马大华人文学与文化学刊，第十四卷，第一期，2026 年
Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2026)

Layered Localization of Teochewness in Kuching: Commemorative Publications of the Kuching Teochew Association

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Abstract

This article examines how Kuching Teochew identity is institutionally narrated in four commemorative publications of the Kuching Teochew Association (古晋潮州公会), issued for its 100th, 125th, 141st, and 160th anniversaries. Rather than treating these volumes as neutral repositories of community history, it reads them as memory media through which the association arranges prefaces, official messages, portraits, constitutions, membership lists, school, temple, and cemetery records, photographs, essays, and sponsor registers into changing claims about belonging. The article argues that Kuching Teochew identity shifts from Huaqiao (华侨; overseas Chinese Teochew) self-understanding toward local ethnic Chinese Teochew self-recognition. The 100th volume already shows a local orientation, but one embedded in a Huaqiao register of migration, Chaozhou (潮州) ancestry, cultural continuity, and pioneer achievement. The 125th volume makes this orientation more explicit and institutionalized, rendering it legible to Sarawak's political and civic public through registration, education and welfare, cemetery governance, youth organization, and links with the Federation of Teochew Associations Malaysia (马来西亚潮州公会联合会). The 141st volume documents the community's past and future in archival form through population data, membership records, newsletters, Qiaopi (侨批) memory, women's and youth organizations, and international Teochew networks. The 160th volume presents Kuching Teochews as ethnic Chinese Teochew and local people rooted in Kuching, Sarawak, who preserve Teochew heritage through temple-centered public heritage, multicultural participation, and overseas Teochew circulation. The article proposes "layered localization" to explain how locality and Teochewness are co-produced through institutions, ritual, education, and commemorative print culture.

Keywords: diaspora Chinese, Sarawak Teochew, commemorative publications, Chinese associations, identity

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1.0 Introduction

Commemorative publications are easy to misread. Their formal conventions make them appear predictable: office-bearer portraits, words from dignitaries, anniversary greetings, donor lists, ceremony photographs, and retrospective essays on community history. Yet these volumes are revealing precisely because they are conventional. They show which memories an institution values, which scales of belonging it addresses, which publics it hopes to reach, and which anxieties it tries to manage. Four anniversary publications from the Kuching Teochew Association offer a rare diachronic archive of how one Chinese dialect-group institution in Sarawak has narrated Teochew identity over hundred sixty years of commemorative self-writing.

This article studies four commemorative publications associated with the Kuching Teochew Association (hereafter KTA): Kuching Teochew Association 100th Anniversary Commemorative Publication (the 100th volume), Kuching Teochew Association 125th Anniversary Commemorative Publication (the 125th volume), Kuching Teochew Association 141st Anniversary Commemorative Publication (the 141st volume), and Kuching Teochew Association 160th Anniversary Commemorative Publication (the 160th volume). The volumes are not regarded as transparent records of Teochew history in Kuching. Instead, they are read as institutional narratives: assembled artifacts used by an overseas Chinese community organization to describe its history, claim recognition in public life, and imagine its future. The main question is therefore not simply "What happened to the Teochew in Kuching?" but "How has the association made Kuching Teochew identity intelligible at different historical moments?"

Teochew identity is repeatedly localized across the four volumes, but locality does not replace Teochewness. Rather, the publications layer Chaozhou ancestral homeland, Kuching settlement, Sarawak belonging, Malaysian Chinese civic engagement, and overseas Teochew connection. The 100th volume presents Teochewness through association buildings, pioneer memory, merchant networks, deceased leaders, current office-bearers, and Chaozhou cultural geography. The 125th volume gives more weight to registration, constitutions, education and welfare funds, temple and cemetery management, youth organization, and federation links with Sarawak and Malaysian Teochew bodies. The 141st volume heightens archival self-consciousness through demographic statistics, membership counts, cultural inventory, school records, women and youth sections, newsletters, and global Teochew networks. The 160th volume then transforms the association into a public heritage institution: its contents move through Sarawak state messages, a China consulate message, cultural camps, temple processions, food demonstrations, Sarawak Independence Day events, coming-of-age ceremony, Teochew music, Teochew opera, historical exhibitions, and essays on Malaysian Chinese cultural resilience.

