

# An Alternative Architectural Strategy to Preserve the Living Heritage and Identity of Penang Hokkien Language in Malaysia

Teh Chee Jye  
Dr. Lim Yong Long

Department of Architecture  
Faculty of Built Environment  
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia  
Johor, Malaysia

## Abstract

*This paper investigated the significance of Penang Hokkien language in Malaysia and the need to promote and preserve it. Hokkien (福建人 fújiàn rén) is the largest Chinese dialect spoken among Chinese groups in Malaysia, who are also the earliest Chinese group to settle in Malaysia. It is also the principal language of Penang Chinese. The ancestors of Hokkiens are mostly originated from Fujian province of China, who came to Penang for trading and livelihood. The Chinese dialect left over in the state is the evidence of the past. However, Penang Hokkien is a variant of Minnan (the caller of Hokkien in origin i.e. Fujian) due to the assimilation with the local culture. Today, most of the Penang Hokkien speakers are not literate Hokkien but instead read and write in standard (Mandarin) Chinese, English or Malay. Dialect is considered as one of the intangible heritage which is one of the fragile items in the heritage conservation due to the demographic change time to time. Hence, the effort should be made to preserve the Hokkien's dialect to deliver it to the next generation so that the knowledge of past history from the ancestors will be hold. This study searched for an architectural solution that can revitalize the faded history and the culture of the Hokkien people in Malaysia. After extensive literature review, three strategies were proposed. A knowledge and education centre was seen to be the hardware, which can be the adobe of the two intangible software. The first of them could be using Romantic Classicism to bring back the memories, while the second could be to derive an architectural language which is contemporary yet responsive to tradition. Together they could be the key to promote the revival of Hokkien culture in Malaysia as a whole.*

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, Penang Hokkien, Dialect, Georgetown

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate the significance to preserve the history of Hokkien culture in Malaysia, and search for potential mechanism through architectural solutions to revive its past heritage. Language is fundamental for cultural identity. Hokkien language reflects the sense of belonging of Penang Chinese community and society. Hokkien language was chosen as the key element for this study which can be the vehicle for such cultural revival and preservation.

## 2. Hokkien culture in Malaysia

### 2.1 The early stages of migration of Hokkien people in Malaysia

Hokkiens (福建人) are the earliest Chinese group to settle in Malaysia and also the biggest dialect spoken among the Chinese people in Malaysia. They originated from the Southern regions of Fujian (Min) province in China, and generally recognized as Hokkiens. Before the 18th century, a bulk of the Chinese settlers came from Quan Zhou, Amoy and Zhangzhou (Conceicao 2009). They settled firstly in Penang and Malacca, where they formed a large number of the local Chinese populace. More Hokkiens came to Malaya onward from 19th century and majorly took part in the field of rubber plantation and financial sectors of the Malayan economy. Now-a-days, the Hokkiens significantly exist in few states of Malaysia including Penang, Johor, Malacca, Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perlis and Sarawak. Presently, majority of the Chinese in Malaysia are using Hokkien as the trade language.

In the past, many Hokkiens left China due to rural poverty, overcrowding and insufficient land for farming, in search of a better life. In China, Hokkiens were living in the coastal areas and were active in sea trade.

For centuries, they were known for their trade with the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaya and Siam (now called Thailand), and along the whole length of the Chinese coast. Thus, they have strong mercantile orientation. So in Malaysia, other than working as the tin miners, rubber and oil palm estate labourers, and fishermen, some of them worked as traders, merchants in the import-export industry and as wholesale dealers and grocers. They perpetuated the tradition of the *zahuodian* or 'mixed goods shop', the general provision stores that sold an extensive array of goods ranging from household items such as kitchen utensils to food such as canned or dried foodstuffs. However, many of them started working as clerks and professionals, small-time shopkeepers, and businessmen later on up to present day (Conceicao 2009).

Besides the livelihoods, these immigrant Chinese people also brought along their culture and tradition to Malaysia such as dance and theatre. For example, Chinese street opera is now common in Malaysian cities and can be found in a variety of dialects. These cultures reinforce historical events in Chinese culture and serve to bond the modern people with a cultural tradition through operatic stories.

