

STUDY ON 24 JIELING DRUMS AS URBAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The 24 solar terms, a knowledge system incorporated in the East Asian lunisolar calendar, reflect a typical agricultural life shaped by the astronomical and phenological nature in ancient China. The UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage embodies this Chinese tradition and culture. It is also commonly observed among Chinese diasporas in other parts of the world. Since 1988 when Tan Chai Puan and Tan Hooi Song established 24 Jieling Drums [二十四节令鼓] in Johor Bahru, Malaysia by exploring this Chinese traditional heritage, artistic performances of this vibrant music genre have effectively transmitted drumming aesthetics in Malaysian urban landscape into the Chinese cultural sphere for over three decades. This study explores a characterised link between this millennia-old Chinese cultural heritage and 24 Jieling Drums as an urban cultural landscape in Malaysia, and discusses several issues on the cultural elements applied in a diversified land through the narrative.

KEYWORDS

Solar terms, 24 Jieling Drums, Malaysia, Chinese tradition, Urban culture

INTRODUCTION

The 24 solar terms [二十四节气] are a body of knowledge developed in ancient China through observations on the annual movement of the Sun. Being not only an almanac to guide farming activities, they also become a cultural symbol of the East Asian continent, which has enriched cultural and spiritual life with diverse historical legends, folklore, and scientific discoveries. This Chinese heritage has inspired the birth of 24 Jieling Drums, an art form invented in Malaysia which has emerged as a cultural representation for Malaysian Chinese culture. It incorporates the 24 solar terms into the design of drumming rhythms and choreography that are closely related to agricultural life. It becomes a form of performing arts as popular as the lion dance in Malaysia, while numerous studies indicate that troupes of 24 Jieling Drums are established not only in Malaysia but also in other countries. Interestingly, local drummers of this tropical country may have not experienced seasonal changes as reflected by the 24 solar terms and the farming life in the bygone era. Their interpretation of the intended cultural meaning behind the 24 Jieling Drums is rather a curious question to ponder on.

This study mainly contains a comprehensive literature review as a preliminary survey before entering the ethnographic field. The first part elaborates the 24 solar terms and their significance in the Chinese culture, while the second part narrates a brief history of the art form, its Malaysian context, and how it links with the solar terms. Primary data sources include the existing literature from magazines, books, and newspapers, while additional data gathered by an author whose first-hand experience in administering the activities of a drum troupe in 2006–2007 are included as a supplementary narrative. The authors hope to explore the connection between the 24 solar terms

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and 24 Jieliang Drums and attempt to trace the characterised link between a cultural heritage of the ancient Chinese agrarian society and an urban cultural landscape in Malaysian modern society.

THE 24 SOLAR TERMS AND THEIR ORIGIN

The 24 solar terms are a set of 24 periods in equal length in the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar synchronised with seasonal changes according to the measurement of the Sun–Earth distance. They are not just a knowledge system but also play a crucial role as a divination guide or almanac in East Asian customs. During the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage on 30 November 2016 held in Addis Ababa, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) listed the 24 solar terms as Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, n.d.). This millennia-old knowledge system that integrates both astronomy and phenology² has been referred to as China’s ‘fifth invention’ by the World Meteorological Organisation. Although the solar terms are not strictly associated with the climatic influence, including Earth’s rotation, revolution, and atmospheric circulation, as well as solar radiation, they still reflect the ancient Chinese understanding of natural phenomena which characterise Chinese climatic characteristics of the four distinctive seasons and the synchronisation of the high temperature and rainfall (Wu, 2019).

Adapted by the ancient Chinese people as an almanac signifying climate changes in a lunisolar year, the 24 solar terms incorporate astronomical knowledge and characterised agricultural activities. This divination guide is rather unique to East Asian culture, such as the significance of the Mayan calendar is to the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilisation. During the Warring States period (481–403 BCE), the solar terms were developed and applied not only in agriculture but also in medicine, politics, and folklore. The theory of 24 solar terms continued to mature during the Qin and Han dynasties (221–220 BCE; Shen, 2001: 55). The inheritance of this ancient knowledge was made possible due to the following reasons:

1. A region must be in a geographical zone that has observable climatic and phenological periods such as annual seasons as the 24 solar terms were developed through observing astronomical activities and describing climate changes. Otherwise, it could not function accurately as an almanac (Xu, 2017: 96). In China, the lower and middle plains of the Yellow River meet this condition exactly, and therefore this region is the origin of Chinese agriculture.
2. Cultural bearers of the solar terms should possess a rather philosophical cultural foundation. Considering China as a land that is predominantly agrarian for thousands of years, an agrarian society, however, is not efficient enough to incubate the concept of the solar terms. There was an uninterrupted epistemological system of literature, philosophy, and document archives that helped sustain the inheritance and development of knowledge. The creation of the solar terms combined a highly developed agricultural civilisation with Zhuangzi’s [庄子] view of ‘harmony’ between man and nature. Therefore, it was the unique idea of ‘harmony’ that developed a philosophy of respecting nature and a willingness to take advantage of it all (Xu, 2017: 97).
3. The prerequisite in astronomy has formed a corpus of knowledge to be relied on. The creation and application of the solar terms required a deep understanding of astronomy. Historically, Chinese scholars have been more enthusiastic about exploring the various laws of Sun–Earth movements to guide daily routine and lifestyles, while the 24 solar terms were utilised as a systematic way to organise astronomical observations. During the Spring and Autumn periods (770–221 BCE), a sundial, which is an ancient chronological instrument to measure the shadow of the Sun, was used to determine the four primary solar terms of

