

# THE WANGKANG CEREMONY: A UNIQUE TRADITION OF HOKKIEN COMMUNITY IN MELAKA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss about the history of the origin and the functions of the Wangkang ceremony which practiced by the Hokkien community in Malacca. This paper will introduce the origins of the Hokkien community's in Malacca. In addition, this paper will emphasize the functions of the Wangkang ceremony which practiced by the Hokkien community in Malacca. The functions will be elaborated based on the community's practices and beliefs as heirs to their culture and practices. Based on the research, this ceremony is believed to have been practiced in Malacca since 1856. The Hokkien community believes that the purpose of the ceremony is to collect and sending away the evil spirits to another world. Based on their beliefs, the spirit was responsible for the existence of chaotic conditions, disease outbreaks and instability of the world. Thus, the community believes that the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony can restore prosperity and peace to the world. Qualitative method using history approach is used to obtain and analyze the data collected. The three approaches are the field observations of Wangkang ceremony, interviews with authoritative individuals among the Hokkien especially Baba Nyonya community and also in-depth study of records and reports as well as the earlier writings related to the Wangkang tradition. The discovery of these three approaches is analyzed and synthesized to answer the research questions. The results show that the Wangkang ceremony is not just an ordinary ceremony, but was a unique tradition that demonstrate the world view of the Hokkien community on the concept of the death. This paper will focus on the history of the origin of the Hokkiens and the functions of the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony in the community.

**Keywords:** Cultural, Heritage, Wangkang Ceremony.

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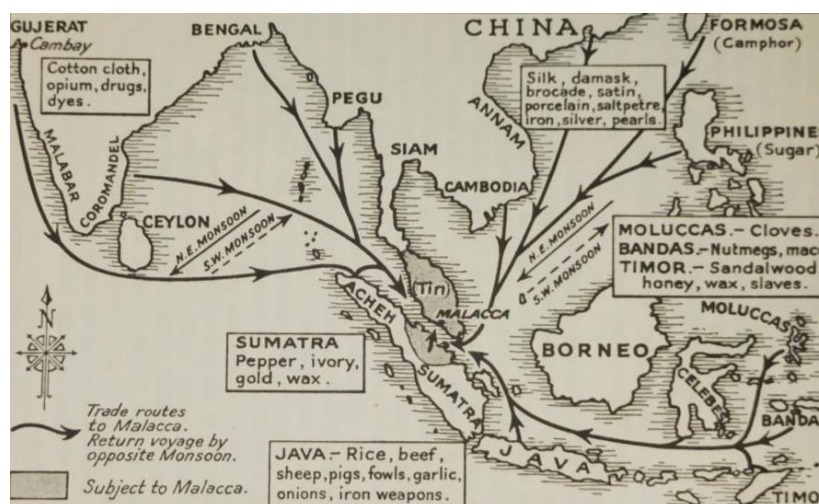
## A. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss about the Wangkang ceremony which is a unique tradition practiced by the Hokkien community in Melaka. The ceremony has been inherited by the community since the time of their ancestors. This research was carried out for its importance as one of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that can reveal the existence of a unique and priceless diversity of customs and cultures among the Malaysian communities. It is also implemented due to insufficiency information about the ceremony, which until now there is still lack of comprehensive scientific research on this ceremony.

Therefore, this paper will describe the history of the Hokkien community in Melaka and the function of the Wangkang ceremony in the community based on their customs and beliefs. Qualitative method using history approach is used to obtain and analyze the data collected. The

three approaches are field observations, interviews with authoritative individuals among the Hokkien and also in-depth study of records and reports as well as the earlier writings related to the Wangkang tradition in the state of Melaka. These findings directly demonstrate that there is a relationship between the Hokkien community and the Wangkang tradition which practiced by the community.

