

Mental Health and Care: Buddhist Spiritual Elements in Fostering a Healthy State of Mind Among Peranakan Chinese Community in Malaysia

¹Nik Nur Azizah Nik Halman, ²Azlina Abdullah, ³Novel Lyndon

¹*Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia, niknurazizah4488@gmail.com*

^{2,3}*Social, Environment and Development Sustainability Research Center, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia*

Abstract

Mental health has been a crucial influence in determining the quality of life. In Malaysia, the statistics highlighted that almost half-million citizens suffered from stress symptoms and depression triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this study has discovered a contemporary approach in maintaining a healthy mental state. Buddhist spiritual activities are the method applied by the Kelantan's Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia for their mental health and care. The purpose of this study is to scrutinize spiritual activities and their benefits in fostering a healthy state of mind. Additionally, this study applied phenomenology qualitative research as the method of study. The data was collected by engaging in interviews and observation involving five informants in chosen Chinese Peranakan's neighborhood. The findings indicated that spiritual activities are performed by the Peranakan Chinese either at home or at Buddhist temple. Some of the activities are praying, fasting, 'Dhana' (donation), applying the concept of wholehearted faith in Buddha, fostering a 'Free Life' lifestyle, and merit-making (doing good deeds). The rituals and benefits of each spiritual activity are also explained in detail. The spiritual elements bring a positive impact to Peranakan Chinese's quality of health. Lastly, this study can be used by the Malaysian Ministry of Health in structuring an initiative to decrease the statistics of mental health issues reported in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mental health and care, Buddhist Spiritual Elements, Peranakan Chinese.

Introduction

Life these days had been hard due to the drastic change of lifestyle due to COVID-19 shadowing the world. Health had been a social issue which is capable in influencing the community's quality of life from many aspects such as social, culture, economy, politic and education. These drastic changes caused stress as the gigantic implication to the disturbed tranquility in life especially concerning mental health issue.

According to National Health and Morbidity Survey (2019), almost half a million of Malaysian suffered the symptoms of stress or depression. According to Royal Malaysia Police, here is a rise of suicide reported in 2020

as in 631 cases compared to 609 cases throughout 2019. As on March 2021, reported cases skyrocketing to 336 cases (Astro Awani, 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic gives a gigantic impact to mental health of each individual in Malaysia. Some of them are at a high risk to suffer from mental health issue such as depression when they get overwhelm by stress and isolated from their family, friends and community. When depression failed to be recognized and contained, a risky decision might be done; suicide.

On the other hand, the community of Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan faces the same impact by

the pandemic spreading all over the country. Malaysia is made of three major races which are Malay, Chinese and Indian while Peranakan Chinese is actually a Chinese sub-ethnic with their own culture and identity, and not incorporated with pure Chinese (Tan et al., 2014). Their identity came from the mix of identities with local culture. Movement Order Control (MCO) also gives an impact to them, causing emotional distress due to a drastic change in work environment such as work from home, losing their source of income and always anxious with the state of health of their family and themselves.

To prevent the mental health issue from becoming more critical, if not instantly treated, Peranakan Chinese took the initiative to practice the spiritual activities frequently. They believe Buddhist spiritual elements is the best method in fostering a healthy state of mind although they face the biggest obstacle in their life. They maintain the Five Precepts which is the moral base in Buddhist teaching and has to be obeyed by the followers of Siddharta Gautama. Thus, this study will explore in details on Buddhist spiritual activities and the benefits of practicing them in the context of mental health of Peranakan Chinese. This study aims to build the indicator on spiritual activities done by Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan at home and Buddhist temples.

Literature Review

Spiritual Elements in Health among Chinese Community

Since 2900 B.C, Chinese community viewed spiritual as a major element in maintaining their health as written in the teaching of Taoism. This had been mentioned in the book; Internal Medicine Classic, The Oldest Truth, that a mind (spiritually) which had been disturbed might cause illness and a clear mind (spiritually) will not (Reid, 1993). Thus, this proved that spiritual factor plays a huge role in health and important in the medical process among the Chinese. According to McKenzie (1999), Chi Kung or Qigong is one of the practices for the flow of energy in the body. McKenzie (1999) also added that Qigong trained the user to regulate their inner breathing to encourage the healing process of mental and physical.

Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan

According to Chew (1993), Chinese community is the second biggest community in Kelantan. They can be divided into two; Cina Bandar (City Chinese) and Cina Kampung (Village Chinese) which is also known as Peranakan Chinese. Peranakan Chinese is the descendants of Chinese that migrated from China to Kelantan during the early 15 centuries and they were originally from Hokkien. They settled nearby the river banks and did farming. Chew also stated that Peranakan Chinese and City Chinese are the same ethnic as both of them are Chinese descendants, but the differences in lifestyle and culture give them a huge gap. Ahmad et al. (2011) explained that Peranakan Chinese adopts the mixture of cultures of local communities such as Malay culture and Siamese culture, be it in their spoken language or style and their daily activities as well. Their traditional beliefs and actions can be traced in their health care and medicine practices, way of dressing, foods, language, handicraft and artistry. However, a few aspects are preserved, preventing assimilation with local community of Kelantan from happening. One of the preserved aspects is religion as they are a firm believer of Buddhist teaching.

Methodology

This study applied a qualitative study in scrutinizing the data. Qualitative study can be defined as a research procedure which is adequate in producing a clear understanding on the data (Lexy, 2007). In this study, qualitative approach is suitable to learn about the spiritual elements practiced by Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan in maintaining their healthy state of mind. In addition, the strength of qualitative approach in collecting a detailed information for the data is one of the reasons why this approach is selected. This approach allows in-depth understanding of spiritual activities done by the target sub-ethnic.

In this study, phenomenology qualitative is selected as the framework. This is done because phenomenology is a knowledge-oriented method in gathering a detailed explanation of a phenomena. To compile the data, researcher has to apply one approach that enable the researcher to collect a specific information, for an example via verbal approach on the informant. From that,

the researcher can conclude that phenomenology is the relevant framework for this study.

Data Collection

In collecting the data for this study, the researchers did a continuous field work at Pulau Chondong, Kelantan starting from 1 September 2021. In addition, the researchers utilized two main sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Secondary data was obtained via readings and research on books and journals by scrutinizing the basic concept of mental health and care in previous studies involving Peranakan Chinese community as well as the spiritual practices done by them from beginning of time till now.

In the context of primary data, the data was compiled when the researchers did the collection of information based on the interviews and observations, in which five informants who reside within the community were involved. All participants were purposely selected.

Table 1. *Demographic profile of participants*

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Level of Education	Employment
1	Pak Chu To	65	Primary School	Self-employed
2	Mek Kok Tie	95	-	Farmer
3	Jin	50	SPM	Village Chief/ self-employed
4	Pak Chu Aseng	99	-	Farmer
5	Tan	68	SPM	Self-employed

The community involved in this study is Peranakan Chinese at Pulau Chondong, Kelantan. The neighborhood of Peranakan Chinese involved are illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Peranakan Chinese Neighborhood at Pulau Chondong, Kelantan*

Results and Discussion

To achieve the objectives of the study, observation and in-depth interview were applied to learn about the spiritual activities done by Peranakan Chinese in taking care of their mental health. It had been a need in psychotherapy to implement spiritual element and religious beliefs in promoting health and wellness in life (Muhsin & Sa'ari, 2015; Vahedian&fallah, 2020). The same implication gathered based on the explanation obtained from Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan as they particularly believe that spiritual elements are capable to boost their community in managing their emotion in daily life. Thus, there are a few activities related to spiritual element practiced by them in maintaining their mental health such as praying, fasting, 'Dhana' (donation), wholehearted believe in Buddha, applying a 'Free Life' lifestyle and merit-making (doing good deeds).

