

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The collection of nine essays in this special issue focuses on the historical and cultural heritage of the northern region of peninsular Malaysia covering Perlis, Kedah, Penang (also known as Pulau Pinang) and northern Perak which since 2007 is also known as the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER). Besides the intrinsically historical nature of three of the essays, history also permeates the discussion of *Bahasa Tanjong* (the Penang Malay dialect), the *pondok* system of education in Seberang Perai, the production of *labu sayong* in Kuala Kangsar and the cultural practices of the Hokkien Chinese of George Town while the essay on Penang museums also touches on the history of Penang notably the so-called Penang Story. In terms of geographical coverage, five essays touch on Penang, one on Perak (Kuala Kangsar), two on Kedah and one on the northern region in general. These essays foreground the historical and cultural uniqueness of the northern region while a few reexamined existing interpretations of various aspects of the history and culture of the northern region.

Historian Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail who specialises in Chinese and Malaysian history discusses the history and formation of cultural and political identities of the northern region which were of great significance since the early days. He examines the region's historical background, its population composition, subsequent changes that had taken place through migration from within and outside the region. He also studies the interethnic cooperation as in the case of the Malay and Chinese secret societies in the second half of the 19th century in Penang. He also inspects publications and newspapers that were published in Penang and how these contributed to political consciousness within the Malay community and educational development in the northern region. The essay highlights Perak state as the centre for political activism notably for the Malay left including those with a strong Islamic background. His conclusion is of much interest: from the perspective of ethnic identity and political ideology, the historical development of the northern region that witnessed the confluence of the indigenous-Malay-Muslim heritage with migrant-foreign heritage providing pointers for the contemporary development in the country.

Another historian Ooi Keat Gin focuses on Penang's socio-cultural traits and diverse traditions which traced their genesis to the establishment of George Town in 1786 as a port of call for the English East India Company that drew merchants and traders from various parts of the world including northern Europe, South, Southeast and East Asia. The population comprised a multitude of racial groups whereby the various communities co-existed harmoniously despite the apparent differences physically, in socio-economic practices, religious beliefs, economic livelihood and overall way of life. The essay traces Penang's historical development from the social and economic aspects specifically that contributed to its socio-cultural characteristics and the identity of George Town and Penang. He argues that since its formative days as a port city Penang had embraced and

nurtured multiculturalism in all its facets that subsequently contributed to the development of disparate identities along ethnic lines. In Penang, the colonial division of labour made each community to withdraw into its respective economic domain that further accentuated the disparate identities. Before the Japanese Occupation the commonality of "in sharing the same fate" to a great extent sustained the social fabric despite the disparate identities of the peoples.

Historian Mahani Musa looks at the collection of the Sultan Abdul Hamid Correspondence which is kept at the National Archives of Malaysia Kedah Branch in Alor Setar. Accorded heritage status by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in September 2001, this correspondence provides a variety of information in politics, economy and society allowing researchers to revisit Kedah's history from a different angle. The correspondence shows more importantly how the palace and the Kedah elites combined their efforts and ideas to ensure the smooth operation of the state administration and at the same time to secure the loyalty of the people before 1909 and after. The correspondence shows the earnestness of the palace and Kedah elites in developing the economic, political and social aspects of the state besides keeping the good relations with the Siamese and British in Penang. To the ruler and the ruling elites, it was paramount that the state's Malay identity be upheld despite the challenge posed by western and Thai imperialism and colonialism.

There is also much history in the discussion of the *pondok* of Seberang Perai. Focusing on its historical development and uniqueness, Jasni Sulong, whose expertise is Islamic jurisprudence, discusses the evolution of the *pondok* amidst a difficult environment and provides an explanation of their survival to the present day. The *pondok* system did not guarantee its graduates any form of employment yet it became the preferred choice of locals to send their children for educational purposes. Despite their poor accessibility, these *pondoks* managed to attract many students from the northern region, other parts of Malaya and outside the country. Jasni identifies some of the contributory factors for this remarkable phenomenon, and these include the strong local interests in religious knowledge, nationalism and the social standing of *pondok* teachers (*Tok Guru*) within the local community. He also directs his attention towards the publication of religious treatise and their marketing in the Seberang Perai area and the connection of these publishing houses with local *pondoks*.

To many scholars, *Bahasa Tanjong* refers to a Malay dialect which has been labelled as either Penang Malay or George Town Malay. It is actually a variation of the Northern Malay dialect of Peninsular Malaysia that had emerged since 1786. To them it is a hybridised form of Malay that grew out of the language contact between the Malays and South Indian Muslims that produced an Indo-Malay community known as Jawi Peranakan who were native speakers of *Bahasa Tanjong*. Hajar Abdul Rahim whose expertise is corpus linguistics, seeks to differ from this standard interpretation. She found out that *Bahasa Tanjong's*

features are in fact cultural markers that contribute to the construction of the *Bahasa Tanjong* identity. Its Indian linguistic heritage as well as its inclination to allow influences from other languages sets it apart from other northern Malay dialects. Hajar is equally concerned on the continued existence of *Bahasa Tanjong* as a heritage language. As heritage language it is vulnerable and may be affected by various socio-political factors surrounding its usage.

