

## Effect of Malay-China Trade Relations During the Malacca Sultanate on the Emergence of Chinese Peranakan Community

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**Abstract:** Malacca historical development of civilization resulting from interactions with other civilizations was brought by foreigners who came to Malacca since the time of the Malacca Sultanate. This is because at that time, Malacca was an entrepot trading centre visited by traders and merchants, representing different civilizations and various groups from all over the world including traders from China, India, Arabs, Persia and also traders from Europe. Busy port of Malacca at that time was described by *Sulalatus Salatin*: "... then all the commerce and trade winds windward all are coming to Malacca ...". Malacca's fame as a famous trade center at that time led to a close relationship between Malacca with other countries, including China. In the initial stages of its development and growth, Malacca had been seeking the protection from China in particular from the Emperor Yung-Lo of the Ming Dynasty. Malacca trade relations with China can be seen clearly through the responses of Ming government when they changed their trade policy to eliminate the closed-door policy of the previous run. Chinese-Melaka close relationship became stronger when the ruler of Malacca visited China several times and so a visit from China to Malacca. Clearly, the initial contact between Malacca and China had occurred since the establishment of the Malacca-China diplomatic relations and also with the arrival of traders from China to Malacca. The arrival of the Chinese, beginning with the trade relations between China and Malacca, had a major impact since it caused the occurrence of intermarriage between Chinese merchants with the local community. As the Chinese immigrants who came to Malacca consisted only of men, this had caused them marrying local women. As a result of intermarriage between the Chinese merchants who migrated to Malacca since the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the local women had resulted in the emergence of a new community known as the Chinese guard, Peranakan Chinese and as the Baba and Nyonya community which exist in Malacca until today. This article aims to discuss in-depth about the impact of trade relations during the Malacca Sultanate to the formation of the Peranakan Chinese community in Malacca. It uses content analysis approach by looking into various literatures concerning this group of people. Based on the historical facts, results show that indeed trade plays an important role especially in the initial stages of the formation and emergence of the Chinese Peranakan community in Malacca.

**Key words:** Peranakan Chinese • Malacca • Civilizations • Trade Relations • Chinese Immigrants

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### INTRODUCTION

The state of Malacca was founded by Parameswara (Iskandar Shah) in 1399 AD [1-2]. In 1414 Parameswara had embraced Islam and therefore Islam began to spread among the people in the state. Since then, Malacca as a trading and shipping center was becoming increasingly important and rapidly growing after its ruler converted to Islam. This phenomenon had caused Muslim traders from countries such as the Middle East, India, China, Persia, Turkey, Armenia and others to come to Malacca to do

their business trade in the port of Malacca [3]. Thus, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Malacca had grown into an international trading port. This article examines the effect of trade relation between China and Malacca during the Malacca Sultanate on the emergence of a new ethnic group called the Chinese Peranakan or the Baba Nyonya of Malacca. This study uses content analysis approach where the effect of trade is analyzed based on the available literatures. This includes historical facts which are elaborated and discussed in relevant themes according to the objective of the study.

**Commercial Activities in Malacca:** When Malacca emerged as a trade center to replace Srivijaya in the 15<sup>th</sup> century it was able to achieve greater success as a result of rapidly growing trade factors. The Malacca Sultanate which initially was a small kingdom had grown as an empire and took over the role of the former trade center held by Srivijaya [4].

Malacca's success in attracting commercial attention proving its ability to efficiently handle the trade center is able to provide modern infrastructure facilities. Being strategically located at the confluence of the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca and Sunda Straits is an important factor that makes it a port of call for traders from India, China, Arab and so forth.

Accordingly, Malacca had emerged as an empire known as the Empire of Malacca Sultanate grown rapidly and became an important port in the Malay Archipelago in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, Malacca was also a center of the spice trade because it served as a central collection and marketing place for the spice states to market their products. This can be proved by the words of a Portuguese sailor and writer named Duarte Barbosa who mentioned that, "He who ruled the place, could dominate world trade" (He who is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice).