Prayer

Prayer is a way of spiritual communication connecting the servant with their God. Every human has the need to plead for help or grant a wish which are impossible to be done by oneself and they believe with the power of higher being can grant their wishes. As an example, prayer to protect oneself from calamity, paranormal disturbance and dispelling the bad spirits. Additionally, human also pray for pleasant things such as health, wealth and success in this world and hereafter. These characteristics are also applied to Peranakan Chinese as they believed that the prayers are the ultimate weapon

in pleading for a healthy mental state and physical body. They also believe that when they pray and confide all their wishes and desires to God, their soul will be peaceful and their mind will be in serene. These somehow relieve their burden and avoid the stress when facing problems. For example, Pak Chu To thought:

"We pray to God to be healthy, calm, safe and successful. There is nothing else we pray to God for. Nothing nonsense. God will surely answer our prayers. But God will not answer nonsensical and illogical prayers. In the Pali Sanskrit scriptures, there is no specific prayer to ask for something. But usually we will take the good verses in the book for us to read, practice and make as a prayer. We pray in Pali Language. Everything will be solved with prayer. Because prayer leads to many benefits. Every religion tells its followers to pray but in their own way". - (Pak Chu To)

For example, Pak Chu Aseng thought:

"We are old enough. That's enough. I am very old. Almost 100 years old. Pray. Pak Chu can only pray that God takes my life in good terms. When we're old, we can't do anything. Just pray. May God bless us with good things. May everything is well. I am now like an old engine (while laughing)". - (Pak Chu Aseng)

This research finding similar to (Levine, 2001) which stated that the prayer itself related with good health, quality of life and prevent psychological distress in healthy people. It is also becoming more widely acknowledged as a way to cope with sickness or maintain well-being (Taylor et al., 1999). These past studies proved that prayer is the most appropriate way for Peranakan Chinese in order to maintain the tranquillity of mind and protect them from mental illness.

Dhana (Donation)

Dhana is an activity to present donations to certain individuals such as 'Tok Raja' or 'Sangha'. The followers of Buddhism are encouraged to perform 'Dhana' and this is also stressed in holy book of Sanskrit Pali. Usually, 'Tok Raja' will provide a few boxes at the

corners of the temple to ease the followers donating to the temple. In addition, there are followers who prepared to give donations straight to 'Tok Raja' in the form of clothing, food and money. They believed the 'Dhana' given can grant their prayers because 'Tok Raja' acted as 'medium' capable to carry their prayers. 'Tok Raja' also played the role of leading the prayers for those who are not fluent with Pali language. However, for the followers who are knowledgeable with the holy book, they recite their own prayers. While giving out 'Dhana', usually followers of Buddhism will read holy prayers from the holy book which bestowing good meaning. Most of the followers give the 'Dhana' to plead for health, peace and success. Thus, Peranakan Chinese believed that the more and frequent the 'Dhana' is done, the easier their prayers can be answered as well as giving them a peaceful soul and emotion. For example, Pak Chu To said:

As an example, charity (Dhana), we do Dhana to ask for anything that brings good. As we give Dhana, we will pray to ask for whatever is desired. For example, when we give food to others, whether that person is a Tok Raja or an ordinary person, we pray what we do will be rewarded with goodness by God. We also do Dhana in the hope that we will always be healthy and successful. The purpose of giving Dhana to Tok Raja is because they are 'postmen' who will deliver the prayers. Usually the Tok Raja would lead the prayer recitation for people who could not pray on their own. Tok Raja can deliver prayers because their beliefs are stronger". - (Pak Chu To)

For example, Pak Chu Aseng thought:

"Many people give alms, provided food for the Tok Ca (monk) at ketik (temple). Their lives are not luxurious but at least they have something to eat, and a place to sleep. Many Tok Ca (monks) in Semerak and in Jubakar, but in Jubakar there are many local Siamese monks. Many people donate". - (Mr. Chu Aseng)

For example, Jin thought:

"Whoever has the time to go for their own charity, can go on their own. If you don't have time, you can send it. We give alms for the purpose of conveying our prayers. It depends on us in what form we want to give alms. It can be in the form of money, or in the form of goods. If it is in the form of money, Tok Ca (monk) can buy the necessary items themselves". - (Jin)

There are few research has explored the impact of donation towards mental condition of human. Konow and Early (2008) stated that happier people give more because they are surrounded by positive emotions. While a study that was conducted by Isen and Levin (1972) demonstrated that charitable activity can increase the happiness in people and they felt good when provide helps. Thus, Peranakan Chinese community believe that donation as a charity behavior which can induce positive moods and develop optimistic personality among them.

