

Traditional Skin Therapy Practices: A Research on the Malaysian Peranakan Chinese Heritage

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Abstract

The traditional practice of skin health care and beauty therapy is still maintained by a large number of Peranakan Chinese women today. This practice is a legacy that reflects the identity of the Peranakan Chinese community, which is very different from the Pure Chinese. However, the effects of migration and urbanisation have caused this traditional practice to be increasingly forgotten among the younger generation due to the difficulty in obtaining valid sources. This happened as many elderly in the village passed away without inheriting their traditional knowledge. Thus, this study will cover the knowledge gap by highlighting the knowledge of traditional therapy used by the Peranakan Chinese in the state of Kelantan in skincare. The main purpose of the study was to document the practice of skincare therapy in detail along with its benefits. This study uses a qualitative method of phenomenology. Study data were obtained through interviews and observations involving five informants in selected Peranakan Chinese villages. The study data has successfully constructed an indicator of skin health and beauty care practices that are frequently practised by women. Among their therapeutic practices are the use of aloe vera leaves with rock sugar, 'Bunga Jam 12' or known in the West as Lady/Queen of the Night (*Epiphyllum anguliger*), egg whites and honey, consumption of young turmeric and cekur (*Kaempferia galanga*). The methods of use and recommended intake of each natural ingredient are also explained. These heritage therapy practices have benefited the Peranakan Chinese in improving the quality of their skin health. This study benefits the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Health Malaysia in planning a proactive effort to preserve the traditional therapy practices of the Peranakan Chinese sub-ethnic heritage. In addition, this study serves as a written guide to a new generation who wishes to learn, apply and develop traditional health care practices so that they can become an alternative to modern medicine.

Keywords: Health and beauty, Traditional therapy practices, Skincare, Peranakan Chinese heritage..

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multi-racial country that lives in peace and tranquillity. The three main races in Malaysia are Malay, Chinese and Indian. The Peranakan Chinese is a group of Chinese sub-ethnic that exhibit distinctive cultural characteristics and identities (Tan, Ngah, & Mohd Darit, 2014). The term Peranakan Chinese is often used to refer to the Chinese in Malaysia who have experienced acculturation with the Malay community and the influence of the local environment. This term was initially used when

referring to the Baba and Nyonya Chinese community in the Straits Settlements, which consisted of the Chinese communities of Melaka, Penang and Singapore (Abdullah, 2013). The existence of this Chinese sub-ethnic can be traced through the migration of Chinese immigrants to Malaya. The migration of the Chinese has opened up opportunities for regular socio-cultural interaction, has contributed to the acculturation of the Chinese by the local population, becoming Peranakan Chinese (Tan et al., 2014). However, Peranakan Chinese in the country still maintain their original identity as

ethnic Chinese through traditional culture and religious practices inherited from their ancestors (Tan, Ngah, & Abdullah, 2017). The uniqueness of this identity nurturing can be highlighted through the traditional aspects of health care that are still practised today. Most sub-ethnic women still practice various traditional heritage therapy practices, especially in the aspects of skin health and beauty care. For Peranakan Chinese women in the state of Kelantan, they believe that natural ingredients are the best "skincare" compared to the products that are widely sold in the market.

However, this heritage is increasingly marginalised by the new generation due to their migration to big cities, and they live with a load of various health and beauty products from all over the world. This causes them to forget the traditional practices left by their ancestors (Ab. Karim, 2018). Looking at the impact of development that impacts the local socio-culture, it is feared that these traditional practices will be lost to the currents of modernisation (Ibrahim, 2006). As a result, the younger generation is growing up in the era of modernisation, and they are gradually abandoning it (Thomas & Coleman, 2004). This is because of the lack of knowledge regarding traditional healthcare, as well as do not know how to find the natural resources used by their ancestors (Akhyar, 2016). They are more likely to obtain health care products and supplements that are readily available in health institutions such as clinics, hospitals, pharmacies, health stores or even purchased online (Uniyal, Singh, Jamwal, & Lal, 2006). This issue is critical as more and more older women who are considered experts in traditional healthcare departed without passing down traditional knowledge to their grandchildren. Therefore, it is feared that the knowledge of traditional therapy will not have continuity and will be left to extinction.