In addition, other factors also contributed to the emergence of Malacca as a developed country trade. Its harbor which was situated in a protected zone, was safe from the threat of the Southwest Monsoon and Northeast Monsoon. Traders from Java, Arab, India, China and other countries in the course of carrying out commercial activities in the region could take refuge in Malacca until the situation was safe for them to continue sailing in the sea. Tome Pires said that at that time there were about 84 different languages spoken in Malacca and each was different [3]. This illustrated the enormity of the role of Malacca as a trading port visited by traders from various countries.

The success of Malacca's role as an entrepot port was mainly because it was able to act as receiver or buyer of the goods. In addition, it also served as a mediator to find traders from the East and the West, including the archipelago to carry out activities and exchanges of merchandise. Apart from the commercial exchange of goods, trade in Malacca also was conducted through the medium of the local currency made of tin and was referred to as calains by Tome Pires as well as the use of foreign currency as the currency of the Kembayat, Hormuz and Pasai [3]. At the same time, the state also served as a distribution centre for goods brought to Malacca to other

places in the vicinity. Malacca as a busy port and commercial center was described in *Sulalatus Salatin* as follows [5]:

“Then all the trade wind and the wind commerce all are coming to Melaka, Melaka town was so crowded at that time. So the Arabs named it Malakat, ie gathering all commerce, from as many different types of trade there.”

Even during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah (1477-1488), there was a note that Malacca had become known until there were about 40,000 people from all races from all over the world [6]. Meanwhile, the *Malay Annals* and Newbold (1971) also showed that when the reign of the last Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mahmud Shah of Malacca that before being attacked by the Portuguese, the total population was around 190,000 people of Malacca [7-8].

Increase in population was evident in Malacca because of two important factors due to its strategic geographical position in the international trade route and also due to the efforts of the state government of Malacca prospering with trade and diplomatic ties with foreign countries [9]. When Malacca emerged as an international trading port visited by the traders and merchants from the East and West, the increase in population in Malacca continued to grow and became a focal point for traders [10].

Thus, the role of Malacca as an important trading port in the region, particularly in Malaya cannot be denied because the achievement of Malacca as a trading port at the time was a factor to be proud of and underlay the development of all activities of government and its people. Among the foreign nations that also visited Malacca were merchants from China. The relationship between Malacca with China was actually through the initiative of the Emperor Yung Lo who sent delegations to Malacca since the beginning and founding of Malacca around 1403. The relationship between China and Malacca brought more benefits to both parties. Based on the *Malay Annals*, the relationship between China and Malacca state became an anchor through the marriage of Sultan Mansur Shah with Princess Hang Li Po who embraced Islam. Hang Li Po's arrival was accompanied by an escort of five hundred Chinese maidens who had also converted to Islam. Since the royal wedding event, the settlement of the traders in Malacca began to flourish. They were given a specific placement around an area known as Bukit China [7]. It was an area that had a good

position at the time because it was a highland area located right opposite the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.

**China Trade Relations and Malacca:** Since before the opening of Malacca in the 14th century the Chinese had actually been visiting the areas around Southeast Asia, including Malaya. They were among the Buddhist monks who traveled to India. This group is said to have stopped in the coastal areas of the Malay Peninsula [11, 12].

Since the beginning and establishment of Malaccan Empire by Iskandar Shah, Malacca had gained the attention of the Emperor of China. This was due to the concurrent period when Iskandar Shah ruled Malacca which occurred in tandem with the reign of Emperor Yung-lo (1402-1424) in China. Beginning from the Emperor Yung-lo interest to establish international relations with countries in Southeast Asia and around the Indian Ocean to ensure its economic progress, power and widening the influence of the Chinese government, then a diplomatic relations had been sealed between China and Malacca. It was established through a messenger named Ying Chin who was sent by Emperor Yung-Lo to Malacca to establish diplomatic relations and explore trade opportunities [13].

Thus, during the Ming Dynasty there was a significant growth of trade relations between China and the Malay World. This is because the Malay Sultanate of Malacca had sought refuge from the Ming Dynasty which was well known for its strong empire. Thus, the Malacca Sultanate had sent a message to seek protection from the Ming Dynasty to face threats from Ayudha. At around 1405 -1435, 20 messengers were sent by the rulers of Malacca to meet the emperor of the Ming Dynasty for the purpose of seeking protection [14, 15].