² Coined by Charles Moran in 1853 (Demarée & Chuine, 2006: 815), *phenology* is the study of cyclical events that occur during an organism’s life cycle, and how these events are influenced by seasonal and interannual variations of the climate and environment. Furthermore, it affects the abundance and distribution of organisms, the productivity of ecosystem services, the structure of food webs, and the global water and carbon cycles (USA National Phenology Network, n.d.). Among the research fields that use phenological observations today are past climate reconstruction, climate change impact assessment, and climate change management (Demarée & Chuine, 2006: 820).

winter solstice or *dongzhi* [冬至], summer solstice or *xiazhi* [夏至], spring equinox or *chunfen* [春分], and autumn equinox or *qiufen* [秋分]. Through observations under the noonday glare, the day with the shortest shadow in a sundial is *xiazhi* and the day with the longest is *dongzhi*, while a moderate length of the shadow is observed during *chunfen* or *qiufen* (Cui, 2009:162).

4. The nature of the political system established since ancient China helped in keeping the custom alive. Since the political unification during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), a custom that celebrates festivals based on the solar terms was established and continued to be consumed until today (Xu, 2017: 98).

Therefore, the unique geographical locality, the profound farming culture and thoughts, the advanced astronomical knowledge, and the nature of the Chinese political system have contributed to the complete system of the 24 solar terms as demonstrated at present.

THE 24 SOLAR TERMS IN AGRICULTURAL CIVILISATION

During the long history of agricultural activities, ancient Chinese placed great importance on the concept of *tianshi* [天时]. While it has different connotations in various contexts, in this discussion, it refers to the changes of weather in certain time cycles, such as annual seasons. In ancient Chinese societies that were mainly self-sufficient by means of agriculture, *tianshi* affected every person regardless of their social classes (Chen, 2011: 125). During the Northern Wei dynasty [386–534 CE], Jia Sixie [賈思勰] compiled ‘Qimin Yaoshu [齐民要术],’³ an ancient Chinese agricultural text, which explained that:

“Follow the appropriateness of the season, consider well the nature and conditions of the soil, then and only then least labour will bring best success. Rely on one’s own idea and not on the orders of nature, then every effort will be futile” (Shi, 1982: 32).

This phrase further confirmed the importance of *tianshi* in Chinese agrarian civilisation. In Chinese vocabulary, *tianshi* can be explained with separate terms of *tian* [天] and *shi* [时]. In the agricultural context, *tian* refers to agro-meteorological conditions, while *shi* means changes that reflect all seasons and weather (Zhang, 2012: 33). Seasonal changes have direct impacts on the growth, development, and maturation of crops, which leads to the need for an accurate study on the *tianshi*. Moreover, different climatic conditions have different effects on crops (Chen, 2011: 127).

To calculate *tianshi* accurately, the Chinese used a traditional lunisolar calendar that contains 4 seasons, 12 months, 24 solar terms, and phenology that are calculated based on the position of the Sun around the ecliptic. According to Chinese astronomers, the 24 solar terms that have been recorded in ancient literature are based on strict scientific calculations (Wu, 2016: 21). It contains a diversity of terrestrial climates caused by the changing relative position of the Sun on the ecliptic in a calendar year, which is divided into 24 equal periods (Cui, 2009: 162). Each period was named specifically as a solar term (Figure 1). In the Northern hemisphere, a solar term rotates from *lichun* [beginning of spring 立春] to *yushui* [rain water 雨水], *jingzhe* [insects awakening 惊蛰], *chunfen* [spring equinox 春分], *qingming* [fresh green 清明], *guyu* [grain rain 谷雨], *lixia* [beginning of summer 立夏], *xiaoman* [lesser fullness 小满], *mangzhong* [grain in ear 芒种], *xiazhi* [summer solstice 夏至], *xiaoshu* [lesser heat 小暑], *dashu* [greater heat 大暑], *liqiu* [beginning of autumn 立秋], *chushu* [end of heat 处暑], *bailu* [white dew 白露], *qiufen* [autumnal equinox 秋分], *hanlu* [cold dew 寒露], *shuangjiang* [first frost 霜降], *lidong* [beginning of winter 立冬], *xiaoxue* [light snow 小雪], *daxue* [heavy snow 大雪]; *dongzhi* [winter solstice 冬至], *xiaohan* [lesser cold 小寒], and finally *dahan* [greater cold 大寒] (UNESCO, 2016).