This article argues that layered localization is the most useful way to understand Kuching Teochew identity. The term refers to a process in which ethnic, dialect, and ancestral identities become more local not by letting go of trans-local attachments, but by

reorganizing them into institutions that are legible to local publics. Through school-building, Teochew cemetery management, welfare, Teochew temple rituals, public events, youth and women's organizations, civic messages, tourism-friendly heritage performances, and involvement in Malaysian and overseas Teochew networks, Teochewness in Kuching becomes Sarawakian. The association's commemorative volumes depict "Teochewness" not as a permanent essence or distant homeland orientation, but as an institutional practice continually adjusted to the politics of locality.

This argument closely relates to research on overseas Chinese communities. First, it contributes to studies of Chinese in Sarawak and Malaysia, where migration, education, land, colonial rule, indigenous relations, national politics, and the shifting place of China in overseas Chinese imagination have all influenced identity (Carstens, 2005; Chew, 2011; Shamsul A. B., 1996; T'ien, 1953). Second, by refusing to treat "Chinese" identity as either primordial continuity or cosmopolitan hybridity alone, it contributes to discussions on diaspora and Chineseness (Ang, 2001; Hall, 1990; Ong, 1999; Wang, 1988). Third, it demonstrates how, in a specific national and regional context, a marginal Sarawak Chinese archive can shed light on the routine institutional work through which people of Chinese descent make ethnicity, locality, and civic belonging mutually intelligible.

2.0 Theoretical Framing: Layered Localization and Institutional Memory

Layered localisation is based on research that views overseas Chineseness as institutionally generated, historically shifting, and placed rather than culturally self-evident. The researchers described here present related location concepts rather than a single, combined theory of localization. Wang Gungwu (王赓武)'s research on Chinese identities in Southeast Asia argues that Chinese identity has evolved in response to changing political, economic, and local circumstances (Wang, 1988). Ang also warns against assuming that diaspora automatically produces a shared or stable Chineseness (Ang, 2001), while Hall's account of cultural identity as positioning helps explain why identity is created through narrative rather than simply inherited (Hall, 1990). Ong's concept of transnational cultural logics further reminds us that Chinese identities abroad are formed by institutions, migration, and strategic cross-border negotiation (Ong, 1999). Ong's work is particularly helpful in this context since it examines how institutions and regimes, rather than just culture, determine identity. Family, state, capital, citizenship regimes, passports, business networks, migration tactics, and governmental reactions to international mobility are some of her examples (Ong, 1999). The Kuching case is not directly related to cross-border capital movement or elite passport tactics. On the other hand, Ong's method clarifies how institutional structures organize identity.This article uses these insights to approach Kuching Teochew identity not as an essence carried intact from Chaozhou, but as a historically situated formation assembled through local institutions.

This approach also clarifies what is meant by saying that Chineseness outside China is not culturally self-evident. For Chinese communities living within China, Chineseness may appear more taken for granted where national institutions, public education, official language systems, and everyday cultural surrounds aid in the naturalisation of mainland Chinese identity, hence Chineseness outside of China is not culturally self-evident. For overseas Chinese communities, Chineseness must be continually explain, organized, and shown through associations, rituals, schools, publications, festivals, welfare work, and public recognition. The Kuching Teochew commemorative publications therefore do not only record an existing identity. They help to produce, authorize, and transmit Teochewness as a local form of heritage in Sarawak.

