

# Maintaining Chinese Cultural Identity: The Role of Chinese Clan Associations in Medan

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Abstract: This article describes the role of Chinese clan associations in Medan in maintaining Chinese cultural identity today. According to Chen (2022) in general there are two types of clan associations, namely those based on family names, lineages, or common ancestry, called kinship-based clan associations (*zongqin hui*), and those based on dialect or the same district of origin, called the locality-based clan association (*tongxiang hui*). An example of a kinship-based clan association is the association of the Yap clan, and the Huang clan. An example of a region-based clan association is the Hui Zhou association, and the Hakka association. There are several clan association activities that are closely related to Chinese culture which are routinely carried out in accordance with Chinese festivals. Examples: Chinese New Year, Qingming or Cheng Beng, and Ghost festival. In particular, this paper analyzes the Cheng Beng celebration held by the Chinese clan association. This study uses a qualitative approach by interviewing the administrators and members of clan associations. Observations were made when the activity was carried out. This study found that the Cheng Beng ritual to honor and commemorate the clan ancestor or the clan guardian deities will strengthen group solidarity and Chinese cultural identity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Qingming (or Cheng Beng in Hokkian) festival is one of the eight festivals in Chinese culture, which is celebrated annually by the Chinese. The other festivals that are still being celebrated currently, are the Chinese New Year celebration (the spring festival), Cap Go Meh, Peh Cun (Duan Wu - Bakcang day) and so on (Goh, 2015).

The Cheng Beng festival in 2022 globally will be celebrated from March 26 to April 15, including in Medan and North Sumatra. This year, Yayasan Istana Harta Lima Penjuru (YIHLP) is collaborating with the Deli Serdang Regional Government by inviting a number of supporting institutions to initiate the simultaneous Cheng Beng celebration in North Sumatra. The highlight of the event was held on April 10, 2022, by holding the Cheng Beng ritual at the funeral site of the Sentana Abadi Foundation, Tanjung Morawa, Deli Serdang. According to the ritual committee, the goal of this peak event is to give

prayers and respect to the abandoned spirits who have no family to pray for mass graves (Candra 2022).

Regarding the Cheng Beng festival, this paper specifically discusses how the Chinese cultural identity is managed and strengthened through the Cheng Beng ritual, which is carried out by clan associations as part of its important role.

Respect for ancestors is an important part of the Chinese cultural traditions. The ritual at the Cheng Beng festival is to commemorate and honor the ancestors carried out by the clan associations to show filial piety and social solidarity among their devotees. Through this ritual, the members of the clan and their younger generation get the knowledge about the importance of commemorating and honoring their ancestors and get to know the history of their ancestors (Chan 2003).

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## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural pluralism with the cultural identity of each ethnic group is a very valuable nation's wealth in the midst of global cultural pressure. Cultural diversity in Indonesia can be seen from the differences in language, ethnicity, and religion. This cultural identity will determine whether individuals are included in the in-group and out-group culturally (Suryandari 2017, 21).

Christian (2017) in his article on "Cultural Identity of the Chinese Indonesians" mentions two thoughts related to the cultural identity. The first thought states that cultural identity is a shared culture that is owned by a group of people who have the same history and ancestry. The cultural identity in this context reflects the same historical experience and the cultural code which tends to be stable and unchanging. The second thought states that the cultural identity is not completely fixed, but can change depending on how it is positioned (positioning) and becomes the subject of history, culture, and power that continues to play.

Regarding the Chinese cultural identity, Christian (2017, 11-12) also states that there are differences in the Chinese identity due to the influence of dialect, domicile region, and clan. This identity is also not fixed and can change due to the influence of politics, power, and other cultures (Western or other Asian). This identity is absorbed from the tradition, historical identity and is considered as the most flexible identity. Still related to cultural identity, Suryani and Azmi (2020, 186) argue that identity is not only about how individuals identify themselves, but also how the dominant group makes claims and internalizes a particular person or group that is attached to the characteristics and stereotypes attached to them.

