Maintenance and propagation of Chinese culture in a Malay state: the roles of the Chinese associations in Kuala Terengganu

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This paper surveys the roles of seven Chinese associations in Kuala Terengganu in maintaining and propagating Chinese culture within a Malay state. These associations have played significant roles in maintaining and propagating Chinese culture as far as the range of cultural activities hosted by them is concerned. There is also a reasonable level of state cultural leadership, though lacking in certain areas. But the small population and the outflow of the younger generation have presented a host of problems to the Chinese associations with regard to the required critical mass, pool of talent, injection of ideas and second-tier leadership. The lack of financial support is yet another problem arising from the peripheral role of the Chinese in the state economy and their small numbers. Meanwhile, leaders of the Chinese associations exercise restraint so as not to infringe on Malay religious sensitivity when hosting outdoor cultural activities during the Muslim ritual periods. They also exhibit a high degree of tolerance towards Islamisation programmes undertaken by the state as long as these programmes do not encroach into their private socio-cultural domains. Despite their small population, the Chinese in Kuala Terengganu are a politically significant minority as a result of the political outbidding among the Malays. Leaders of the Chinese associations have benefited from such a position in resolving certain long-standing cultural issues.

Keywords: minority; Chinese culture; Chinese associations; Malay state; Islamisation

Introduction

As early as 1891, Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’.1 This definition contrasts with subsequent definitions of culture that focus on shared knowledge and belief systems or symbols and meanings, rather than habits and behaviour. Clifford Geertz, for instance, defines culture as ‘a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and

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1Cited in Burtonwood, The Culture Concept, 2.

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