Layered localization names the process through which ancestral homeland, dialect, Chinese, civic, and transnational ties are made local without dissolving into assimilation. The Chaozhou ancestral homeland ties are localized by the Hiang Thian Siang Ti Temple (玄天上帝庙), Chaozhou cultural article, Qiaopi memory, Teochew cuisine, Teochew music, and coming of age ceremony. The dialect identity is localized through the Kuching Teochew Association, office-bearers, youth's section, women's section, membership list, and commemorative records. Chinese identity is localized via Chinese education (Kuching High School (古晋中学)/ Min Teck School (民德学校)), school support, welfare funds, temple worship, and cemetery management. Civic belonging is localized through Sarawak official messages, public events, welfare activities, education, and participation in Sarawak multicultural event. Transnational Teochew ties are localized through the Federation of Teochew Associations Malaysia, international Teochew conventions, overseas congratulatory messages, and cultural exchanges. These ties do not remain abstract but become embedded in Kuching institutions, rituals, publications, and public events. It differs from an assimilationist model, which assumes that local belonging increases as ancestral identity weakens. It also differs from a homeland-centered diaspora model, which interprets overseas Chinese identity mainly through continuing ties to China or Chaozhou. In the Kuching case, Teochew identity becomes local because it is structured through recognizable local institutions like association leadership, temple rituals, cemetery administration, schools, welfare funds, youth and women sections, public celebrations, official messages, and commemorative books. In other words, ancestral identity does not simply weaken; it changes form as it is reorganized through local institutions. Locality and Teochewness are therefore co-produced rather than opposing poles.

In Southeast Asia, Chinese associations have long mediated between migrants, commercial activity, kinship or dialect networks, temples, schools, welfare, burial grounds, and colonial or postcolonial states (Freedman, 1960; T'ien, 1953). Their records are therefore more than administrative documents; they are cultural tools for producing community. The Kuching Teochew Association is significant because it gathers several infrastructures of identity formation under a single institutional name: association, temple, cemetery, school, welfare fund, youth organization, women's group, and federation network. Although these infrastructures appear across the four volumes, their meanings

change. In one volume, they demonstrate pioneer sacrifice; in another, civic legitimacy; in a third, archival self-consciousness; and in the most recent volume, public heritage.

Commemorative publications are especially useful for this study because they organize and perform memory rather than simply store it. Memory studies show that collective remembrance is produced through repeated practices, places, and symbolic forms, not merely preserved as information (Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1989). Anniversary books condense many institutional genres: official speech, preface, founder biography, donor list, constitution, historical essay, commemorative photograph, cultural inventory, and advertisement. In printed form, they are public memory. A donor list, for instance, names a public of obligation as well as recording financial support. A page of deceased leaders does not merely preserve memory; it establishes lineage. A constitution not only regulates membership but specifies who belongs and what belonging requires. A cultural essay on Teochew food, opera, or music does more than inform; it teaches readers to recognize Teochew culture as heritage.

The Kuching Teochew's volumes are especially valuable because of their internal sequencing changes. The 100th volume begins with a sparse cover and sponsor advertising before moving into emblematic and commemorative material, a preface, pioneer portraits, office-bearer photographs, building images, and cultural-geographical material on Chaozhou in China. The 125th volume opens with Sarawak state figures and messages, followed by formal institutional documentation. The 141st volume foregrounds official messages but soon moves into charts, membership figures, education and welfare records, youth and women's sections, and cultural essays. The 160th volume is more expansive and event-driven: a single table of contents lists not only organizational records but a year-long repertoire of public cultural activities.

This article therefore reads each volume along five axes. The first is scale: Chaozhou/Chaoshan (潮汕), Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, Southeast Asia, and the wider world. The second is institutional role: temple, association, school, cemetery, welfare fund, youth group, women's group, federation, cultural organizer, and civic partner. The third is cultural repertoire: language, opera, music, food, ritual, calligraphy, papercutting, maps, photographs, and lineage memory. The fourth is political address: members, elders, state officials, Chinese associations, overseas Teochew organizations, local multiethnic publics, and future generations. The fifth is temporality: pioneer hardship, institutional success, cultural loss, youth succession, heritage revival, and future development. This approach does not require every commemorative statement to be interpreted as authentic or false. Institutional narratives are performative: by organizing evidence, authority, and affect, they construct a version of community.