Therefore, this study was conducted with the aim to document and provide a clear guide on traditional therapeutic practices in skin health and beauty care that are commonly practised by the Kelantanese Peranakan Chinese.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Malaysian Peranakan Chinese

The Peranakan Chinese community in Malaysia exhibits a very different identity from the pure

Chinese community and gives birth to a distinct Chinese sub-ethnic group (Tan et al., 2017). Their identities result from a combination of identities that have been nurtured through the local cultural heritage. According to Tan et al. (2017), the majority of the ancestors of the Chinese in this country are composed of Chinese immigrants from Fujian province (southern China) who came to migrate to Malaya in search of employment opportunities, both as traders (most came before the 19th century) or as manual labourers (most came after the 19th century), subsequently deciding to reside in Malaya. However, unlike the native Chinese community, the Peranakan Chinese community is actually the result of acculturation resulting from frequent social interaction with the local Malays as well as other locals. In this regard, intermarriage with locals is one of the factors contributing to the occurrence of acculturation, and it is a common occurrence, especially in the pre-19th century, due to the shortage of Chinese immigrants in Malaya at that time (Tan, 2000).

2.2 Kelantanese Peranakan Chinese

According to Chew (1993), the Chinese community in Kelantan is the second most populous community in the state. They can be divided into two, namely Urban Chinese and Village Chinese, which are also known as Peranakan Chinese. The Peranakan Chinese are descendants of Chinese who migrated to Kelantan in the early 15th century, and they are from Hokkien. They settled on the banks of the river and did agricultural work. According to Chew again, Peranakan Chinese and Urban Chinese are of the same ethnicity, both of Chinese descent, but in terms of living culture has a high gap of difference. Ahmad, Dollah, and Teo (2011) explained that the Peranakan Chinese community had adopted a mixture of cultures either orally or through their actions. Oral traditions in this society can be assessed one by one in the form of health care and medical practices, dress code, food, language, handicrafts and arts.

2.3 Traditional Therapy Science of Chinese Health and Beauty

Traditional health and beauty care for the Chinese community begins when the Chinese community begins to suffer from diseases, and they strive to find ways to prevent and cure themselves of such diseases (Ab. Karim, 2018).

Typically, they will use certain flora, fauna and minerals to treat patients. Any potent ingredient will be the main ingredient. There are also exercises and movements inherited from their ancestors. In other words, they rely entirely on the use of natural ingredients without the use of chemicals or machines throughout the period of treatment and health care (Ab. Karim, 2018).

According to McKenzie (1999), natural substances such as plants or herbs are known as phytomedicines, which contain active ingredients for certain herbal plants that can be taken in the form of powder, essence or liquid. In order to treat, beautify and maintain the health of the whole body, Chinese society places emphasis on the use of various natural ingredients that can provide a variety of different nutrients to the human body.

3 Methodology

The approach chosen to be applied in this study is a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach can be defined as a research procedure that produces an understandable picture of data (Lexy, 2007). In this study, the use of a qualitative approach is more appropriate to be used to study the aspects of traditional skin health and beauty care among the Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan. Qualitative strengths led researchers to choose this approach to assist in the data collection process.

In this study, the researchers chose a phenomenological study as the study design. This is because phenomenology is a method that is oriented to getting an explanation of reality. To obtain information about the subject to be studied, the researcher must apply an approach that allows the researcher to obtain information in great detail, for example, through oral informants. Therefore, the researchers believed that phenomenology is the most relevant study design to be used for this study.

4 Data Collection

To obtain the data required in this study, the researcher has conducted fieldwork in Pulau Chondong, Kelantan, continuously starting 1st September 2021. In the process of data collection, the researcher used two main sources, namely secondary data and primary

data. Secondary data were obtained through reading and research methods in books and journals to examine the basic concepts of traditional health care in previous studies related to the Peranakan Chinese community and health care practices practised by them from their early years in the country until today.

In the context of primary data, this data was obtained when the researcher collected information based on the process of interviews and observations involving five informants in the study area, and the first source area of the study is the Peranakan Chinese community in Pulau Chondong, Kelantan. The informants were selected by objective sampling based on their experience and knowledge of traditional therapeutic science in traditional skincare.

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 settlement of the Peranakan Chinese community in Kelantan is shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. *Peranakan Chinese Settlement in Pulau Chondong, Kelantan*

5 Results and Discussion

To achieve the purpose of the study, in-depth observations and interviews were used to explain and document the traditional skincare therapy practices practised by the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese community. Among their practices are the use of aloe vera leaves with rock sugar, 'Bunga Jam 12' or known in the West as Lady/Queen of the Night (*Epiphyllum anguliger*), egg whites and honey, consumption of young turmeric and cekur (*Kaempferia galanga*). The methods of use and recommended intake of each natural ingredient are also explained in detail.