In agricultural practice, solar terms serve as an almanac with instructive meanings. This almanac guides farmers on what and when to do the farming. For example, *lichun* is the first solar term and represents the beginning of spring when all living things revive and the temperature, sunshine, and rainfall tend to rise or increase; the weather of *lixia* is very suitable for crops because the

³ The book title has been translated as “Essential Farming Skills of the People of Qi” (Li Wenhua, and Zhang Renwu, 2001: 26).

temperature rises significantly with more thunderstorms; *liqiu* is a time of harvest when the temperature starts to drop gradually; and *lidong* marks the end of farming, and farmers begin to manage the storage of crops after harvesting (Cao, 2017). Furthermore, solar terms are widely used in farming proverbs that sum up the long-standing practices in farming as useful guidance in agricultural activities as well as a daily routine. For instance, ‘planting melons and beans around *qingming*’ [清明前后，点瓜种豆] instructed farmers to sow melon seeds and beans when the temperature rises with increasing rainfalls around *qingming*.

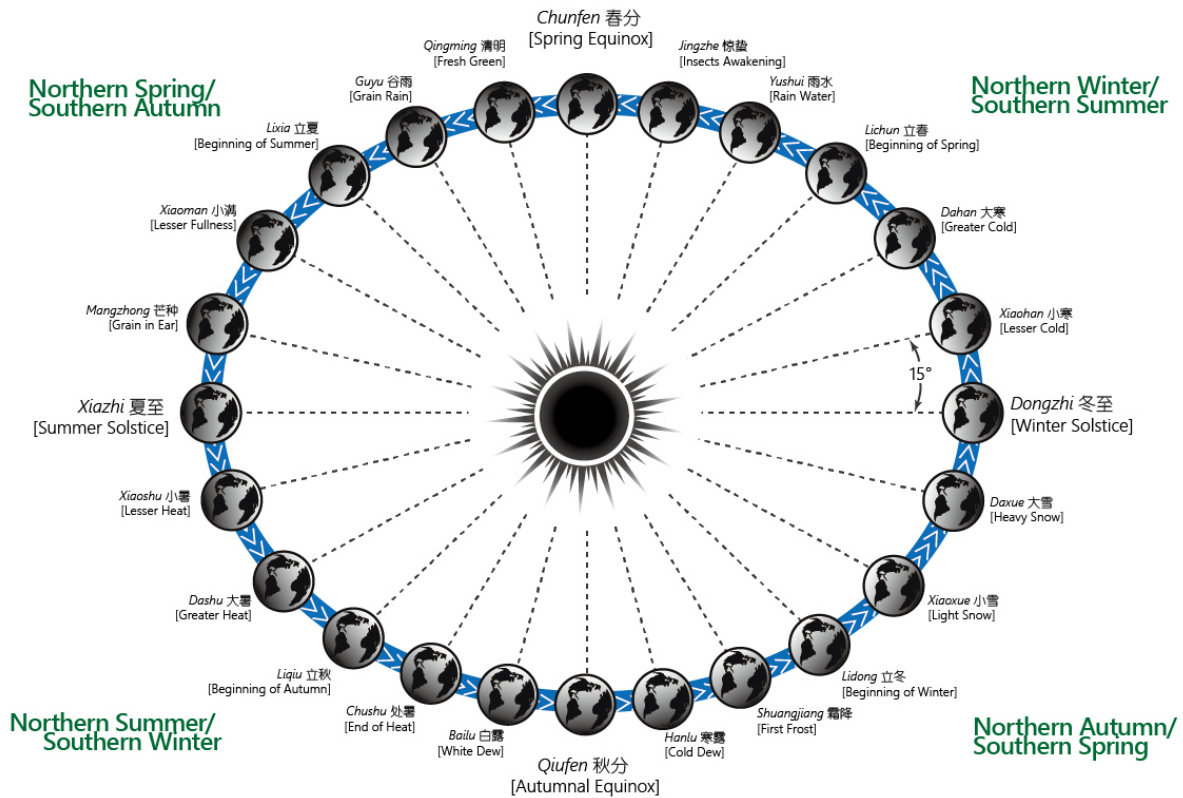


Figure 1: The relationship between 24 solar terms and Earth’s position in its orbit during a lunisolar calendar year (drawing by Yang Yunxi).

THE 24 SOLAR TERMS AND CHINESE URBAN FOLK CULTURE

The integration of the 24 solar terms in human activities has given rise to a range of folk cultures. Folk culture is the behavioural language and patterns regulated by people over a long period of time in work and social practices. In other words, it means that the rules of behaviour are created and observed by common people (Zhou, 2015: 145). Over the centuries, folk activities related to certain festivities had become part of folk culture. For instance, during the late Qing dynasty (1840–1912 CE), the custom of ‘spring ox beating’ [打春牛] was practiced all over China. Clay sculptures of an ox and a goblin called Mangshen [芒神] were made on the day of *lichun*, which marked the arrival of springtime. After a magistrate presided over the ceremony of ‘spring ox beating’ with a colourful whip, the folks would compete to grab home some of the clay pieces. This ritual signified a good harvest in the year (Xiao, 2015: 13). This folk custom is a precursor for the arrival of the spring season and farming is about to begin. Besides, common people usually hang a picture of ‘spring ox beating’ during *lichun*, which becomes one of the popular new-year paintings (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Spring ox beating (Han & Wang, 1998: 42).