## 2.2 Hokkien Language in Penang

The first group of Chinese settlers in Malaysia came to Georgetown, Penang, when Francis Light established the British port of Georgetown in the year of 1786. In the 1800s, the Hokkien community started to grow in Georgetown. The Hokkien Chinese in Penang was the main investors in the tin mines of Taiping. Although the mines were led by the Hakkas and the Cantonese, it helped the Hokkiens to achieve the prosperity and enable Hokkien clans to build the temples for the worship and veneration of their ancestors and patron deities. Furthermore, there was a riot in 1867 between Cantonese and Hokkiens due to some conflict of the matter in tin mines (TWHLM 2014). Thus, it was the best and the worst time of Hokkiens at this period.

Besides, it was more than a century that Hokkien has been in use as the major teaching language among the local Chinese Hokkien, even before Francis Light founded Penang. It continued until 20th century, until when Dr Sun Yat-sen started the Chinese revolution which was purposed to promote Mandarin for gathering all Chinese subgroups. Nevertheless, the Chinese sea-farmers who arrived in the 17th and 18th century generally spoke Hokkien, Teo Chew, Cantonese, and other South China dialects, but no Mandarin, as Mandarin was still a foreign tongue to them.

The historical settlement from the past had brought in the outsiders from different places to Penang for the trading and their livelihood. This had contributed to the firm foundation of Penang in term of multi-cultural education, which anchored not just the local Chinese and Malay culture, but also Western culture. The presence of multiple overlapping languages and societies of multi-lingual speakers had described the socio-linguistic background of the Penang Chinese.

A significant number of the Penang population whose ancestors were Chinese immigrants widely speak Penang Hokkien, which is also known as the modification of Minnan. It tolerates strong similarity to the language practiced by the Chinese who stay in Indonesian city of Medan and is based on the Minnan dialect of Zhangzhou prefecture in Fujian province, China. Other Chinese dialects such as Hakka, is spoken mostly at Balik Pulau. Beside, Cantonese is also spoken in the state of Penang.

In the midst of globalisation and Malaysianization, Penangites can boast of being multi-lingual as besides Penang Hokkien, they can also speak formal British English, informal 'Penanglish' (which is local Penang English), Mandarin, one or more of Chinese Provincial Dialects such as Cantonese, Teo Chew, Hakka, Hock Chew, Hainanese and other district dialects, Bahasa Malaysia and Pasar Malay. However, viewing the other side of the coin, Penang Hokkien linguistic heritage has also become one important element in promoting the identity of Penangites (Kim 2002).

Thus, in order to enable proficient expression of the living culture and tradition adequately efforts to preserve Penang Hokkien are necessary. Moreover, to preserve Georgetown's status as the heritage city, both of the tangible and intangible heritages are equally important (GHH 2013). Penang Hokkien dialect is considered as the intangible aspect of the heritage city due to the cultural and historical value which has the significant meaning as an identity of the ethnic group. It includes the language, oral traditions, practices, rituals, traditional foods, arts and games. It should have a proper record to keep it to the newer generations.

### 3. Evolution of Penang Hokkien Language

Penang Hokkien language has evolved due to several issues. The first one is the demographic diversity of Penang population. The other ones include political and global issues. Finally, the ‘Strait Chinese settlement’ issue that resulted cross-lingual marriage along this region.

#### 3.1. Demographic, political and global issues

The Penang Hokkien dialect is originated from Fujian, China. The original Hokkien language was the surviving language of the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618-907AD) in 2000 years ago. It was also the official language of the powerful Tang Dynasty who influenced the language to spread to Japan and Korea which is evident from many Korean and Japanese words very similar to Hokkien. It is just one example to show how Hokkien language contains certain historical values, which are worth to preserve even before it came to Penang.

Like many other languages, Hokkien language evolved with time. After coming to Penang, it added to its unique character after the adaptation to the local culture and became widely recognized as Penang Hokkien nowadays. The Hokkien we hear today may have ‘evolved’ from its original form 2,000 years ago, but it still retains the main elements of the Tang Dynasty Language. However, in Penang, the Hokkien has been ‘modernized’ as the younger generation started to mix it with other language such as Cantonese, English and Mandarin to make it sounds more sophisticated or advance, and it was easier because of the unique demographic character of Penang (Chin 2009). The timeline which showing how the language took holds. Before it evolved to become Zhangzhou Speech (Chiang-chew Hokkien), the Hokkien history is as below (Figure 1):