3.0 Corpus, Dates, And Reading Strategy

The four volumes cover about sixty years of commemorative practice. The 100th volume depicts the association through a 100-year genealogy of settlement and leadership within a 1864-1964 frame. The late 1980s are linked to the 125th volume, the mid-2000s to the 141st, and the 2024-2025 anniversary cycle to the 160th. The 100th volume's frame alludes to 1864, while the 160th volume specifically links the occasion to the building of the Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple in 1863. This article treats the difference not as a simple error, but as evidence of how institutional origins are narrated through monuments, temple records, and anniversary customs.

The primary evidence is summarized below.

Table 1

Volume	Approximate anniversary moment	Dominant identity work
100th volume, 潮州公会百周年纪念特刊	1964	Pioneer genealogy, commercial leadership, early Sarawak history, Chinese education, Chaozhou cultural memory
125th volume, 古晋潮州公会创会一百二十五周年纪念特刊	1989	State-facing legitimacy, registration and organizational system, cemetery and education/welfare governance, youth and women sections, Teochew federation links
141st volume, 古晋潮州公会创会壹佰肆拾壹周年纪念特刊	2005	Condensed association history, membership data, newsletter archive, youth and women sections, cultural inventory, Malaysian and international Teochew networks
160th volume, 古晋潮州公会创会一百六十周年纪念特刊	2024-2025	Public heritage, temple-centered event culture, Sarawak multiculturalism, tourism and media visibility, China/Southeast Asia/global Teochew networks

The reading method is comparative rather than exhaustive. The goal is not to reconstruct every activity of the association, but to determine how institutional memory organizes Teochew identity differently across anniversary moments.

Since commemorative publications are edited institutional products, variations in length, genre, historical information, and structure may also be a reflection of the association's shifting publication objectives, the availability and skill of editors and writers, and access to local historical materials. Therefore, rather than using textual difference as a direct indicator of community-wide identity change, this paper views it as evidence of shifting commemorative self-representation.

4.0 Institutional Narratives Across Four Commemorative Publications

4.1 100th Volume: Pioneer Genealogy And Chinese Mutual-Aid Locality

The 100th volume presents Teochew identity through grammar of origin, hardship, leadership, and respectability. Its cover is simple: the title announces the Teochew Association's centenary special issue, with Kuching and Sarawak as locational markers. Unlike the later 160th volume, which surrounds the association with state, consular, tourism, festival, and transnational imagery, the 100th volume's cover is institution-centered. In this volume, Teochew people are presented first not as an ethnic group, but as members of an organized association community.

The opening pages also reveal the social base of that public. Before the preface and historical materials, the volume includes advertising and congratulatory pages from businesses. This is not incidental. Merchant sponsorship places the association in a commercial ecology. In addition to elders and office-bearers, the Teochew community is represented by businesses, benefactors, and local economic credibility. This is consistent with the historical location of several Chinese dialect associations in Southeast Asian towns, where temples, schools, welfare, and association buildings were frequently funded by commercial elites (Freedman, 1960; T'ien, 1953).

This commercial-local foundation is particularly evident in the 100th volume's description of Law Kian Huat (刘建发, 1835–1885). Law is introduced as a Teochew migrant who came when the early Brooke state started promoting immigration, and as a person with ties to fellow countrymen and the establishment of Yishun Kongsi (义顺公司) (KTA, 1964, p. 6). The book presents Yishun Kongsi as more than just a company: it was a significant institution in early local Chinese society, managing import-export operations, running a sago factory, mining, and participating in revenue farming. The volume also notes that Sarawak's government borrowed money from Yishun Kongsi when funds were short, giving the impression that the business provided financial support to the government. Law is positioned as one of the three key Chinese personalities of the era alongside Hokkien (福建) and Chao'an (诏安) leaders. Thus, the 100th volume grounds Teochew identity not only in ancestral feeling, but also in early Sarawak political economy.