Apart from the above example, there are many other customary activities related to agronomical timing, such as the Tomb Sweeping Day during *qingming*. Since the social system in ancient China was based on the farming system, agricultural practices were ingrained in many Chinese customs. However, the use of modern technology has vastly changed modern agricultural practices. As most people do not need to farm in their daily lives, it became harder to associate customs with 24 solar terms (Zhang & Tian, 2017: 1170). Nevertheless, the solar terms are still an integral part of modern Chinese culture through written and oral transmission and continue to influence the lifestyle of modern Chinese. Despite the decline of agricultural civilisation, folk cultures and 24 solar terms are still well-preserved and ingrained in people's awareness of health and wellness nowadays (Shang & Zhou, 2015). In the book entitled 'The Regimen of Huangdi Neijing and Twenty-four Solar Terms' [黄帝内经二十四节气养生法], a sum of knowledge about healthcare is introduced with connections with the solar terms.

CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, West Malaysian population records showed that Chinese merchants and envoys visited the Malacca Sultanate in the early 15th century. After the British occupied Penang in 1786, the Chinese population surged. A similar phenomenon was observed in Malaya after the British effectively colonised the area. There have been four stages of Chinese migration:

1. Before 1786, Chinese in Malacca were mainly merchants;
2. From 1786 to 1921, many Chinese migrants who settled in Malaya worked in a variety of professions, such as traders, carpenters, farmers, miners, and labour force;

3. The third phase lasted from 1921 to 1947 with an interesting piece of information: in 1933–1938, the Alien Ordinance implemented in Malaya restricted adult males from immigrating except women and children as to better balance the gender demography in the Chinese population;
4. The last phase is from 1947 to 1990 when there was a natural increase in population in West Malaysia. Chinese migrants during this period also tend to migrate to Singapore, Australia, and the United States (Lim et al., 1998: 200–209).

There are various reasons to explain Chinese migration throughout history, and these include economic factors, political turmoil in the homeland, and maritime development (Zeng, 1984: 19–43). Chinese migrants carry different dialects, occupations, customs, and habits. Demographically, the Chinese in West Malaysia can be divided into a few dialectic groups: from 1911 to 1980, the Hoklo people made up the Chinese majority and were followed by the Hakkas, the Cantonese, and finally the Teochew. These major dialectic groups accounted for 90% of the total Chinese population, and this situation has been maintained since 1921 (Lim et al., 1998: 213). According to the official statistics, the total population of Malaysia is estimated as 32.75 million in 2021. The *bumiputera* (which consists of the Malays and indigenous ethnics) accounted for more than half of the population (69.7%); the Chinese represented a bigger minority population constituting 22.5%; the Indians and other ethnic groups occupied only 6.8% and 1.0% of the population, respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2021).

Although the Chinese are deemed a minority in the population of Malaysia, much evidence shows that folk culture is persisted as a carrier for transmitting the Chinese culture, and traditional festivities are largely important to the Chinese in Malaysia. Soo (1994) pointed out that the Chinese in Malaysia have only inherited not all but some of the traditional Chinese festivals. Some of these festivals have retained their original spirit, while others have been changed due to differences in the geographical locality and other factors, thus creating a festival with many local characteristics (Soo, 1994: 2). Of all the festivals celebrated by the Chinese in Malaysia, Lunar New Year⁴ is the most important festivity. A month before Lunar New Year, families are busy with preparations for the New Year: buying new clothes for children and cooking local delicacies such as *kuih bakul*. On New Year's Eve, special rituals of ancestral worship, a reunion dinner, red envelope giving, and *shou sui* [守岁] are still practiced (Soo, 1994: 6). Over time, the Chinese culture has generally retained the spirit and essence of tradition in the Sinosphere; but due to the unique nature of the locality, it is often contextualised according to local circumstances, especially due to social, political, or climatic influences (Lew, 2012: 35).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF 24 JIELING DRUMS IN MALAYSIA

Chinese drums have a long-standing history and culture. There are a wide variety of drums, including *yaogu* [腰鼓], *yugu* [渔鼓], and *huapengu* [花盆鼓]. The close connection between a drum and its local cultural heritage where it was originally manufactured shaped the characteristics of the drum carries. In ancient China, a clay block was used to make early drums, which were mainly used for wars, festivals, and labour. 'I-Ching', or the 'Book of Change', recorded the accounts of people who used drum beating as signals to attack their enemies or to retreat (Ji, 2017: 104). This proved that drums were used as instruments to accompany songs and dances when people wept for their defeat or sang for their victory. This custom spread to Chinese neighbouring regimes together with the Chinese drums. According to the archaeological evidence, there were up to 30 records with mentions about drums in the ancient texts excavated from the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE) (Sun, 2015: 4). In the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), music performance that combined drums and dance was rather popular, especially the *banguwu* [般鼓舞]. Drums were laid flat on the ground as performers danced and sang on them while being accompanied by chimes, small drums, and other plucked chordophones (Pu, 2013: 203). Between the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–

⁴ The Lunar New Year is celebrated by Chinese descendants throughout the major diasporic communities of Southeast Asia, Europe, and Canada. In Canada, it is one of the biggest celebrations that are equally important as Christmas and Hanukkah. On 1 June 2016, the Canadian Parliament recognised the Lunar New Year as an official holiday in the country so that the festivity can be celebrated by Canadians of all backgrounds (Bonikowsky, 2012).