5.1 Aloe Vera and Rock Sugar

Aloe vera is a plant that is commonly used by the Peranakan Chinese community in an effort to maintain the health and beauty of the skin. Aloe vera is a plant native to South Africa, Madagascar and Arabia. It belongs to the Liliaceae group (Sharrif Moghaddassi & Verma, 2011). The shape of this plant looks like a cactus, but the contents of the leaves are very slimy. The Peranakan Chinese sub-ethnic uses aloe vera to remove acne scars, wounds and burns. In addition, they use this plant to moisturise and refresh facial skin. Aloe vera has many benefits for the skin because it contains protein, fat, carbohydrates, calcium,

phosphorus, iron, vitamins A, B1, and C (Ananda & Zuhrotun, 2014).

Rock sugar is an ingredient that is often mixed with aloe vera and boiled for about half an hour using low heat to produce a facial beauty ingredient. Rock sugar is produced from sugarcane juice that is crystallised without purification and is rich in various vitamins, minerals and amino acids (Open, 2017). The decoction of the two ingredients will produce a concentrated liquid or gel that works to restore the radiance of the face. Usually, this concentrated liquid will be drunk or used as a face mask. This decoction can be drunk at any time, and the Peranakan Chinese community will usually apply it as a face mask at night. There is no specific dosage for the use of these two ingredients, as users can determine for themselves according to the concentration they want.

"We Chinese like to use aloe vera on the face. Often we use it for the purpose of removing acne scars, wounds and burns. We cut, take the slimy filling on the inside. After that, we take rock sugar, mix it with the aloe vera filling and boil for about half an hour. Don't use large fires. There are many benefits, vitamins for the skin. You can drink its boiled water, you can also make a mask." - (Jing)

"It is good to use this aloe vera for the face. Can make our faces clean and moist. People used to use aloe vera for skin beauty. (Back then) there are not many (skincare) products like nowadays. Many products nowadays are also not good. Better to use natural ones. There are many uses for aloe vera." - (Mek Kok Tie)



Figure 2. *Preparation of Aloe Vera and Rock Sugar*



Figure 3. *The Aloe Vera Filling is Removed and Boiled with Rock Sugar*

This knowledge of the heritage of the Peranakan Chinese community is supported by many academics who have done many studies on the benefits of using aloe vera leaves in maintaining the health and beauty of the skin. This is in line with the results of a study by Duryatmo and Raharjo (1999), who explained that there are many nutrients contained in aloe vera leaves, and it contains a slimy yellow liquid (aloin) that can reach as much as 30%. In addition, Chevallier (2001) presented the results of his study that is about the benefits of the nutritional content of aloe vera leaves the same nutritional content of other green vegetables. The combination of nutrients from aloe vera leaves with rock sugar can indeed benefit humans because the nutrient content of both ingredients

is very good for the skin. The content of rock sugar mixed with the content of aloe vera can help improve blood circulation and ensure that facial skin always looks beautiful and radiant (Resna, 2020).

5.2 Lady/Queen of the Night / Bakawali (epiphyllum anguliger)

The bakawali flower, or epiphyllum anguliger and also known as the '12 Hour Flower' among the Chinese community, is one of the plants used by them to maintain the health and beauty of the skin (Abd Wahab, 2016). The bakawali flower belongs to the cactus group and is a unique type of flower because it blooms only at midnight. According to the Peranakan Chinese community, this flower will wither when exposed to sunlight. The main feature of this flower is that it has a clean white colour, and the petals will start to open at 9 pm and bloom fully at 12 midnight. Because of this, the Peranakan Chinese community calls the bakawali flower a '12 hour flower'.

Bakawali flowers are believed to have many benefits, especially for beautifying the skin. Usually, the Peranakan Chinese will take the fine seeds found in bakawali flowers, then pounded or ground them dry and then rubbed on the face. The fine seeds are said to smooth the skin and brighten the face.

"Our people call Bunga Jam 12. Indeed, our people use it to take care of the skin. But this flower is difficult to get because it blooms once. It was midnight, then it withered. From time immemorial, we people have used it to smooth the skin of the face." - (Mr Chu To)

"Since I was little, I like to take the fine seeds in Bunga Jam 12 to rub on my face. People here believe that the seeds in the flower can beautify the skin of the face. Usually, we mash it until it is crushed, then use it as a kind of powder. I planted that flower tree." - (Jing)



Figure 4. *Bakawali flower or '12 Hour Flower'*

The Peranakan Chinese community of Kelantan strongly believes that bakawali flowers have great benefits in skin health and beauty care. The knowledge of this tradition is inherited from their ancestors. Studies on the benefits of bakawali flowers on the skin are very rarely done by academics. However, the traditional knowledge of the Peranakan Chinese community is supported by Abd Wahab (2016), who explained that the bakawali flower is one of the important sources of medicine and is a cure for various diseases. Therefore, research on bakawali flowers should be developed from time to time so that more people can benefit from this unique flower.