Malacca trade relations with China can also be seen clearly through the responses of Ming government when they changed their trade policy and eliminated the closed-door policy [16]. Subsequently, the Ming Dynasty who wished to expand its political influence abroad had sent Admiral Zheng He as a special envoy to the Asian countries. Admiral Zheng He's visit to Malacca had laid the foundation to the earliest appearance of Malacca as the center of international trade [17]. Zheng He's recognition of the role of Malacca as a center of international trade had saved Malacca from the threats of Siam [15]. When facing the threat of invasion from Siam around 1435, Malacca government was able to protect the country and had become self-reliant and capable of defeating Siamese attacks without the need for outside help again [18, 19]. It is thus giving a significant impact on

the development of Malacca as an important trade centre and further open up to the settlement of the Chinese people in Malacca.

Clearly, the trade relationship with China goes back as early as the establishment and founding of Malacca. The next close relationships between these two governments continued to be strengthened in 1403-1435. During this period, Malacca had had trade relations and also close diplomatic relations with China. Protection and auspices of the Chinese government on the state of Malacca had given the chance for it to grow as an international trading port visited by merchants from all over the world including traders from China who provided facilities and privileges [20].

In the meantime, other effects that had also occurred as a result of the trade relations between China and Malacca were the cases of intermarriage between Chinese traders with local Malay community. Intermarriage between the Chinese merchants who migrated to Malacca since the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the local women had spawned a new community known as the Chinese guard, Chinese Peranakan or Baba and Nyonya of Malacca.

**History of Chinese Arrival in Malacca:** Historically, the Chinese have centuries-old residing in Malaya since the days of the past. Their arrivals in Malaya occurred in several phases that can be categorized in three main phases consist of the earliest settlements of the Chinese, during the British colonial era and the post-independence Malaya.

Thus the earliest identifiable settlement of the Chinese in Malacca was since the Malacca Sultanate. As an entrepot trade center and a place of exchange of business items brought in from various countries, Malacca attracted traders from China to carry out commercial activities in the state. The history of the coming of the Chinese officially to Malacca took place by a visit of Admiral Yin Ching sent by the Emperor of China to Malacca in 1403. The visit followed next with a delegation from Malacca government to visit the Emperor of China was in 1405 and 1407.

At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, an admiral from China named Zheng He made several expeditions to Southeast Asia and South Asia including a visit to Malacca as a delegation sent by the Emperor Yung Lo in the 1408. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> expedition (1409 - 1411) and 7<sup>th</sup> (1431 - 1433), Zheng He also brought with him a writer named Fei Xin, who wrote about the expedition made by Zheng He (1405 - 1433). In Fei Xin's entry, he wrote about the locals in Malacca and mentioned about the existence of a light-skinned people, who may be Chinese [21].

Meanwhile, in the *Malay Annals* written around the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there are also important records related to the marriage of Sultan Mansur Shah (1458 - 1477) from Malacca with a princess from China named Hang Liu or Hang Li Po. According to the *Malay Annals*, princess Hang Li Po was sent to Malacca by the Chinese Emperor and Sultan Mansur Shah had married her after she converted to Islam. As a result of the marriage, they were blessed with a son named Paduka Hamad (or Mimat). Paduka Mimat also had a son named Paduka Sri China [22].

According to information found in the *Malay Annals*, princess Hang Li Po was accompanied by 500 male followers and several hundred noble maidens. Escorts of the princess Hang Li Po were composed of the sons of ministers sent by the Emperor of China to become assistants to the princess [23]. All of them were converted to Islam and were given a place to stay at a hill known as Bukit China [23]. Based on these facts, there are a lot of opinions, including among the Peranakan Chinese community who believe that they are the descendants of the escorts of Hang Li Po [24].

Apart from that, other evidence that may explain the issue of the marriage of the daughter of the Sultan of Malacca from China was recorded by a Portuguese man, Tome Pires. He had recorded in his writings that there was a marriage between Xaquen Darxa (probably Sultan Iskandar) with the daughter of a Chinese leader who accompanied him back to Malacca after visiting China. According to Tome Pires notes, from the marriage, they were blessed with a prince named Raja Putih [9].