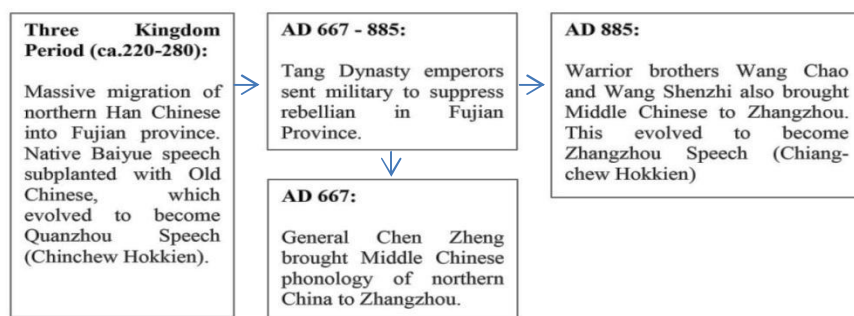


Figure 1: The history of Hokkien before it evolved to become Zhangzhou speech (Tiye 2013)

In the 9th- 17th Century, the evolution of Minnan language was as below (Figure 2):

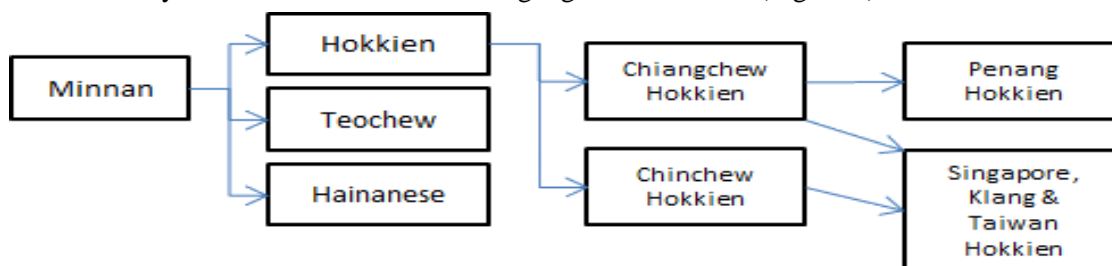


Figure 2: The evolution of Minnan language (Tiye 2013)

The local life and the influence from outside have caused the Hokkien dialect being assimilated with the new cultural identity which is now much different than the original. The process continued while Malaysia was ruled by a series of kingdoms and empires. The colonial power such as Portuguese, Dutch, and the British that started around the end of the 18th century has influenced the Chinese community. They were also influenced by the indigenous Malay people.

Because of all those influences, today the major issue with Penang Hokkien is that it is no longer being spoken as the major language for the younger generation even in Penang. The dialect is slowly replaced by Chinese Mandarin. Some of the younger native Hokkien speakers are even unable to speak in Hokkien.

The situation is further aggravated by the official education system in Malaysia which does not provide any proper formal training of Hokkien language in the school. Therefore, the dialect is slowly being forgotten and Mandarin has become more important language among the Chinese in Malaysia.

Another factor is that globally China has now become a powerful country and it caused Chinese Mandarin to be considered as a priority language over other dialects. Therefore Penang Hokkien faces the fear of extinction.

### 3.2. Straits Chinese Settlement

The community of Chinese began to draw into Malaysia while the Straits Settlement port of Penang, Melaka, and Singapore in the 1826. These communities of acculturated, mercantile Chinese set up homes and established their business. In 1867, these three Straits Settlements became Crown Colonies, administered by the Colonial Office in London. Hokkien and Teo Chew settlers from Kedah, Siam, Sumatra, and Melaka arrived on Prince of Wales Island (previous name of Penang).

The assimilation of the Chinese culture started when they had the intermarriage with the local and also when they started to mix with the western culture. The seafarers, all the male without the accompanying of Chinese women, intermarried with the Siamese and Burmese women living in these ports, as well as with the local Malay women of Acehnese, Javanese, Balinese, and Batak descent, and became the *Peranakan* people.