Cruz's (2017, 1438) article on Chinese people in the city of Zamboanga, Philippines illustrates that the Chinese cultural identity can be analyzed from the several components, namely language, festivals, food, and the values they practice. Especially for the Chinese cultural festivals there are several cultures that are practiced such as the Spring Festival or Chinese New Year, Qingming/Tomb Cleaning Day, Dragon Boat Festival, Hungry Ghost Festival, and Mid-Autumn Festival.

In particular, this article discusses and analyzes the components of the festival, especially the Cheng Beng festival which is carried out by clan associations. I argue that this activity aims to increase social solidarity among clansmen and manage

Chinese cultural identity so that they can still exist in the face of various kinds of changes in the present.

## 3 METHODS

This study was conducted on a clan association, namely the Yap clan association in Medan called the Perkumpulan Sosial Persaudaraan "Yap" Budi Luhur (PSPYB). This association is chosen because from the many clan associations in the city of Medan and its surroundings, this association has a clan ancestral deity temple, namely the god Hui Tek Cun Ong who is the ancestor of the Yap clan.

This study used qualitative research methods. Data was collected by means of interviews which were complemented by observations of the environment and various activities carried out by the informants in their social activities. Structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with informants to get an idea of the Cheng Beng rituals, and clan associations, as well as their various activities. The data collection carried out in this study relates to the primary data and secondary data.

Key data are field data obtained from in-depth interviews and observations of participating in various clan association activities. The main data came from direct observations of various social activities, especially those related to the Chinese festival, namely the Cheng Beng ritual in this study.

Secondary data were obtained from reports or newspapers, magazines or research reports from various institutions and previous authors who conducted research on Chinese clan associations.

## 4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Cheng Beng Ritual

One of the most important festivals in the Chinese culture is Cheng Beng (Qing Ming/ pure brightness). This celebration falls on the third month of Chinese Lunar New Year, which is on April 4 or April 5. Cheng means "clean" and "pure", while Beng is "light". So Cheng Beng means clean and bright, because on that day the sun is in a perfect position, at the equator.

On that day, Chinese families visit their ancestral graves by bringing incense sticks, candles, paper money, food and fruit offerings to their ancestors or families who have departed. They came to clean the graves and pray. Visiting ancestral graves

during Cheng Beng may be done 10 days before or 10 days after the actual Cheng Beng day (Goh, 2015; Gultom, 2018).

Based on the author’s observations, the Cheng Beng ceremony (ritual) in Medan and its surroundings is mainly carried out by the families who privately clean the graves and pay homage to their ancestors. The ancestral respect for Chinese culture is carried out by the living family members to fulfil the needs of deceased family members and thus this will make them happy in the afterlife. This is done as a sign of devotion and to strengthen the unity in the family and lineage.

Furthermore, the Cheng Beng ritual, besides being carried out by the families, it is also organized by the Chinese community who are members of the clan associations (dialect and surname associations), and associations that take care of public funerals. In general the rituals managed by the families and by the Chinese community are the same. After completing the ancestral prayer, to fulfil the needs of the family and ancestors in the afterlife, a ritual of burning the paper money is carried out. Other items such as clothes, shoes, etc. all made of paper are also burned. They may be put in a suitcase. All of them are replicas. The package in the form of burnt suitcases was labeled the name of the ancestor and the name of the families who send it.

Based on the explanation above, the Cheng Beng ritual is organized by:

1. The Family

The family visits the tomb or to the columbarium (where the ashes of the cremated body are stored). The visit may be done 10 days before or 10 days after the April 4<sup>th</sup> or April 5<sup>th</sup>. However, the family prefers to get it done before April 5 because there is a belief that the sooner it is done, the better the blessing that will be obtained.