The Hokkien Community In Melaka, the Chinese community in Malaysia consists of various ethnic group such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hailam, Teochew and Hainan and etc. Nowadays, the Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese community are the most numerous ethnic groups compared to others such as Teo-Chiu, Hok-Chiu, Hok-Chia, Heng-Hua, Kwong-Sai and Hainanese. Based on records, the arrival of the Chinese to Malaya has already happened since the 15th century with the arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho to Melaka. The large-scale migration of the Chinese community to Malaya occurred around the 19th century when large groups of Chinese arrived in Penang or Singapore, causing their population to multiply. This situation encourages Chinese people to move to Malaya, especially those who lived in Southern China from the districts of Guangzhou, Fujian, Foochow and Guandong.



Map: Trade routes to Malacca in 15th century.

According to Khoo Kay Kim;

*In 1901, almost 75% of the population of Malacca consisted of Malays. Ten years later, 40% of the total population of Malacca consisted of Chinese and Indians. The increase for Malays was only 9.6%; for the Chinese, 29.1% and for the Indians, 151.1%. Such a large increase for Indians proves that the rubber industry is progressing.*

## B. METHOD

Based on research, the Dutch has introduced the position of 'Kapitan' to take care of the affair of Chinese community in Malacca. According to the records, there are a total of 10 Chinese

Kapitans who have been appointed throughout the period of Dutch ruled in Malacca (1641-1825) and most of them are Hokkien. According to Ee Kim Tiam;

*During the Dutch Administration here, a unique position was created for the Chinese solely to take care of the affair of Chinese Community and this continued for about 250 years between 1624 and 1874. Capitans were appointed to take charge of the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple's affairs those days.*



Picture: A List of Chinese Kapitans of Melaka

Among the Chinese groups, the largest group is Hokkien. In 1921, 32.4% (380656) of the total Chinese population in Tanah Melayu (1174777) consisted of Hokkien people. The second largest group is Cantonese who make up 28.3% (332307), followed by Hakka (18.6%), Teochew (11.1%), Hailam (5.9%) and others (3.7%). The Hokkien community is the earliest group who migrated and settle in Tanah Melayu compared to the other group. The migration of the Hokkien people to Malaya has brought together with their culture, customs and beliefs. In Malaysia, Hokkien community build settlements in Penang, Kedah, Melaka, Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu and Sarawak.



Picture: The Wangkang Ceremony  
1919 Year Wangkang in Melaka

The Wangkang ceremony is rooted in the beliefs and customs of the worship of Ong Yah, who is a deity revered and recognized as Tye Tian Soon Siew Ong Yah, among the coastal communities. Those who lost their lives at sea, revered as “good brothers”, became souls wandering lonely and homeless. Rituals to welcome and guard Ong Yah were periodically held for

his visits to the mainland and the rescue of “good brothers”. Based on the research, the Wangkang tradition has been practiced by the Hokkien community in Malacca since 1856 and was subsequently held in 1891, 1905, 1919, 1933, 2001, 2012, 2017 and lastly in 2020.

According to *The Malacca Guardian*:

*In truth, Wangkang, the great festival of the Chinese, is the expression of the faith of a people. Whatever the ceremonials, whatever their significance, Wangkang is the sum total of faith.*

The Wangkang tradition was originated from China and later brought to Melaka by Hokkien immigrants during the reign of the Ching Dynasty (1644 to 1911). This tradition was practiced in the Minnan region (the southern region of Fujian) in China in the 15th and 17th centuries. Now the traditional practitioners are widespread in communities in the Xiamen Bay, Quanzhou areas and also in the Chinese community in Melaka. According to Tan Seng Tee:

*The Wangkang Festival is from Hokkien origin, and it is held in China, only in Chiang Chew Hoo and Chuan Chew Hoo (2 very large districts of the Hokkien Province) and in Malaya, only in Malacca.*

The Wangkang tradition is believed to have been practiced in China during the reign of Eng Lock Koon during the Ming Dynasty, which is about 5 centuries ago. The culture was then brought into Malaya during the reign of the Ching Dynasty when the Hokkien people migrated to Melaka. According to Soo Khin Wah:

*The idea of holding the Wangkang Procession is “to capture all the evil spirits which are responsible for the epidemic scourges and chaotic conditions of the world, and send them away in the Wangkang to the unknown, and to pray for peace and prosperity for the whole world, and Malacca in Particular”.*

In Malaysia, the Wangkang tradition has been practiced by the Hokkien community who lived in Melaka, Butterworth (Penang), Kuching (Sarawak) and Batu Pahat (Johor). However, until now only the Hokkien community in Melaka is still practice the Wangkang tradition according to the original implementation practice. Based on the research, the tradition of Wangkang is no longer practiced in Butterworth and Kuching, Sarawak, while in Batu Pahat the celebration of the Wangkang ceremony is celebrated by using the Wangkang which made from paper.

