month is the birthday of the Lunar Jade Emperor or Emperor of Heaven. The Gods and Goddesses celebrate the Jade Emperor's return to the palace, so that day is also called *Song JiaRi* (Wu, 2007). During the emperor's birthday, it is also taboo among others to dry clothes, especially underwear, under an open sky, because it is considered as harassment and disrespect towards the sky emperor. After passing through the ninth day, the local Lunar New Year atmosphere, in general, is not clearly felt anymore. Until the Lantern Festival, common events that can be found are *Liong* and *Barongsai*. Unlike the original Chinese, the Bangka Chinese society does not have a tradition of lighting lanterns, lantern riddle or eat *onde* cake. Compared to the traditional Chinese, the Lantern Festival event in Bangka is more plain and simple.

On the 20th day of the Lunar year is the *Tian Chuan* day. It is a nearly extinct ancient feast. Now, the *Tian Chuan* can only be found in the Hakkanese areas and preserved by the Hakka community. The main tradition in the *Tian Chuan* is patching the leaking sky. In the ancient records of *Yuan Jian Lei Han* volume 13, he wrote "Just east of the river Yangtze or Chang Jiang called the 20th of the month one as the *Tian Chuan* (leaking ceiling) day. He uses the red rope to bind *Bing'er* (a type of fried small food) and place it on the roof. This tradition is called the patching leaking sky. According to legend, on this day the goddess Nuwa is patching the leaking sky (Zhang & Wang, 1985). People believe that it is the day that Goddess Nuwa mends a leaking ceiling, so they form the tradition of patching up the sky. A long time ago, on the day of *Tian Chuan*, citizens were resting and not do anything for one day. This was because people believed that on the day the sky was leaking, everything done in that day would leak and useless. Fortune obtained on that day would be leaked and did not produce good results. Therefore, residents are resting on the *Tian Chuan* day.

Another habit on the *Tian Chuan* day is the people are worshipping the sky by using a basket cake. Basket cake is not only sweet, but also very sticky, so it is suitable to be used to patch a leaking

ceiling. After patching the leaked ceiling, residents will begin to work in peace. Tracing the long tradition of Chinese New Year, the basket cake is a must have food for the feast. For the Hakkanese, after passing through the *Tian Chuan*, all the series of New Year traditions is finally ended.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lunar New Year celebration is the biggest festival for the Chinese community. Bangka Island as one of the regions with the largest Hakka community in Indonesia is still preserving its Chinese traditions. As a concept proposed in Surrounding-zones theory, China as the central area always updating its culture, but it does not bring much influence to Indonesian culture from a central location. The Chinese community in several regions in Indonesia still maintains and preserves the original form of the indigenous culture. It can be seen from the Lunar New Year tradition runs by the Hakkanese in Bangka. The Kitchen God prayer tradition, Small Year festival, New Year ancestor worship tradition, and prayer tradition of the *Tian Chuan* sky festival, show that these traditions may have been abandoned in China, but they still can be found on the island of Bangka.

Of course, the preservation of traditional cultural practices is going through series of changes to cope with the social and cultural conditions. Taking the example of the Lantern Festival, some holiday traditions have been simplified or even abandoned. This proves that folklore has to change. It also explains that there is no indigenous tradition that never went through changes. The Hakkanese in Bangka has successfully preserved and passed their traditions to the others. It helps the traditions itself to play its social function to control the behavior of human beings.

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