5.3 Honey and egg whites

Among the other natural ingredients that are practised by the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese community to maintain the beauty and health of the skin are honey and egg whites. Honey is a natural sweetener produced by certain types of bees, is the result of the intake of flower nectar, and it contains 20-60% sugar and 40-80% water as well as some minerals, organic acids, vitamins and aromatic substances (Siwi, Asiah, Hilmawati, & Wulandhari, 2018). Honey is usually mixed with egg white to produce a facial skincare ingredient among Kelantanese Peranakan Chinese women. The mixture of these two ingredients will produce a concentrated liquid that is used as a facial mask to get a smooth and clean skin texture. The most commonly used dosage is one egg white and 2 teaspoons of honey. Then, the two ingredients are mixed thoroughly to get the desired texture.

However, users can determine the dosage of ingredients according to their own tastes.

"We always use a mixture of honey and egg whites. We use it because we want the skin to be healthy, bright, and smooth. We only take the white part of the egg. We mix it with honey. There is no specific measure depending on the amount we want. Usually, we wear a mask, then rinse. The result after wearing this mask, we can feel our skin is smooth." - (Jing)



Figure 5. *Preparation of Honey and Egg Whites*

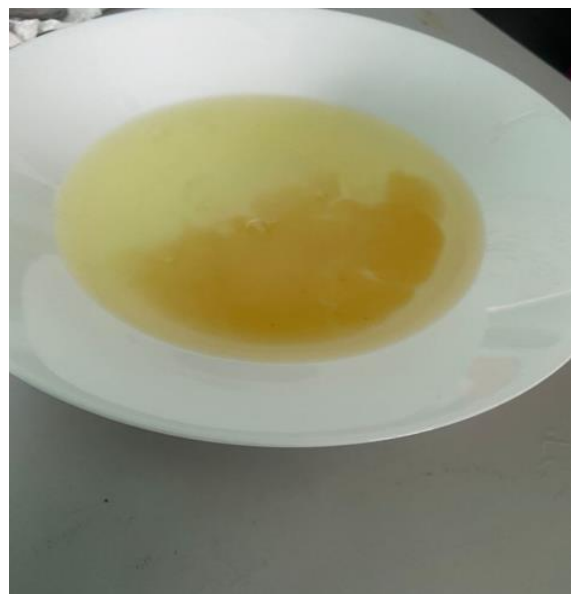


Figure 6. *A Mixture of Egg Whites and Honey*

The use of honey as an ingredient in face masks coincides with the view of Nur Aini, Hidayah, and Ambarwati (2019), who explained that the content of vitamins, minerals, enzymes and sugars found in honey could cure various

diseases, including skin diseases. Therefore, honey in ancient Egyptian times was classified as among the ingredients of high value because it is an important ingredient in health and beauty care (Nur Aini et al., 2019). To this day, honey is widely used in the production of foodstuffs, medicines and cosmetic products in Malaysia.

The combination of egg whites with honey is believed to benefit the skin, with the support of studies from Lupo and Cole (2007), who explained that the protein content found in egg whites could reduce skin inflammation, increase skin cell migration and promote wound healing. Jeerranaiprepame, Jangpromma, and Khunkitti (2019) explained in their study that bioactive proteins in egg whites are also used in many anti-ageing products. Thus, it can be concluded that the use of a mask mixed with honey with egg white is suitable for use not only by the Peranakan Chinese community but all individuals who want beautiful and healthy facial skin.

5.4 Young turmeric and cekur (*Kaempferia galanga*)

Turmeric, also known as *Curcuma longa*, is a type of herbal plant that is very beneficial in curing various types of diseases (Yadav, Tarun, Roshan, & Yadav, 2017). Usually, the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese community grows turmeric around their residential areas to make it easier for them to get young turmeric. They believed that turmeric has many benefits for their body, especially in keeping the skin youthful so that it looks youthful. Turmeric contains nutrients needed by the skin, such as protein, fibre, Vitamin C, Vitamin E, potassium, calcium, iron and magnesium (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). Usually, they make young turmeric as one of the main ulaman (salad) eaten with budu (anchovy essence) and white rice.