The implementation of the Wangkang ceremony in Melaka was based on the instructions given by their gods or Ong Yah who are worshiped by the Hokkien community. According to Soo Kim Wah in his book titled *Tour of Inspection By Imperial Decree- Tee Ong Yah and The Wangkang* there are five gods that are worshiped by the Hokkien community in Melaka namely Choo Hoo Ong Yah, Hoo Ong Yah, Tee Hoo Ong Yah, Lee Hoo Ong Yah and Pek Hoo Ong Yah. According to research, these gods are considered protectors and play an important role in the life

of the Hokkien community, especially in the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony in Melaka.

### C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on research, there are 3 temples and an association building that has become a temple of the gods for Ong Yah, namely Cheng Wah Keong temple, Kandang (Choo Hoo Ong Yah), Yong Chuan Tian temple, Bandar Hilir (Tee Hoo Ong Yah), Kampung Tiga temple, Kubu (Hoon @ Hoo Ong Yah) and the temple in Ujong Pasir (Pek Hoo Ong Yah) and at the Malacca Hainan Association in Jonker Street (Lee Hoo Ong Yah).

Khoo Kay Kim's in his article *'Melaka: Perceptions of its History and Society'* stated that the Chinese community in Malacca conducts the Wangkang procession from time to time. This brings the understanding that the Wangkang ceremony is not performed annually but is performed based on the needs or instruction of the Ong Yah. According to Soo Kim Wah, there is a relationship between the Hokkien community and the gods or Ong Yah in the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony. In preparation for the ceremony, the Hokkien community will perform a prayer ceremony to communicate and get Ong Yah's instructions whether the Wangkang ceremony should be held that year.

The same findings were also obtained by Nik Hasnaa Nik Mahmood in a study conducted on the Chinese community in Tanah Melayu. The study found that there is a connection between the gods worshiped by the Hokkien community and the performance of the Wangkang ceremony in Melaka and the Hokkien community in Melaka worships five holy people or known as Ong Yeh, namely Tsu, Un, Ti, Li and Pek.



Picture: Yong Chuan Tian Temple, Bandar Hilir, Melaka (Tee Hoo Ong Yah).

The Functions Of Wangkang Ceremony, based on the Hokkien community, there are a few reasons or functions why the community practised the Wangkang ceremony in Melaka. The main function is to collect the evil spirits or wandering soul and send it away to another world in order to restore prosperity and stability to the world. The Hokkien community believes that the instability or chaotic conditions that occur in the world is caused by the spirits. Therefore, the Hokkien community strongly believes that the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony will be able to restore prosperity and stability to the whole world. According to *The Malacca Guardian*;

*The idea of the Wangkang Procession is to capture all the evil spirits which are responsible for the epidemic scourges and chaotic conditions of the world, and send them away in the Wangkang to the unknown, and to pray for peace and prosperity of the whole world.*

According to Khoo Kay Kim, the Wangkang ceremony is not a party, the parade is carried out to curb an epidemic by praying to the spirit that brings the epidemic. His view clearly shows the connection between the implementation of the Wangkang ceremony and the power of the gods worshiped by the Hokkien community to curb the spread of the epidemic and restore prosperity to the world.

The importance of performing the wangkang ceremony has been supported by Soo Kim Wah who stated that the Hokkien community believes that the performance of the Wangkang ceremony will be able to cleanse a place or the world from any disturbance, the spread of disease or from the occurrence of unwanted things. Spirits (unguarded) that wander will be collected or captured through the Wangkang boat procession ceremony and sent to another unknown world to restore harmony and well-being throughout the world.