*Peranakan* is the descendants from a union between a local and a foreigner, also named the Straits Chinese or Baba-Nyonya. The men are called as 'baba' while the women are called as 'nyonya'. The union of Chinese and Malay created a distinct and exclusive lifestyle included unique speech, culture, customs, cuisine, and fashion evolved. In Penang, these *Peranakan* spoke *Baba Hokkien* (Hokkien with a spattering of Malay words), while in Melaka, they spoke *Patois Malay*. Many of the words in Penang Hokkien was contributed by the *Peranakan* even though they have adopted Malay customs to some extents which later on causes them to speak a Chinese-Malay creole language. Other the language, they also assimilated in the way of cooking. The *Peranakan* cuisine is a combination of Chinese cooking style infused with the Malay and Thai fragrant herb and aromatic spices. Thus, the *Peranakan* is one of the evidence of the heritage of past, it is also prove that the intermarriage is one of the factors which bring to the change of a culture from the origin.

Furthermore, to seek for the surviving, they started to influence by the outsiders. They treated themselves as the members of the British Empire, dressing in Western suits and spoke English. They also sent their kids to English mission schools, to England for further studies. It is also has the influence in term of the tradition such as dancing, listening to big band music, playing cricket, horse riding, and so on. The mixing culture of the east and west is also the factor of modernising and transforming the original Chinese culture.

In terms of architecture, the Straits Chinese Eclectic architecture, like the occupants of the houses, was a version of the Sino European influence of the era. Sino European Straits Eclectic terrace homes that can still be seen in Penang are fronted by the gokhakee (Hokkien pronunciation of five-foot way), which is provided shade from the sun and rain. It is also served as a space to play or sit and fan oneself watching the world go by.

However, after the independent of Malaysia, the Malay language has become the standard language in Malaysia and it taught to citizen through education system. The official policy at the time also discouraged other language from being taught and used. The most common languages used are Malay, English and Mandarin Chinese. It was the result that the Hokkien language is mixed with the other language in the local culture. Because some of the older generation, they did not have proper education chance to study and learn it. Hence, the mixing of the language are the caused when they wanted to communicate with the younger generation. It caused the language to evolve (Tong 2012).

### 4. Uniqueness of Penang Hokkien Language

Whenever people mention about Penang, they will think about Hokkien. Obviously, it is a colloquial communication medium in Penang. However, it was evolved became the Penang-style Hokkien in present day due to multi-cultural and other factors. It has the unique slang that Penang people can easily recognize it as the "Penang Hokkien".

Other than this, the Hokkien has many borrowed words from Malays words since the Hokkien Chinese has absorbed the local culture. Some of the words in Hokkien were derived from the Malay language such as *sampah* (rubbish), *jari* (finger), *sabun* (soap) and other. There are also cases where the words had evolved with its meaning when it comes to Penang. For example, the Malay word *baru*, meaning "new", but in means 'recently' in Hokkien.

Also, *mata* means "eyes" in Malay but in Hokkien, there is also one word called *mata* which means "police". It is obviously shown that some of the words in Hokkien are derived from Malay language.

Thus, the Hokkien in Penang has its own and new created identity and cultural in term of the language spoken which is a unique fashion and character for the Penang Chinese.

### **5. Alternative Architectural Strategies to preserve and promote Penang Hokkien language**

Understanding the comprehensiveness of the necessity to preserve the living heritage and identity of Penang Hokkien Language, several architectural strategies seem to be relevant. The first one is to develop public hub(s), where different activities and programs can take place in order to educate people about the language. Ideally one hub can be the starting point with others to follow. However, that only provides the hardware. There can be other softwares that can be the catalyst for people to actively integrate with the past. One of them is to revive the Hokkien history in terms of spaces and landscapes in the concept of Romantic Classicism. The other proposed here is to search for an architectural image, in some kind of metaphor that mixes the past and the present, and connect the bonding of generations through its physical architectural language. They are discussed in more detail below.

#### **5.1. Providing programs**

To encourage and preserve the tradition in terms of speaking the dialect, the skill of art and performing or even the way of cooking a Hokkien/Fujian cuisine, some programs can be set up for training and teaching the knowledge and skills. For example, the class for learning the Hokkien language, singing class by using Hokkien language and so on. However, to attract the local community and tourist in order to make it economically and social sustainable, some activities must be created such as the eating place, resting place, garden and public relaxing and gathering space that can make the place more lively and interesting. These extra activities act as the catalyst and the magnet to attract the general mass.

