

From Borneo to Penang: Preserving our culture and language for future generations

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If languages and cultural practices are disappearing fast in the indigenous communities of Borneo to the Chinese community in Penang and elsewhere, can digital technology and AI play a bigger role to document pieces of our identity that can be preserved beyond time and space?



This picture taken on 11 March 2023 shows people riding in a trishaw in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. (Mohd Rasfan/AFP)

“I am probably the last generation that truly knows how to farm paddy,” my friend chuckled bitterly. “But even I haven’t been involved in it for years.”

This conversation took place on a night when I stayed in the house of a Lun Bawang family in Long Semedoh, a village situated in the highlands of the heart of Borneo. This region spans southwest Sabah, northern Sarawak and the Krayan Highlands of North Kalimantan, and it is home to the indigenous Lun Bawang people, also known as Lundayeh. The region is renowned for its highland rice, which possesses a distinctive texture and fragrance.



Guesthouse in Long Semedoh. (Photo: Goh Chun Sheng)

Neither of us needed to question why he said that; the answer was apparent. Mixed feelings welled up within me as my thoughts drifted back to Penang, my birthplace and hometown.

Gradual loss of a language

My great-grandparents, who were poor farmers from the southern Chinese province of Hokkien or Fujian, migrated to Penang where they established a sizeable family. They were not proficient in Mandarin but spoke the dialect of their kampung. Over time, the dialect underwent changes influenced by local languages, Mandarin and English, eventually evolving into what is known as “Penang Hokkien”.

During my secondary school years, a language policy was implemented in many Chinese schools, forbidding the use of Hokkien to ensure proper Mandarin learning.

Regrettably, my generation will likely be the last to regularly speak Penang Hokkien and uphold traditional Penang Hokkien ceremonies. During my secondary school years, a language policy was implemented in many Chinese schools, forbidding the use of Hokkien to ensure proper Mandarin learning.

Ironically, as rebellious teenagers, we found speaking Hokkien, the forbidden language, to be a cool and defiant act, leading us to use it as much as possible. However, the consequences of this ban have become evident after a few years, as many of my younger cousins no longer have a strong command of Hokkien, and this is even more apparent among my nephews and nieces.



Shophouses in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. (SPH Media)

To be fair, the decline in the usage of Hokkien in daily life and the diminishing motivation to pass down the dialect to future generations can also be attributed to cross-state marriages with Chinese individuals from different clans.

Interestingly, the issue of "cultural dilution", as described by the people I met in Borneo's highlands, was also mentioned in relation to cross-ethnic marriages. This phenomenon is particularly observed among indigenous people who marry migrants from Java and Sulawesi, who moved in from the Indonesian side.

Some younger individuals temporarily returned to farming due to job loss during the pandemic, but it remains uncertain how long they will stay.

Issues of land and communal living

"We are still determined to safeguard our languages and culture," my Lun Bawang friend affirmed. Yet I wondered how this would be possible when we no longer live together in the village or practice farming just like what happened to my village. Many traditions seem intertwined with land and communal living.

Most of the individuals I encountered in the highlands were elderly, while their children and grandchildren resided in Lawas, a coastal town approximately four hours away by car. The relative isolation and distance led to less frequent visits from their children. Some younger individuals temporarily returned to farming due to job loss during the pandemic, but it remains uncertain how long they will stay. The travel time may be reduced in the future as major road construction projects are currently underway to improve the roads.



Efforts by Lun Bawang communities to document their folklores. (Photo: Goh Chun Sheng)

In the case of Penang, the challenges are not primarily related to physical distances but rather the isolation caused by the prevalence of concrete jungles. Urbanisation has further fragmented our once close-knit family, dispersing us into small apartments. The motivation to preserve traditional ceremonies among the younger generations has waned over time as each of them established their own families.

Vanishing rituals in pockets of communities

Raised in the village, I consider myself fortunate to have witnessed traditional Chinese New Year celebrations and religious ceremonies in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, practices that have faded in Penang over time. Unfortunately, due to technological constraints during those eras (at least for my village), there appears to be limited documentation of these events. With the passing of my generation, those memories may soon be lost and become untraceable in human history.