Cekur or also known as Chinese ginger (*Kaempferia galanga*), is one of the main herbal plants that is the choice of the Kelantan Peranakan Chinese community. Cekur is a plant that is widely grown in Southeast Asia but is widely cultivated in India (Burkill, 1966). According to the Peranakan Chinese community, cekur can beautify the skin and help them look youthful. Cekur is a small herb and has leaves that grow horizontally on the soil surface. Cekur has no stem and has a small rhizome size, and emits a little aroma. The

rhizome can be eaten as raw ulam with white rice and budu, just like young turmeric.

"Our people like to eat young turmeric and cekur the most. There are many benefits that people do not know. Since ancient times, people here have liked to eat various types of ulaman. Eat raw like that, with white rice and budu. That's how I eat every day. I don't like fast food. These dishes are good for the skin to stay young." - (Mr Chu To)

"There are many benefits of turmeric and cekur. Often we will indeed put it in most dishes. We also eat raw with white rice. We make it as a side dish. Usually, people here will plant herbs like that. It's easy to get when you want to eat. Like me, I plant, and if there is more yield, I sell. Turmeric and cekur are good for skin health." - (Jing)

"In the past, many residents here went into the forest to look for plants and ulaman. They sell in the market. There are many benefits of ulaman that we do not know. Ulaman, like turmeric and others, are good for internal health and skin. But now, not many people want to look for ulam. Older generation had passed away. Younger generations don't know what is ulam. It's a pity." - (Mr Chu Aseng)

"Every plant created by God has its own benefits. There are diseases that require us to go to the hospital, see a doctor. But for prevention and mild illness, we can do it ourselves. Use the natural resources that are around us. Our job is to always study the reason for this vast knowledge. For example, in the consumption of plants such as turmeric, cekur, bitter gourd and many more. All that is useful for the health of the skin, hair, mouth and so on. The younger generation has a lot to learn and study in this field." - (Tan)

The views and experiences of the Peranakan Chinese community on turmeric herbal plants are in line with clinical studies conducted by Waghrane et al. (2017), which have proven that the intake of turmeric as an alternative and

complementary medicine in the treatment of skin diseases such as acne and infectious skin diseases is safe and proved to have low side effects. Similarly, a study conducted by Zaman and Akhtar (2012) has proven that the use of turmeric is very beneficial in helping patients who have problems of excess oil on the face that results in acne problems.

In addition, the consumption of cekur by the Peranakan Chinese community, which is said to have many benefits for skin health and beauty, is supported by a study conducted by Omar, Suraya, Mohamad Cusairi, and Lepun (2016). According to them, taking cekur can help improve blood circulation. A smooth circulatory system is a basis for a human being to get healthy and beautiful skin. Similarly, Saidin (2000) believed that cekur is not only a flavouring ingredient in cooking, but it is a herbal plant that provides many nutrients to the human body, including the skin.

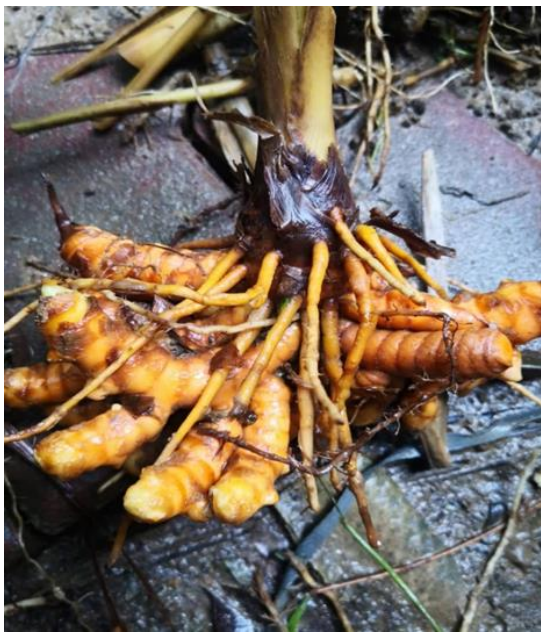


Figure 7. *Young Turmeric*



Figure 8. *Cekur (Kaempferia galanga)*

6 Conclusion

In line with the results of this study, we can see that there are still Peranakan Chinese community who still practice traditional therapy practices in skin health and beauty care. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the younger generation to continue the continuity of this traditional knowledge no matter where they are to prevent this traditional knowledge from dying out one day. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Health Malaysia are among those responsible for preserving and developing the traditional heritage of an ethnic group. They can use this study to plan preservation programs and record traditional skincare therapy knowledge for future generations. In addition, more scientific studies on traditional medicine need to be done from time to time to enable the practice to be used as an alternative to modern medicine.

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