Fasting

Fasting is the act of holding yourself from doing something and done at a certain time. The benefit of fasting is training self-patience from doing anything which will break the fast. Furthermore, someone who is fasting will gain peaceful soul and mind because with fasting, they will empty their mind, avoid anger and anything which can cause stress. In every religion, there are specific rules and regulations in fasting. The context of fasting for Peranakan Chinese, they practice fasting twice a month, precisely every 1st day and 15th day in Chinese calendar. They start their fast from 12 midnights and will break their fast at 1 in the afternoon of the next day. While fasting, they cannot eat, drink, get angry, and commit sins and talking bad things. The purpose of the fasting is for a healthy body, peaceful mind and plead for their desired wishes. For them, fasting helps them practicing to be more patience and more peaceful. Thus, the positive aspects which can be gain by fasting is their soul become more neutral, the emotion become more stable and the body become more vigorous. For example, Pak Chu To thought:

"I fast twice a month - on the 1st day of the Chinese month and the 15th day of the Chinese month (Chinese Full Moon). According to the beliefs I hold, I start fasting at 12 noon, until 1 noon the next day. It is obligatory to breakfast after 1 noon. We can't drink water and can't eat rice, just like the Malays form of fasting. Fasting to maintain health. We fast to bring goodness to ourselves. We hope to get what we want. Not everyone fasts, some do not fast. This fast can be good for us. See how patient we can be. You can't be angry, you can't do evil, you can't say bad things. I have been fasting for four years. I have changed, my heart becomes neutral. There is no stress and my body become fitter". - (Mr. Chu To)

While several past studies shown the advantages of fasting on one's health. Fasting has become known as a safe method to use in order to reduce the risk of all type of diseases (Trepanowski et al., 2017). Besides contribute to weight loss, fasting has been considered as a way of purification for the soul and body throughout history and different religions have demanded their followers to follow the rule (Rahmani & Zarei, 2003). These past studies proved that fasting could help the members of a society to enhance internal happiness and mental relaxation through resorting to religion and spiritually.

Wholehearted Faith in Buddha and 'Free Life' Lifestyle

Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan hold the concept of wholehearted faith in Buddha and 'free life' lifestyle as the efforts in maintaining a healthy mental health. Wholehearted faith in Buddha is the action on surrendering the fate to the higher being after the efforts are made and placing a full believe on God. This is one manifestation of confidence in heart which is capable to give motivation for them in having faith on higher being. The benefit from the wholehearted faith in Buddha is they are able to be in peaceful state of soul and emotion. Human who did not practice this concept usually shadowed by anxiety and stress which might lead to mental illness such as depression. 'Free

life' lifestyle in the context of daily life of this sub-ethnic community is actually living according to their own capability; no obsession on something or being forced to do something. They do what they like and comfortable for them to ensure their soul and mind can be at peace and their emotion can be in tranquil. For example, Pak Chu To thought:

"When we tawakal (put our trust entirely to God), the heart becomes calm, we become happier when we do a job. We will easily feel successful. After the prayer, we tawakal. That is our duty. That's all our jurisdiction. The rest we leave to God. When we walk on the right track, disease is hard to come by. No sleep problem, no eating problem, no work problem. I accept what God does; what God gives. Do not take bribes, do not do evil. Open your mind, open your heart. Do not take people's rights, surely our lives will be calm. I do what I love, what I can afford. I decide when to open the store, when to close the store. I want to live a neutral life. I want a free life. Our hearts are calm, our emotions are calm". – (Mr. Chu To)

For example, Mek Kok Tie thought:

"We should not take people's rights (belongings) because there will be no blessing. Mok never take other people's rights from young to old. Why take others' rights. Life will be restless. Satisfied with what we have. As Mok never takes people's rights, Mok's rezeki (good fortune) never ends. Many people give alms. Outsiders also give alms. Raya last year, Mok got RM1000 just from charity. Even if we don't want, people still give. We take it just for the sake of these people". – (Mek Kok Tie)

For example, Pak Chu Aseng thought:

"Older folks used to be different from children nowadays. Children now live luxuriously, not like the older generation. They (children) do not mix with people. Do their own thing. The older folks don't know whose children these are. They

grow up so fast. Just like our grandchildren". – (Mr. Chu Aseng)

For example, Tan thought:

"I like living in this state. Living in Kelate (Kelantan). It's already my flesh and blood. Although there is no majestic development. If we compare with the other states, the way of thinking is not the same. Kelate people are ok. With the situation like now, I feel very happy and calm. I used to live in Singapore for 30 years. The same as your age (laughing). I came back here in 2015. I have my own business". – (Tan)

Based on the conversations above, we can conclude that Peranakan Chinese choose to live free-life style to avoid stress which can lead to cardiovascular diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. According to Reese (2016), stress is a part of life and it is undeniable because as people grow older, they will have more responsibility that will cause stress. Last but not least, free lifestyle can also improve the quality of health and develop their overall wellbeing (Jamil, 2017).

Merit-Making (Performing Good Deeds)

In every religion, the followers are encouraged to always performing good deeds. Any form of action done by human can result in good and bad outcomes. Thus, for Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan, the teaching of Buddhism encourages them to perform good deeds and leave the bad ones. By performing good deeds, they believe all of their wishes can be granted by God. In addition, performing good deeds help them to be at ease with their soul and keeping their emotions in check. The good deeds done are able to protect themselves from illness, including mental illness. For example, Pak Chu To thought:

"I am still given good health and a calm heart because of the good deeds I have done. God grants all requests when we do good. I do good in the hope that I will be rewarded well by God, not only to me but to my children because I am old. May

God grant goodness to my descendants. I can still read without glasses, drive long distances, all of that are thanks to good deeds. My heart also feels calm and free". - (Mr. Chu To)

For example, Mek Kok Tie thought:

"No matter where we live, be honest. Only then, we will have a lot of friends. Don't deceive people, don't lie, don't say bad things. Even if we found people's money, even if it's only 10 cents, don't take it. Even if people want to give gold, don't take it if you must do something bad to have it. What do you want to do with all that? You have to do good things, just like rezeki (fortune), do good, get rezeki (fortune) for good things. What do you think?" - (Mek Kok Tie)

For example, Jin thought:

"It's like this. We do anything, we have to remember one thing. We have to remember, even though people don't see what we do, but God sees. People may not know. But we have to remember what is the punishment later (in the Hereafter). That's what we have to think about. Don't follow the behaviour of a bad friend. It's better to live alone than living in a state of evil. For example, if we do good to people, then people themselves will do good to us ". - (Jin)

Other studies shown that merit-making indeed should be practice in daily life as it can bring positive vibes to the givers and recipients. Lyubomirsky et al. (2014) proved by their experimental work that acts of kindness or merit-making can significantly increase happiness level for several weeks. Same goes to another study by Field et al. (1998) clearly stated that good deeds help human experienced less anxiety and depression, as well as improved health and reduce stress-related hormones.

Conclusion

Parallel with the findings, spiritual elements obviously help in maintaining mental health of

Peranakan Chinese in Kelantan. As other illness can be treated with medicines, mental illness patient needs attention, support and consideration from a lot of involving parties to ensure they can recover. Thus, Malaysian Ministry of Health can utilize this study to plan an initiative in combating the rising reports of cases involving mental illness in this country. Aside from the efforts by the government, individuals and community should actively play their own role in this battle of maintaining a healthy state of mind among their families and community. They have to provide more knowledge and evidence (research findings) regarding mental health as a major strategy to prevent mental disorders.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the informants willing to participate and provide full cooperation in this study and funding from National University of Malaysia: Research University Grant (GUP-2019-057) and Research Distribution Fund (TAP-K021290).