Over the years, concerns about losing one's language, culture, and ultimately identity have intensified due to both the outmigration of younger generations and the influx of outsiders. This has given rise to many cultural movements and efforts. This reminded me of the defenders of Chinese education in Penang — those who strived to preserve their roots and were willing to go to jail to protect the existence of Chinese schools during the old times.



A Chinese temple at the entrance to Chew Jetty at George Town, Penang, Malaysia. (SPH Media)

The larger Chinese civilisation

However, nothing can endure indefinitely, including cultures. This sentiment holds true even for the Chinese civilisation, often hailed as one of the longest-lasting civilisations in human history. The Chinese civilisation as a whole has undergone profound transformations and evolutions over the past three thousand years. These changes have been driven by significant shifts in population dynamics from north to south, resulting in alterations in biological traits and the rise and decline of languages and dialects.

These shifts may be attributed to factors such as changes in geographical landscapes, alterations in river courses, fluctuations in climate that impact agricultural practices (and, consequently, shape societies), and the influence of external forces (e.g., missionaries). And there is also the impact of migration. For example, the Chinese people who migrated to Southeast Asia have evolved into distinct entities in different regions due to the influence of local and Western cultures.

If human history were likened to a mighty river, flowing like those in Borneo, cultures would be the radiant lights adorning its banks. Perhaps, the brightness and vibrance of a culture are not determined by its lifespan, but by the colourful touches that once graced the tapestry of human civilisation.

Digital archives and potential of AI

Documentation probably holds the key to preserving the rich cultural legacy. With the advancements of technology and digitalisation, we have been empowered to move beyond stone carvings and decaying books in our quest to protect and share our culture.

Three years ago, I came across the Hainan Boatbuilder project on Pangkor Island by the Centre for Research-Creation in Digital Media (CRCDM) in the School of Arts at Sunway University. With only one Hainan master boat builder left on the island, the project digitally captured and archived the process of constructing large wooden fishing boats, ensuring the survival of both tangible and intangible heritage.

Through extensive audiovisual documentation and a 360-degree virtual experience, the project immerses viewers in the boat-building workshop environment, including giving a feel of the traditional ceremonies practised by the boat-reliant communities.

The aid of AI opens up new realms of possibility.

I recently had the joy of visiting the Borneo Cultures Museum in Kuching with my family, and to my surprise, my children showed a keen interest in the exhibits thanks to the high-tech facilities and gamification techniques employed at the museum.

This engaging experience continued when we explored the Sarawak Cultural Village, where my children eagerly immersed themselves in the unfamiliar cultures by embarking on a “treasure hunt” within the traditional houses. By scanning QR codes with our mobile apps, they discovered captivating stories and insights about specific subjects. The combination of technology and traditional heritage created an inspiring cultural experience for the whole family.



The entrance of Sarawak Cultural Village in Sarawak, Malaysia. (Photo: Nabilah Z. Jamari)

The aid of AI opens up new realms of possibility. NatGeo has reported the potential impact of AI in culture preservation, with the Aztec legacy as one of the remarkable examples. Despite Spain’s victory over the Aztec, their rich culture persisted through the ancient Aztec codices. These manuscripts acted as a bridge between the past and present, preserving the Aztec language and documenting their achievements.

Today, scholars leverage AI to revitalise Aztec culture, allowing it to transcend time and thrive in the digital realm. AI scientist Rafael Pérez y Pérez has developed a programme that generates captivating short stories inspired by the Aztec heritage. This programme emulates the intricate storytelling process of the human brain, infusing narratives with depth and creativity, reminiscent of the vibrant Aztec culture.

With the rapid emergence and evolution of digital technologies and AI, will our cultures transcend the confines of spatio-temporal boundaries, inspiring our future generations? The answer probably lies in our collective determination to preserve and celebrate the treasures of our past, present and future.

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