Next, the family performs an ancestral prayer ceremony at home, for families who have an altar/maintain ashes or a spirit tablet (*sin cu pai*) on Cheng Beng day, which is April 4 or 5. They also burn paper money, replica clothing made of paper, etc.



Figure 1: Ancestral tablet (*sin cu pai*)

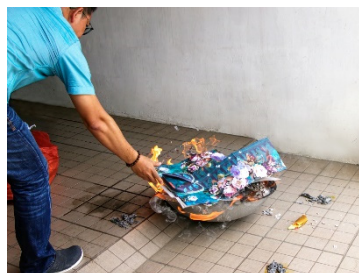


Figure 2: Offerings for ancestor

2. The Clan associations (surname and dialect associations)

The surname association performs the Cheng Beng ritual in the clan association building or at the clan ancestral temple to honor the clan ancestor or the guardian deity of the clan concerned. The dialect associations carry out the Cheng Beng ritual at the graves of their community ancestors. For example at the tombs of the ancestors of the Hakka, Teochiu, Hui Ciu and so on.



Figure 3: The community ancestral tomb

3. Cemetery foundation

The association that takes care of the funeral complex performs the Cheng Beng ritual at the cemetery for the abandoned spirits (who have no family). For example: At the peak event of Cheng Beng in North Sumatra in 2022, this ritual was held by YHILP at the Sentana Abadi Foundation cemetery, Tanjung Morawa, Deli Serdang, on April 10, 2022.



Figure 4: The Cheng Beng brochure 2022



Figure 5: Mass graves at Sentana Abadi

## 4.2 Chinese Clan Associations

The Chinese clan association is an organization that accepts the people with the same surname as its member. Ch'ng (1995) states that the overseas Chinese in South East Asia is bound by the social relationships which begin from the family relationship then widened to the non-family kinship based on the same surname, same home town, or same dialect (Makmur, 2018).

Chinese people are used to the organizations (associations). Those who live in Indonesia are used to being in groups of associations. Overseas and or domestically, there are almost always clan-based Chinese associations with activities carried out collectively (Gayatri, 2019: 39-40).

In the nineteenth century to get a better life, a large number of Chinese people migrated to the southern region (Nanyang), Southeast Asia. Nearly 90 percent of the Chinese who migrated to the archipelago, including those who came to the East Sumatra region, came from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Although they speak several

dialects, they are united by the same way of writing. In the areas they visited, the migrants then formed various voluntary associations that were patterned on certain criteria such as the area of origin in China, dialect, kinship, surname or clan, and occupation, because of the awareness of the importance of unity to face the life challenges in the new and foreign environment (Ch'ng 1995:45-46).

Those who migrated brought with them their cultural, religious, social and economic institutions (Gamba 1966:123). This is why until now in the city of Medan, there are many associations of Chinese people who come from various regions or regions of the two provinces (Vleming 1989: 187-188).

According to Yen 2014:23-25 different dialect groups and clans form their own associations for social, cultural, religious purposes, and for the protection of group interests, such as the Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainan Hakka associations, and the Tan, Yap, Lim and Huang clan associations.. All these dialect and clan groups form their own social, religious and educational activities. They founded their own shrines that worshiped various gods, organized different religious celebrations, founded sacred burial places and schools. The social role of associations at that time was very important to provide a useful direction for emigrants of the same dialect group to meet and socialize, in a new and sometimes hostile environment. They worshiped gods and celebrated festivals together. The association also plays a role in the welfare matters to provide assistance to members in need.

In general, according to Chen (2022), clan associations can be categorized into two types, namely those based on family names, lineages, or common ancestry (called kinship-based clan associations, *zongqin hui*), and those based on dialect or kinship or the same home district (called locality-based clan association, *tongxiang hui*).

Based on the study of Setiawan (2018:83) as an ethnic minority who respects the ancestral culture, many Medanese Chinese have an interest in joining a community where they can express and protect each other. The clan associations have flourished in Medan over the past decade. Almost all of these associations have offices in the form of large buildings located in the downtown area. Generally, the Medanese Chinese who are active in clan associations are Buddhists or Confucians, because organizational activities cannot be separated from ancestral worship rituals.