Historian Azmi Arifin looks at the pottery production, a heritage of Kuala Kangsar in particular the *labu sayong* which had a unique history of its own. Started hundreds of years ago, this heritage is kept alive and practised traditionally by a handful of family based production. Its technique of pressing and pinching has been sustained to the present despite facing challenges from new and modern pottery production techniques that are able to produce a greater variety of products and usage that prove attractive to the public. The modern production technique involves about 100 households while there are only a few families that still subscribe to the traditional mode of production. Significantly, official attention at the moment is mainly given to the modern mode of production although, as Azmi argues, traditional pottery producers equally deserved similar aid and attention if only to sustain the continuity of a heritage that had existed since hundreds of years. Azmi is equally concerned with the present situation of the industry and the need to preserve its heritage.

Translation specialist Goh Sang Seong looks at Penang Chinese customs and traditions that have evolved since the arrival of the Chinese some 200 years ago which later had assimilated local influences. Goh focuses on the Hokkiens who form the majority of the Chinese in Penang. They came to Penang after 1786 bringing their Chinese culture from China but with the passing of time their cultural practices had undergone significant changes. Modern education and geographical environment had resulted in the evolution of their own unique and distinctive variation of Chinese customs. Although the festive celebrations, beliefs and practices and daily activities reveal the inheritance from their ancestors from China, these also absorbed Malay socio-cultural elements. Some customs are peculiar only to the Penang Hokkien who had to survive in an environment that was different from China although these customs are still based on traditional Chinese concepts and philosophy. Goh argues that present day Penang Chinese preserve the traditional customs brought by their ancestors from China although there are evidences of association and assimilation with Malay elements.

Historian Abu Talib Ahmad looks at museums in Penang, their cultural displays and culture competition in the different museums. He has identified more than 16 museums, mini museums and galleries that cover various themes including ethnography, history, the Second World War, the arts, owl, cats, Islam, toys, flora and fauna, Sun Yat Sen, P. Ramlee and camera that are mainly located in the heritage enclave of George Town. Penang is selected as a case study because of the ethnic balance between Malays and Chinese which is reflected in

the cultural foregrounding of the Penang State Museum. Yet behind this façade one could detect cultural contests that are also found within the different ethnic groups like the Peranakan and non-Peranakan Chinese or the Malays and the Indian-Muslims.

The last essay by Rahimah Abdul Hamid focuses on indigenous knowledge that is related to rice cultivation in Kedah (and neighbouring Perlis) by examining the farmer's almanac and traditional wisdom which have been in use since hundreds of years ago. The ancient farmers learned from nature to create their own knowledge of paddy cultivation. They were sensitive to natural phenomena and keen observers of the changes that have taken place around them. From repeated observations they have developed methods of segmenting the cycle of rice cultivation (farmers' almanac) and invaluable tips on paddy planting. They would hold fast to these practices to ensure an abundant harvest. However, these practices have been eroded in present day Kedah due to modernisation and technological advances in paddy cultivation while those that contravene Islamic teachings have been gradually phased out.

All the essays were part of the research on the "Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia (focusing on Perlis, Kedah, Penang and northern Perak)" which was undertaken between October 2007 and September 2010. It was funded by a research university grant from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The multi-disciplinary research involved 39 academics from the School of Humanities and one from outside the school, each working in his/her specific discipline covering linguistics, literature, geography, philosophy, sociology, civilisation studies and Islamic studies with the common aim of highlighting the uniqueness of the northern region in terms of its physical features, culture and history. The generous financial assistance allowed researchers to scour various localities within the northern region. The objectives were to bring to the fore the uniqueness of the northern region in terms of its natural heritage, as well as human and cultural heritage. It was the first major research undertaken within the School of Humanities that involved such a large number of researchers from diverse academic backgrounds. Researchers were divided into three groups namely the natural heritage group which focused on man and the environment, the cultural heritage group which focused on cultural heritage and the third group which focused on the historical-cultural heritage.

Output for the research was impressive with five monographs, 24 journal papers, 22 book chapters and 5 conference proceedings. The research findings were presented in various seminars within the university, in the country and within the region including group seminars in Pulau Jerejak in late 2007 and other parts of Penang at times in the presence of 1–2 well known scholars from outside who were invited to assess all the papers. Many of the papers were published in local and international journals like *Sari: International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* (Abu Talib, 2010; Azmi, Muhamad Luthfi and Tarmiji, 2010; Rahimah, 2010), *JMBRAS* (Abu Talib, 2008) and *Kemanusiaan*

Asian Journal of the Humanities (Nooriah, 2011). The five monographs were Abu Talib (2012), Ooi (2012), Jelani (2011), Mahani (2011) and Abu Talib (2015). Two of these monographs were published by the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Press, two by the National Archives of Malaysia and one by the National University of Singapore Press. Researchers from the national heritage group had contributed ten essays in the 2011 issue of the *Malaysian Journal of Environmental Management* (Chan, 2011).

Six of the essays or parts of it (Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail, Ooi Keat Gin, Jasni Sulong, Hajar Abdul Rahim, Azmi Arifin and Goh Sang Seong) had appeared in two edited books (Abu Talib, 2012; Ooi, 2012) which were published by the USM Press. Different versions of two of the papers had also appeared in the journal *Sari* (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). It was felt by many including international visitors to the School of Humanities that some of the essays should be translated into English to benefit a wider reading public. I am thankful to both the USM Press and the editor of *Sari* for providing permission to adapt/translate these essays into English or to revise them. I am also grateful to the two reviewers and their constructive comments. It was most unfortunate that one of them passed away just after submitting the review report. On the whole the authors had highlighted the uniqueness of the northern region in terms of both its culture and historical experience. They are equally concerned with the preservation and conservation of these unique cultural and historical heritage that are specific to the northern region.

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