Meanwhile, other evidence that was also recorded is the wedding events of the Sultan of Malacca with a Chinese lady posted by Braz de Albuquerque. He noted the Sultan of Malacca with the second title of Sri Maharaja (1424-1444) married the daughter of a Chinese captain. In this case, the two entries by the Portuguese recorder indirectly support and strengthen the evidence of the true story pertaining to the Sultan's marriage between Malacca Chinese women as told in Malay History. This is testimony to the truth that since the days of the Malacca Sultanate more Chinese people already made settlements in Malacca.

However, the story of the princess Hang Li Po and his followers has never been found in any Chinese records [25]. Consequently, according to Tan Chee Beng, although Sultan Mansur Shah had married a Chinese woman who was presented by the Emperor of China, the woman did not need to be a princess. He also argues that the number of escorts who accompanied the princess might have been magnified to glorify the sultan who ruled

at the time [26]. Meanwhile, Kong Yuanzhi was of the view that Hang Li Po's story has two very important positive aspects. First, he felt that the story actually shows the history of the friendly and close relations that have prevailed so long between the Malays and the Chinese. The second positive aspect is that the story also shows that there have been cases of intermarriage between the Malays with the Chinese over the past five centuries [25].

Oong Hak Ching (1983) confirmed the existence of the Peranakan Chinese since the days of the Malacca Sultanate with reference to Chinese historical sources and also from local sources. According to him, the Chinese Peranakan descent was nicknamed as 'Chinese guard' which means 'protected persons'. They include a new class of non-Muslim or Muslim Chinese. Chinese group consisting of the escort maidens of Hang Li Po was said to have dug a well at the foot of Bukit China for their daily use. The well still exists to this day and is known as the 'Well of the King' among the local Malay community and the Chinese people call it as 'The Well of Sam Po-Cheng', which takes its name from Admiral Zheng He [27].

There is also evidence by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which described and proved the specific Chinese settlement in clusters in Camp on China, Malacca. This is based on *Descriptions of Malacca* (1613M), written by a Portuguese man named Gohindo de Eredia who was born in Malacca in 1563 and settled in Malacca in the first 40 years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century [28].

However, according to Oong Hak Ching (1983), there was no reliable source to prove that the Chinese Peranakans in Malacca at present are the descendants of the Chinese during the Malacca Sultanate. He was of the view that the Chinese people at the time of Malacca Sultanate had probably gone through full assimilation with the local Malays. In addition, the Chinese might also have moved to another place with Sultan Mahmud Shah's followers when Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511 [27].

#### **Effect of Commercial Activity Against Chinese Peranakan Community Formation in Malacca:**

Based on records obtained from the source of Chinese, Malay and Portuguese, it is certain that there was a Chinese merchant community who came to trade in Malacca before Malacca was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511. However, according to Oong Ching (1983), the ancestor of the Chinese Peranakan in Malacca that exists at present time is made up of the Chinese who settled in Malacca during the Portuguese rule (1511-1641) or later period [27]. This is based on evidence that at the time of the

Portuguese conquest of Malacca, there was a Chinese village which had been built. Information about this case was recorded by De Eredia, a Portuguese man who sketched in his writing a village named 'Chinese Village' which was located near the town Upe [28]. Therefore this is a fundamental evidence which proved the formation of the Peranakan Chinese community who had settled in Malacca since that particular time until present. Thus, the earliest Chinese settlers who came to Malaya in particular to Malacca were made up of traders who came to carry out commercial activities. They are believed to be the ancestors of the Chinese Peranakan community in Malacca. Therefore, it can be assumed that trade relation plays an important role in establishing and creating a new ethnicity called the Chinese Peranakan.

Lack of Chinese women in Malacca was the main factor in the phenomenon of intermarriage between early Chinese migrants with local women. The formation of the Peranakan Chinese community in Malacca is of mixed marriage between Malays and Chinese in the days of the Malacca Sultanate since 500 years ago.

According to Winstedt, since Islam forbids marriage between Muslim and non-Muslim individuals, most Chinese wives consisted of slaves among non-Muslims from around the Malay Archipelago [12]. In her writings, Mary F. Somers Heidhues also has a similar opinion with Winstedt and as Islam forbids marriage with a non-Muslim woman, she also argues that intermarriage occurs between the Chinese with local women and non-Muslims such as Balinese women or non-Muslim women from the slaves [29].