Based on observations and interviews with the Chinese leaders in Medan, it is known that there are about 25 clan associations in Medan. Some of them are: The Huang Clan Association (Wijaya Clan Social

Foundation), Tan Clan Association (Lautan Mulia Social Foundation), Ong Clan Association (Raja Clan Foundation), Lim Clan Association (Indo Makmur Lestari Foundation), Xu Clan Association (Kho), Yap Brotherhood Social Association Budi Luhur, Li Clan Association, 6 Clan Association (Sad Putrapersada Foundation), Zhuang and Yan Clan Social Foundation, Loe Clan Association, Zhang Clan Foundation, Hakka Association, Teochiu Foundation, South Sea Social Foundation (Hainan), Angsapura Social Foundation (Hui Zhou).

### 4.3 Maintaining Chinese Culture Identity

The Cheng Beng ritual is one of the most important activities carried out by the Yap clan association in order to strengthen social solidarity among clan members, and maintain the Chinese cultural identity. Every year this association carries out four ritual activities, namely [i] the celebration of the birthday (*shejit*) of the god Hui Tek Cun Ong on the 10th day of the 12th month of the lunar year, [ii] the Cheng Beng festival on April 4-5, [iii] the festival of hungry ghosts in the 7th month of the lunar year, and finally [iv] the birthday (*shejit*) of the four-faced god (*Se Mien Fo*). However, this study only specifically analyzes the Cheng Beng ritual carried out by the clan association, Perkumpulan Sosial Persaudaraan “Yap” Budi Luhur (PSPYBL) Medan.

The Cheng Beng ritual in 2022 is held by this association on Saturday, April 2 at the ancestral hall of the Yap clan.

The date of the ritual is determined by asking permission and approval of Lord Hui Tek Cun Ong. This year the ritual at the Yap clan association was carried out on April 2, after obtaining the blessing of the ancestor of the gods by using “*pwa pwee*”. The approval was obtained if the “*pwa pwee*” which was thrown, showing one open and one closed position (interview with Mr. Y).

The Cheng Beng ceremony should not be pass 12 o’clock because the soldiers who escort the spirits, descend in the morning and will return at noon. Therefore, when the gates of the spirit world are opened during Cheng Beng, a ceremony is performed to burn the paper money and other items such as clothes, gold coins, silver coins, etc. The goal is that the burned objects can be used there. How many offerings are burned is independent according to the ability of the family, or the clan association (interview with Ms. N).



Figure 6: Prayer to the god of the earth



Figure 7: Prayer to the god of heaven



Figure 8: Prayer to ancestor



Figure 9: Offerings for ancestor

## 5 CONCLUSION

The conclusions from the results of this study are as follows:

1. For Chinese people, Cheng Beng is the second most important day after the Chinese Lunar New Year. It is the day to gather with the whole family. The informan says that not going home during Chinese Lunar New Year is permissible than not going home during the Cheng Beng. This shows that it is an obligation to go home during the Cheng Beng, to honor and commemorate the ancestors, and to gather with the whole family.
2. At the time of Cheng Beng, many people originally reside in Medan, return to their home towns to gather with their whole families and together they will visit the ancestral graves as a sign of devotion. In Medan and its surroundings, this has a positive impact on regional economic development.
3. The components of the festival, especially the Cheng Beng festival, as one of the most important elements of the Chinese cultural identity, need to be managed, preserved, and continuously socialized to the younger generation. Socialization can be done either by the family older member, or clan associations so that Chinese people do not forget their ancestors, and continue to respect and commemorate them as a sign of devotion and gratitude.
4. As part of the Indonesian population, the presence of Indonesian Chinese with their distinctive cultural identity can enrich the diversity of cultures in Indonesia.

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