For Chinese people, different dialect group have different cultures in term of food, performance, musical and also the language. Some of the dialects might have overlapping culture such as the god praying, slightly similarity on the language and some of the Chinese general festivals and events. Thus, the building program not only can be the showcase for the Hokkien, but also can serve as a community space for the public to gather and participate especially when there is special event or festival celebrations. The user target can include local, other races as well as the tourists.

#### **5.2. Recreating the memory of the past**

To preserve the culture and tradition, efforts can be made in reclaiming the memory and history in the past. It means to recall and remind the newer generation about the ancestor's culture and life in the past as the information as in they need to understand their root in term of standing firm of their own identity. The memory is the media for the new generation to overview about the past living of their ancestors. Memory is abstract and temporary, it might be hard to imagine it if the story is only transmitted orally. Thus, in order to get a firm memory of it, a concrete medium has to make for the people to experience it in the real journey. For example, architectural proposals can be made in a historical site in the Georgetown which can contain the value of history and the story in the past. By conserving or adaptive re-use the old building could create the ambience of the past and recall the memory of the past.

#### **5.3. Architectural Image building**

Architecturally, there is a need to create a building complex or hub(s) complex with the program of exhibiting the culture and the heritage from the past, which is blended with the community space that can hold the events, festivals and other public activities. The objective is to exhibit the remaining historical evidence and to promote Penang Chinese culture, events and activities. If that can be added with elements of Romantic Classicism, then the history revives physically to the spectator's eyes.

On the other hand, there must be the strategy on the building design to create the Chinese and Hokkien image in Georgetown, Penang. The language of connecting the past and present can be used as strategies. For example, the contrasting of the new and old elements in building design can appeal to the people to compare and appreciate the past and witness the changed and evolution in the present day. The modern technology can be used in term of the material or construction method which respond to the present need but still retain the essence of the past. Some of the Chinese ancient architecture also can be applied into the design.

For example, to create the feel of Chinese image, the traditional Chinese garden elements can be used in designing the Hokkien image building. However, the building blocks could be new and modern in the way of the form and material.

## 6. Conclusion

As the result of centuries of history, the people are the living proof of a unique multicultural population which is evident from the living cultures and habitat, the architecture, the languages, and lifestyle. They are absolutely mixed yet they can still retain their own identity without blending to each other. The most significant aspect is that historical phenomena stay together, side by side, doing their own things, remaining their own identity such as religions and customs. However, that history should be scripted. It can be done literally on books and writings, but architecture gives another option to keep the memories. This paper insists that such attempts might prove worthy enough to supplement the other strategies of preservation, and let Georgetown sustain the status of a heritage city by preserving the living heritage-the Penang Hokkien language.

## Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely acknowledge Research Management Center (RMC) (Research grant no. 09J11, and 4L063), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), and the Ministry of Education (MOE), Government of Malaysia, for the finding of the research.

## References

- Chin, Christina, (2009), Pass on Penang Hokkien to children, *The star online*, Friday July 18, 2009, Retrieved on January 2014, from <http://www.chinahistoryforum.com/index.php?showtopic=26459>
- Conceicao, Jeanne Louise (2009), Hokkien Community, Singapore Infopedia, Retrieved on January 2014, from [http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP\\_1498\\_2009-04-09.html](http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1498_2009-04-09.html)
- GHH (2013), Heritage City : Preserve George town's status New Straits Times, Letter to the Editor, *New Strait Times*, March 01, 2013, Retrieved on January 2014, from <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/heritage-city-preserve-george-town-s-status-1.226653#ixzz2oQ2wfu2C>
- Kim, P. L., (2002), the roots of multi-lingual society: A case study of history, community and identity of Chinese in Penang, Coordinator of Culture & Education Unit, Persatuan Kebudayaan Rakyat P.P.
- Tong, Lillian (2012), The Peranakan Culture in Penang, Retrieved on January 2014, from <http://www.expatsmalaysia.com/article/691/the-peranakan-culture-in-penang>.
- Tiye, Timothy (2013), History of Hokkien Language, Penang Travel Tips, Retrieved on January 2014, from <http://www.penang-traveltips.com/history-of-hokkien-language-in-penang.htm>
- TWMLM (2014), Tentative World Heritage List Malaysia: Historic Centres Social and Cultural History. Retrieved on January 2014, from <http://www.hbp.usm.my/sanusi/lalilu/websitewarisan/workgroupsconsultants/history/history01.htm>