589 CE), culture bearers from the Central Plains (the lower and middle regions of the Yellow River) and the Western regions often interacted, which led to the development of a new type of drum called *jiegu* [羯鼓]; it later gained much popularity during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). During Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties, drums were not only utilised widely in songs, dances, and theatrical works but also combined with other musical instruments to create musical sound with local timbres, such as Xi’an wind and percussion ensemble [Xi’an *guyue* 西安鼓乐], Xingjiang hand drum [新疆手鼓], and waist drums in Northern Shaanxi [陕北腰鼓]. In modern times, Chinese drums were distributed through modern waves of the Chinese migration southbound to Southeast Asia as common people in China sought after a better living within a diasporic community (Zhuo & Cai, 2016: 101).



Figure 3: Tan Chai Puan (left) and Tan Hooi Song. The date of the photography is unknown (Shen, 2020).

Although Malaysia is deemed as a country with a highly diversified environment in ethnicity, culture, and religiosity, the complexity of ethnic politics and the need for cultural identity and inheritance have enriched the conditions of the establishment of 24 Jieling Drums. In 1988, at the opening ceremony of the 9th National Chinese Dance Festival, the sonorous beats of nine drums have inspired Tan Chai Puan [陈再藩], a Malaysian Chinese literatus, to create his artistic and cultural masterpiece. He envisaged a large drum formation with the concept of ‘harmony’, which embodies 24 single-skin lion drums that represent the 24 solar terms with bold calligraphy of each solar term engraved on the instrument body. Therefore, the drums received the name ‘24 Jieling Drums’⁵, as *jieling* [节令] denotes the customary festivities paralleling the solar terms. This initial idea was supported by Tan Hooi Song [陈徽崇], a Malaysian Chinese artist who composed music for the drums. The combination of their ideas created a complete form of 24 Jieling Drums as performing arts (Onn, 2011: 11; Figure 3).

Tan Hooi Song (1947–2008) can also be considered an important figure of Chinese music in Malaysia. He was born in 1947 and migrated from China to Malaya at the age of 6. He was a Malaysian musician who has contributed considerably to the development of local music. He once expressed a metaphor that as sports are the art of physical education or physique and music is the art of emotions or will, the school must be responsible for the education of the next generation. Therefore, he spent much time promoting the music clubs in schools. In the 1970s and 1980s, he wrote numerous poems and songs and was active in the Chinese education movement in Malaysia.

⁵ The English-translated terminology for this art form is rather not standardised. The drums received an official name as ‘24 Festive Drums’ since 2009, but within 30 years, this art form was also known as ‘24 Season Drums’ and ‘24-drum Ensemble’ (Siu, 2020: 26). Not many literatures written in the English language have acknowledged the formalisation of this art form (Chan, 2009; Chan, 2013; Nithyanandan, 2015; Mastusky & Tan, 2017). Due to the difficulty to translate the Chinese term *jieling*, which does not entirely fit into known English terminologies such as *festive*, *season*, or *solar term*, this study rather adopts the translation as ‘24 Jieling Drums’ in order to instil the awareness of the context in the Chinese term *jieling*.

One of his major achievements was the establishment of 24 Jieling Drums (Akademi Kewartawanan & Informasi Taima, 2013).

Tan Chai Puan, 68 years old, is genealogically from Chaozhou, Guangdong Province. He is a renowned poet and a strategist of cultural activities in Malaysia since the 1980s, typically performing the roles of programme planner, coordinator, or curator. He actively promotes traditional Chinese culture in Malaysia, ‘packaging’ the presentation in a novel way for the appreciation of young people (Chinese Who’s Who Society, 2014).

In the beginning, Tan Hooi Song created a set of basic drum scores and techniques for 24 Jieling Drums, which used many of the symbolic meanings of traditional Chinese culture. For example, the drum rhythm of ‘Dong Nan Xi Bei’ [东南西北] describes the scene of ‘one hundred flowers in full blossom of spring’, a cheering crowd that celebrates the Spring Festival and behavioural symbols of agricultural praxis such as *chayang* [插秧], *shouge* [收割], *dagu* [打鼓], and *huanqing* [欢庆]; it can thus stand as a repertoire for flower markets and temple fairs (Onn, 2009: 243). On 12 June 1988, 24 Jieling Drums took its form at the Old Temple of Johor in Johor Bahru, by incorporating *shigu* [狮鼓, literally lion drum), the solar terms, and calligraphy into lion drum sets. Meanwhile, the world’s first troupe of 24 Jieling Drums was formally founded in Foon Yew High School in the same year.

The drums used in the 24 Jieling Drums are the southern lion drums, which are generally used for conducting and accompanying the lion dance. The southern lion drum is a single-sided membranophone made of buffalo skin, wooden boards, bamboo circles, nails, and black and red lacquer. This single-skinned lion drum, also known as *jinshengzao* [金声造], is made by a century-old company in Kaiping City, Guangdong Province, China. The drums generally have a diameter of 1.8 feet (Xu & Tian, 2016). Tan Chai Puan pointed out that the traditional culture left behind by their ancestors was rich and colourful. Therefore, 24 Jieling Drums is an inheritance and creation of the Chinese culture. For the younger generation to better appreciate the traditional culture, there is a need to constantly ‘innovate the culture’ and ‘package’ in a contemporary way (Hu, 2016: 30). Tan Chai Puan once spoke of this idea in a documentary:

“The performance of drums comes in two forms. We can call it ‘drum dance’, (it) means that the drum is a part of the dance. The other form is ‘drum music’, (and) it is a kind of musical performance. The festival drums consist of the characteristic of ‘drum dance’ and try to achieve for the higher level of drum music” (Leonghoe Workshop, 2009a).