Chia in his study agrees with Somers and Winstedt where they believe that intermarriage actually occurred between the Chinese with Batak women who were slaves to the Chinese. After some time, such marriages were no longer required when there was a balance among the Chinese family. Subsequent marriage occurred mostly in the community itself and caused the emergence of a new ethnic group known as the Chinese Peranakan community which is also known as the Baba and Nyonya in Malacca [30].

During the British colonial period, Chinese Peranakans in Malacca had progressed in various sectors such as education, employment and so on. However, when Singapore was established and growing since 1819, some of the Peranakan Chinese community had migrated to Singapore to pursue better opportunities [24].

Furthermore, the existence of the Chinese Peranakans was also justified by the places of worship of the Chinese in Malacca such as Cheng Hoon Teng Temple which was built in 1673 during the time of Dutch rule. It is the oldest

Chinese temple in Malaysia built for religious purposes and also as a place to Chinese capitans and Chinese leaders to discuss problems faced by them [31].

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Peranakan Chinese community had formed a strong group in this country. This is because if referred to the ancestors of the two figures of the famous Chinese Peranakan descent, Tun Tan Cheng Lock (1883-1960) and his son Tun Tan Siew Sin, it turns out that their ancestor and their first generation to come to Malacca was Tan Hay Kwan, who had lived in Malacca, died in 1801 and was buried in Ayer Lelah, Malacca [32].

Obviously, the history of Chinese Peranakan culture with Chinese-Malay assimilation was formed in Malacca since before the British colonization of Malaya. Since the rule of Malaya fell to the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese Peranakan population continues to grow.

Thus, it can be proved that the trade relationship had much impact on the formation and existence of the Peranakan Chinese community in Malacca. Chinese immigrants who settled in Malacca since the 15<sup>th</sup> century are the ancestors of the Chinese Peranakan community that exists in Malacca at the present time. Malacca Peranakan Chinese community has stronger roots in duration compared to other Chinese communities in Malaya who only arrived around the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They also have assimilated themselves with the local Malay community [33]. It can be seen from many dimensions of Malay adaptation in terms of their culture, language, clothing, jewelry, traditional games, singing, poem and belief system. Hence, it can be said that trade relations and interaction between Chinese culture and civilization since the time of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca had played an important role and had a great effect to the establishment, emergence and formation of a new ethnic group named the Peranakan Chinese community in Malacca.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Chinese Peranakan in Malacca was attributed to the impact of trade relations that prevailed in the days of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca and its emergence as a leading trading center began around the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. This is the beginning of a string of stories about intermarriage between the Malays and the Chinese which was described by the Malay Annals as Sultan Mansur Shah's marriage with a Chinese woman named Hang Li Po. The escorts of Hang Li Po were almost entirely converted to Islam and given placement from nearby China.

However, there is no source to prove that the Chinese Peranakans in Malacca at present are the descendants of the Chinese during the Malacca Sultanate. As such, it is likely the Chinese at the time of the Malacca Sultanate had gone through full assimilation with the local Malays. Unfortunately, when Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, they had probably joined and moved with the forces of Sultan Mahmud Shah. During the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial era and conquest of Malacca, second wave of Chinese immigrants had come and made settlement in the place. During the colonial period, the marriage between the Chinese and the Malays had also occurred. However, since Islamic affairs during the colonial era were managed by the colonial authorities, the rules and laws of Islam regarding intermarriage had been ignored. Thus a marriage might take place between Chinese and Malays without prior Islamization. This may be explained why Chinese Peranakans in Malacca at present day consist of a majority of non-Muslims.

Obviously, the coming and settlement of the Chinese people to Malacca and their interaction with the local Malay community had resulted in the emergence of a new ethnic group of Chinese-Malay synthesis known as Chinese Peranakan (Baba and Nyonya) ethnic in Malacca. In regards to that too, trade was the other main factor that contributed to the formation and existence of this new ethnic group. Interaction that occurred between the Chinese and Malays was the eyewitness on the immigrants' adoption to many aspects of Malay culture and values in their daily lives. Therefore, the Peranakan Chinese community seems so close to the Malay community, especially in terms of culture.

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