Reference

- [1] Ahmad, M. N., Dollah, H., & Teo, K. S. (2011). Penghayatan Tradisi Lisan Melayu dalam Kalangan Masyarakat Cina Kelantan. *Jurnal Melayu*, 8, 111-132.
- [2] Astro Awani. (2021). 638 Kes Bunuh Diri Dalam 7 Bulan, Meningkatkan Hampir 60 Peratus. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/638-kes-bunuh-diri-dalam-7-bulan-meningkat-hampir-60-peratus-323614>
- [3] Chew, H. T. (1993). *Studies on The Chinese Religion in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia: Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelandok Publications.
- [4] Field, T. M., Hernandez-Reif, M., Quintino, O., Schanberg, S., & Kuhn, C. (1998). Elder Retired Volunteers Benefit from Giving Massage Therapy to Infants. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 17, 229-239.
- [5] Isen, A. M., & Levin, P. F. (1972). The Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness. *Journal of*

- Personality and Social Psychology, 21, 384-388.
- [6] Jamil, A. T. (2017). Exercise for Good Health. *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2017/03/22/5030/exercise-good-health>
- [7] Konow, J., & Early, J. (2008). The Hedonistic Paradox: Is Homo Economicus Happier? *Journal of Public Economic*, 92, 1-33.
- [8] Levine, E. G. (2001). *Jewish Perspective on Illness and Healing*. Rutledge, New York.
- [9] Lexy, J. M. (2007). *Metodologi Penyelidikan Kualitatif*. Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya.
- [10] Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & Sheldon, K. M. (2004). Pursuing Sustained Happiness through Random Acts of Kindness and Counting One's Blessings: Test of two six-week interventions. Unpublished Data. Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside.
- [11] Mckenzie, H. (1999). *Chi Kung Cultivating Personal Energy*. London: Octopus Publishing Group Limited.
- [12] Muhsin, S. B. S., & Sa'ari, C. Z. (2015). *Kaedah Psikoterapi Islam Berasaskan Konsep Maqamat Abu Talib al-Makki*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- [13] National Health and Morbidity Survey. (2019). *Lembaran Fakta Penyakit Tidak Berjangkit, Permintaan Jagaan Kesihatan dan Literasi Kesihatan*. Shah Alam, Selangor: Health System Research Institute.
- [14] Rahmani, M. R., & Zarei, M. (2003). The Effect of Ramadhan Fasting on Increasing Delayed Hypersensitivity. Response to PPD. *Journal of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences*, 10(1), 52-56.
- [15] Reese, N. (2016). 10 Simple Ways to Relieve Stress. <https://www.healthline.com/health/10-ways-to-relieve-stress#1>
- [16] Reid D. (1993). *Guarding the Three Treasure the Chinese Way of Health*. London: Simon and Schuster Ltd.
- [17] Tan, Y. S., Ngah, K., & Abdullah, M. S. I. L. (2014). *Budaya Makanan Cina Peranakan Terengganu dan Kelantan: Penyelarasan Identiti dan Kontradiksi Dalamannya*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- [18] Taylor, E. J., Outlaw, F. H., Bernado, T. R., Roy, A. (1999). Spiritual Conflicts Associated with Praying about Cancer. *Psychooncology*, 8, 386-394.
- [19] Trepanowski, J. F., Kroeger, C. M., Barnosky, A., Klempel, M. C., Bhutani, S., Hoddy, K. K., ... Varady, K. A. (2017). Effect of Alternate-Day Fasting on Weight Loss, Weight Maintenance and Cardioprotection Among Metabolically Healthy Obese Adults a Randomize Clinical Trial, 177(7), 930-938.
- [20] Vahedian M, Fallah A M. Investigate the mental health of female students in following the style of contemporary life (Case study: Students of Kashan University). *sjmshm*. 2020; 2 (1) :5-10