“In my personal opinion, teenagers (are) so attracted to 24 (Jieling) Drums, because everyone can design for the drum scores... We hope that we can show our (cultural) concept (and) a stronger face through the performance of playing the drums” (Leonghoe Workshop, 2009b).

To young people, one of the most attractive features of 24 Jieling Drums is its flexibility. There is no fixed form in the performance, and drummers are free to create their compositions by incorporating foreign musical elements based on their interpretation.



Figure 4: 24 Jieling Drums with a sound adsorbing mat (photograph by Yang Yunxi).

The popularity of 24 Jieling Drums is deemed phenomenal since its establishment, making it gradually an equivalent cultural symbol for the Chinese in Malaysia. It is nowadays common for institutions, corporates, and community organisations of the Chinese in Malaysia to patronise a drum troupe of such that can contribute cultural performance for social functions and during festive times, while it has also been a prevailing trend for decades that almost every Chinese national-type or Chinese-medium school in Malaysia owns a drum troupe which is active in performance. Most drummers at schools, demographically aged 7–18 years, are trained by engaged, professional coaches during the extracurricular hours. When getting mature, they are selected by the school to perform publicly. Years later, many of them carry on their engagement in their university troupes that were formed in most public and private universities in Malaysia, while some of them turn out as coaches who return to teach drumming at their alma maters. The repertoire used in a drum troupe is usually compositions arranged by a coach who plays the mastermind and who materialises cultural concepts, musical ideas, choreography, costume, as well as the visual effects in performance. The coach usually uses a music score with drum notation, which is sometimes a new composition (Figure 5), but drummers are required to learn memorising the music finally. It is common to observe the performance of drum troupes in related concerts and competitions in West Malaysia, especially in Johor Bahru⁶ (Figure 7 and Figure 8). In a Chinese-majority city such as George Town, Penang, public performances of 24 Jieling Drums are omnipresent during official functions or Chinese festive events (Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Figure 5: A composition by Quah Beng Chye [柯明财] in 2019, dedicated to 24 Jieling Drums (Quah Beng Chye, open source).

⁶ Located in the Southern end of Peninsular Malaysia that is accessible by visitors from the Singaporean border through a 1.056-kilometre causeway, Johor Bahru has many inseparable connections with Singapore. Hundreds of thousands of Malaysians commute from Johor Bahru to Singapore on the daily basis, while there is an increasing number of Singaporeans buying landed properties in Johor Bahru. With the commencement of Iskandar Malaysia as the southern development corridor in the Johor state, the Johor Bahru—Singapore region has been coined as the next Shenzhen—Hong Kong financial hub in Southeast Asia (Wan, 2015). Culturally, it is reported that almost all Chinese in Johor Bahru grew up with watching Chinese programmes of Singapore television stations (Leung et al, 2015).



Figure 6: A drum troupe from Foon Yew High School in ‘Huiju’ [匯聚], a thematic concert held in Foon Yew High School on 8 December 2006 (photography by Chow Ow Wei).



Figure 7: A drum troupe from Penang Chinese Girls' High School in ‘Huiju’ on 8 December 2006. The school is one of the rarest in Malaysia to feature all-female drummers in a troupe (photography by Chow Ow Wei).



Figure 8: Penang Miaohui [檳城庙会] or the official Chinese New Year celebration is one of the major functions in Malaysia with a constant showcase of 24 Jieling Drums. This scene depicts the setup for guest arrivals in Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, George Town, Penang, on 24 February 2007 (photography by Chow Ow Wei).



Figure 9: Young drummers from Chung Ling Private High School and SJK (C) Wen Khai (opposite rows) stood by for the opening show in Penang Miaohui on 24 February 2007 (photography by Chow Ow Wei).

Hands Percussion [手集团], the first Malaysian professional drum group derived from 24 Jieling Drums, attempts to transform the community-based performance of 24 Jieling Drums into a professional theatrical show while adding new elements to illuminate on-stage intercultural interactions (Hands Percussion, 2016). Established in 1997, the troupe is renowned in the Kuala Lumpur art scene for its innovative and avant-garde approach in drumming, and it has delivered many world-class international concerts. Hands Percussion's performance incorporates a variety of musical instruments from Asia which drives the music out of its original cultural context. These instruments include the Malay drums, chimes and gongs of gamelan Melayu, taiko, jinggu [京鼓], and sitar (Chan, 2013: 107). In recent years, Hands Percussion has brought new energy to the stage, moving the shigu away from its central role as a mere rhythm provider and incorporating modern theatrical drums and other instruments. Their drummers delved into the strengths of the shigu to explore the possibilities of the art of drumming. For example, installing a shigu on a movable stand with wheels instead of a non-movable one thus increases the drum's mobility in a stage show. They work on new compositions with a constant stream of inspiration, putting themselves in a refined and polished state before a stage show (Chan, 2013: 105). Since its inception, Hands Percussion has been invited to perform in many countries. A prominent example is being invited to participate in the 6th Shenzhen International Percussion and Culture Festival, China, in 2015.