During the ceremony, the Wangkang ship will be taken out from the shipyard and marching to several locations that have been determined by Ong Yah. Throughout the procession, the Wangkang will stop at each location and the Chye Lian Tow or the Captain will waved the holy flag several times to invite the spirit or wandering soul on board.



Picture: The 1919 Year of Wangkang Ceremony in Melaka.



Picture: The Chai Lian during the wangkang ceremony in 1933.

Based on their beliefs, Choo Hoo Ong Yah from Cheng Wah Keong Temple who carries the royal order will purify the areas that the Wangkang ships pass through and further grant peace and prosperity to the world. It explains the role and power of the Ong Yah in returning well-being and stability to the world through the magical power possessed by the deity. Later, the Wangkang will be burnt as a symbolism of sending away the spirit to another world.



Picture: The routes of the Wangkang procession, 2012.

According to *The Malacca Guardian*:

“In 1891 after a lapse of eleven years when the outbreak of cholera was very virulent it was again held, and since then it has been taking place every 14 years. The one held in 1905 was just 4 days after the signing of the Peace Treaty between Japan and Russia, and when the Chinese boycotted the American goods. In 1919, it was a year after the Great World War and the influenzal epidemic, and there was also the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods, and during this year you know what is happening in the world.”



Picture: The Wangkang Burning ceremony in 2012. The Wangkang was set on fire for the final journey to the Western Heavens

The other function of the Wangkang ceremony is to show the concept of the obedience and compliance of the Hokkien community to the Ong Yah. Every instruction that given by the Ong Yah will be translated by the Tung Chee or medium and carried out by the Hokkien community to ensure that the Wangkang ceremony could be done perfectly. They beliefs that a bad event or misfortune will befall them if something is done without blessing and permission from the Ong Yah. Based on research, the selection of an individual to carry out the duties in in the Wangkang ceremony such as Committee Leader, Committee Members, Head of Wangkang Construction, Chai Lian and Tung Chee is a priceless honour and privilege. According to *The Malacca Guardian*:

*To take part in this Festival is considered as a holy privilege and everyone connected with it takes keen interest and works very hard. The attendance is always one hundred per cent.*

The third functions are to show the participation and cooperation of the Hokkien community through the ceremony. This is the important aspects that can be seen during the celebration of the Wangkang ceremony in Melaka especially in the preparation process such as the construction of the Wangkang and the Koh Teng pole. The celebration of the ceremony not only unites the Hokkien community in Melaka, but also unites the Hokkien community throughout Malaysia and some foreign countries. Based on research, the celebration of the Wangkang ceremony in 1933 have been witnessed and attracted the Hokkien Communities from all over Malaya. According to *The Malacca Guardian*;

*Being a religious procession taking place at intervals of 14 years, a steady influx of Chinese is expected from all parts of Malaya. Already the rooms of all the Chinese Lodging-houses have been fully booked up.*

*The Malacca Guardian* also explained about the participation of Hokkien Chinese community organizations in Malacca during the Wangkang ceremony in 1933 such as the Tang Wah Whay Kwan (Kampong Java), Ann Kuay (Banda Hilir), Hoon Lim Kok (first Cross Street), Hock Leong



Kiong, Bachang and many others. Based on research, the cooperation between the community still can be seen until now, especially during the celebration of the Wangkang ceremony. They work together willingly in order to achieved the objective of the ceremony and also to preserve their old tradition.



Picture: The Wangkang Procession Ceremony in 2012.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Wangkang ceremony is one of the important evidences of the Intangible Cultural Heritage which practiced by the Hokkien community in Melaka. The celebration of this ceremony proved of their loyalty and adherence to their old tradition. In line with the recognition under Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 17 December 2020 (Multi National Nomination with People's Republic of China), it is very important for this cultural heritage to be well preserved, maintained and transmitted within the community. With the involvement of the local community and thousands of participants during the ceremony, Wangkang ceremony is significant in that it raises awareness on the importance of preserving the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Melaka to our future generation.

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