24 JIELING DRUMS IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF MALAYSIA

Although the fundamental elements that establish 24 Jieling Drums were derived from traditional Chinese culture, this art form was created in an equatorial country that is geographically different from China. Therefore, the drums stand as a cultural brand that was created by the Chinese in Malaysia, as this art form has gained popularity and undergone a successful process of internationalisation through fusing other ethnic cultures from a pluralistic cultural context in Malaysian society.

Since Johor Bahru is the historical birthplace to 24 Jieling Drums, Tan Chai Puan transformed some public spaces in its home city to honour the drum culture, such as the world's first 24 Jieling Drums Cultural Museum (Sinchew Daily, 2019), and Drums Café was decorated with the 24 Jieling Drums arts. Across the country, the International Jieling Drums Festival in Malaysia took the drum culture to another level by setting standards for the stage performance of this unique drum ensemble and established judging criteria for elite competitions. For instance, the International Jieling Drums Competition 2018 featured drum troupes from other countries such as China, Singapore, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Nanyang Siang Pau, 2018). Besides, the status of 24 Jieling Drums is highly recognised by the Malaysian institution. In 2008, Tan Hooi Song was honoured as a National Cultural Figure, the first Chinese citizen to receive this national cultural award in Malaysia under the National Heritage Act 2005 by the Minister at the Department of Tourism, Arts

and Culture (Akademi Kewartawan & Informasi Taima 2013). In 2009, 24 Jieling Drums were recognised as one of the National Cultural Intangible Cultural Heritage in Malaysia (Sinchew Daily, 2017). In 2019, Tan Chai Puan, the co-founder of 24 Jieling Drums, was acknowledged as Warisan Kebangsaan Orang Hidup (WAKOH) or National Heritage Living Person (Chung, 2019).

The biggest difference between 24 Jieling Drums and other traditional Chinese arts, such as lion dance, is that the Jieling Drums is neither a product of single inheritance nor a borrowing of Chinese culture, but a newly created form of artistic expression through cultural fusion and reinvention (Zhou, 2017: 37). In fact, ethnic, cultural, and national identities in the contemporary time are very complex among the Chinese in Malaysia. It is not uncommon that most Chinese born as natives to a land outside China do not culturally adopt a sense of belonging to China as the 'motherland'; generation after generation, they have adapted to the surrounding local communities, and some Chinese do not feel the need to become Sinophonic or a Chinese speaker; they see themselves as descendants of Chinese migrants (Tan, 2007: 72). Growing up in a diverse society, the Chinese diaspora, especially in Malaysia, is influenced by the local cultural practices of the surrounding communities, and a localised brand of culture that represents their own ethnicity is thus created (Nithyanandan, 2015: 7).

Nevertheless, the emergence of 24 Jieling Drums in Malaysia is deemed to be related to the development of lion dance, one of the most representative heritages of Chinese culture in Malaysia, in a political way. The lion dance is a popular custom during the Lunar New Year celebration in Chinese communities of Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States; people are all likely to witness lion dancers performing in the streets and being accompanied by gongs, drums, and firecrackers (Carstens, 1999: 40). It originated as a folk performance during the Ming and Qing dynasties with a strong regional style and a rich mythological background. It was brought to Malaysia by the Chinese in the 19th century and plays an important practical role. Its most essential role is to make out a ritual that fends off evil spirits or to celebrate festivity (Loo & Loo, 2016: 131). In contrast, it symbolically disseminates a message to migrating generations that success and fortune in lives do not come easily but they ultimately depend on skills, hard work, and a promising environment (Carstens, 1999: 41).

In fact, from 1970 to 1990, the lion dance was deemed a political controversy under the racial tension in Malaysia. In the National Cultural Policy enacted in 1971, a provision states that the national culture must be based on the indigenous Malay culture. This policy has resulted in the traditions and cultural practices of other ethnics, including the lion dance, that they were marked as 'obsolete' or 'extinct' (Chan, 2009: 92). In a subsequent public debate on Malaysian national culture held in the 1980s, one of the burning issues was whether the lion dance, which represents the traditional culture of China, should be officially included as part of Malaysian national culture (Carstens 1999: 12). The related racial tension was only eased until Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia (1982–2003), stressed on the acceptance of the 'others' in a multicultural society (Chan, 2009: 93). The lion dance is gradually recognised as a localised culture in a rather pluralistic Malaysian society. Nowadays, there is an increasing number of Indians and Malays joining as members of the lion dance troupe, as in the Muhibbah Lion Dance troupe; in its instrumentation, large percussion instruments as well as the South Indian nadaswaram and the thavil have been added (Loo & Loo, 2016: 144).

Based on the historical sources, the escalation of racial tension in Malaysia was predominantly due to the 13 May Incident in 1969, which directly contributed to the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1971 by the government then. This policy is to resolve suspicion and grievance among ethnicity in order to achieve unity and to construct a just, reasonable, prosperous, and stable nation (Lim et al., 1998: 180–182), but the reality does not develop in line with the idealised condition. The Chinese community was deemed the most overwhelmed ethnic group in Malaysia and left with little room for opposition. Subsequent development in Malaysia highlights the following reflection: a biased public education policy based on racial quota (Lim et al., 1998: 184; Xia, 2018: 22), the enactment of ethnonationalist cultural policy (Tan, 1989: 138), the establishment of numerous Chinese community organisations (Lim et al., 1998: 184), and widespread celebration of Chinese religious customs among the Chinese community with fund-

raising purposes for social aids, such as the Por Tor [普渡] or Hungry Ghost Festival [中元节] (Lim et al., 1998: 185). These are the reflections of cause and effect of the relationship between the state and the Chinese community, leading to a general sentiment of disapproval on how they are affected economically, politically, and culturally. The 24 Jieling Drums, together with the lion dance in Malaysia, are therefore much emphasised with a strong identity of the Chinese culture, as both reflect cultural symbols of resistance and sustainability for Chinese in Malaysia.

As the Chinese cultural identity is gradually recognised in Malaysia, values and traditions of Chinese ethnicity are reshaped by the Chinese community, especially those of the middle class. One may find that the Chinese performing arts in Malaysia do not only appeal to Malaysian Chinese as the cultural bearers but also equally to all Malaysians and foreigners. The contribution of Chinese culture to Malaysian national culture has been evident in terms of national or international recognition (Matondang, 2016: 68). Chinese culture in Malaysia, with intense performativity, is often manifested as performing arts when festivity poses as a platform not only for the promotion of traditional culture but also for the converging demonstration of cultural arts for the senses including sight, sound, aroma, flavour, vibration, and sentimentality. In the beginning month of a lunar calendar year, the Chinese community in South Malaysia holds massive annual parades for the worship of the deities in the Old Temple of Johor. A huge procession is run as a prayer for year-long protection and blessings for productivity, and it always features various Chinese performing arts, including the lion dance and 24 Jieling Drums (Lee, 2018: 134). Since the inaugural of the Chinese Cultural Festival held at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall in 1984, there are a line-up of active non-governmental organisations sorting out sizable events to promote Chinese culture in Malaysia. These events include theatre and dance festivals (Onn, 2011: 10), or general gala shows that feature lion dance, 24 Jieling Drums, and calligraphy. Many Chinese-medium schools as well as national-type Chinese schools are dedicated agents of cultural promotions with an array of cultural clubs and the consistent organisation of various art competitions at regional, state, or national levels. The organisation of cultural events is predominantly initiated by Chinese culture or heritage enthusiasts and funded by private sectors or through fundraising campaigns. Talents in performing arts cultivated through related activities set standards in performing arts, and some also have won accolades at the international level. What is even more important about artistic performances by artists is their innovation and integrity to manifest the values in Chinese culture for an appreciation by foreigners (Lew 2012: 27). In short, the dynamics of Malaysian Chinese that connect the arts, artefacts, heritage, activities, and people through local communities have formed a cultural life that is both familiar and also unique to the local people and the Chinese abroad.

CONCLUSION

In China, the influence of the 24 solar terms is rather significant not only in its ancient agrarian societies but also in its modern cities. As an intangible cultural heritage, the almanac contains a rich cultural connotation, ranging from proverbs, songs, legends, art pieces, calligraphy, and painting to production tools and household utensils. In addition, certain festive events, rituals, and folklore also contain connections to this heritage. In agricultural activities, the solar terms played an important role in guiding farmers on when to plough, sow, harvest, and other cyclic agricultural activities. Many mundane routines in daily life are also guided by solar terms. The folkloric activities associated with the solar terms involve a wide range of customs, rituals, ceremonies, and entertainment, all of which vividly reflect the intrinsic link between the solar terms and the everyday life of China's common people.

The ethnic communities in Malaysia, as Hall explained (1993), bear traces of the specific cultures, traditions, languages, belief systems, texts, and histories that have shaped them. The culture of one ethnic group may intermingle with the culture of another in a multi-ethnic country. However, this is not cultural hybridisation or cultural unity as understood before: it is an intersecting of different cultures and histories, and this culture may belong to more than one ethnic group at the same time (Hall 1993: 362). The Chinese in Malaysia, who reflect this cultural characteristic, have reworked

the traditional Chinese culture in order to adapt to the local cultural context, making the old tradition possible to perpetuate again in another form of modern heritage. Unlike the native Chinese in China, Malaysian Chinese combined several Chinese traditional elements to create a new form of performance called 24 Jieling Drums and promote this art form as one of the culture-oriented brands from Johor Bahru, Malaysia on the international platform.

Considering the narrative of the relationship between the double heritage of the 24 solar terms and 24 Jieling Drums, we see a profound link in Chinese culture that develops from an agrarian civilisation to urban culture and performing arts, as this process brings new meanings to the cultural bearers from one generation to another. However, the narrative still leaves some questions in the fundamental connection between both entities that originated from unparallel cultural contexts, as the founding principle of the 24 Jieling Drums is more driven by factors other than agrarian needs. The successful culture-oriented branding of the drums has instilled pride in many Malaysians, but younger generations may have not learnt enough the essence of the solar terms as an ancient knowledge system in which 24 Jieling Drums are deeply rooted in. These issues require a further examination through a thorough ethnographic work in both countries in the Sinosphere.

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