The preface uses migration and survival to frame Kuching Teochew history. The Teochew are portrayed as early migrants to Sarawak who travelled across oceans, persevered through adversity, and eventually built livelihoods. Because migrants needed organization, mutual help, protection, welfare, and a place to gather, the association became essential. The preface also emphasizes the continuation of Chinese cultural traditions and collaboration with other Chinese organizations. This is an important point. Teochew identity is not opposed in the 100th volume. Teochew is presented as a sub-ethnic, dialect, and local way of being Chinese, while the association is expected to collaborate with a broader Chinese public.

This 100th story aligns with what Hall calls identity as "positioning" rather than a final essence (Hall, 1990). Kuching Teochew identity is oriented in two directions: backward to the ancestral and moral past, and outward to other Chinese communities in Sarawak. Its locality is not yet expressed mainly through the language of multicultural heritage or state development. Instead, it is expressed through a settlement narrative: Teochews arrived, persevered, flourished, organized, and made contributions.

This moral temporality is reaffirmed in the portrait sections. A significant portion of the 100th volume is devoted to deceased leaders and present officeholders. Portrait pages are more than biographical images. They perform succession. The living are authorized by the deceased, and current officeholders inherit responsibility for maintaining the association. Identity is therefore largely genealogical in the 100th volume. It depends on honoring the association's founders, generous donors, and notable individuals whose lives give the organization a sense of continuity.

The building and event photographs place this genealogy in context. The association is a visible Kuching institution as well as a network of individuals. Buildings, halls, gatherings, and festivities make Teochew identity material. They also demonstrate how infrastructure creates locality. In Kuching, being Teochew means having a venue to gather, a group of officeholders, a recognized association emblem, and a public memory of service.

A significant portion of the book is devoted to pages on the history, geography, economy, human culture, county demographics, and a basic map of Chaozhou (KTA, 1964, pp. 61–84). However, this content is not organized as a straightforward nationalist appeal. It is followed and surrounded by Kuching association history, a chronicle of the association from the Soon Heng Kongsi (顺丰公司), Teo Khiaw Association (潮侨公会), and Teochew Association periods, histories of Teochew communities in Sarawak towns and districts such as Bako, Lundu, Simanggang, Sibu, Mukah, Bintulu, Tatau, and Miri, and sections on Sarawak history, geography, ethnic groups, Chinese education, Chinese courts, early Chinese-Brooke relations, and economic records such as sago, gambier, pepper, revenue farming, fire, and agricultural policy (KTA, 1964, p. 88, pp. 98–185). The volume does not become local by ignoring Chaozhou. It localizes through movement among Chaozhou and Kuching. Although the ancestral region remains a cultural reference point, it is incorporated into Sarawak's institutional and historical narrative. Origin is recalled in order to strengthen the legitimacy of settlement.

This 100th story gains an additional local dimension through education. The volume includes a brief history of Teochew educational activities in Sarawak, sections on Hanjiang (韩江) culture and new tendencies in Sarawak Chinese education, and descriptions of Kuching High School (KTA, 1964, pp. 159–167, pp. 175–179, pp. 236–247). These pages show that even in 1964, Teochew identity was not narrated only through commerce, temples, and leaders. It was also connected to language, education, and future generations in Sarawak.

Thus, the 100th volume produces what may be called pioneer Teochewness. It is rooted in migration, adversity, male leadership, merchant support, association infrastructure, Chinese cultural continuity, and inter-dialect solidarity. Although its Kuching locality is real, it is described as the site where Teochew migrants and their descendants fulfilled the moral obligations of their Chaozhou origin.

In this regard, an early local orientation in Kuching Teochew identity is already evident in the 100th volume. Nonetheless, this locality is still encompassed by a Huaqiao register of migration, Chaozhou heritage, Chinese cultural continuity, and pioneer achievement. Teochew migrants and their descendants appear to have gained respectability in Kuching, while Chaozhou and China continue to serve as significant cultural and moral sources. Therefore, rather than starting localization from scratch, the 125th volume makes this local orientation clearer, more institutionalized, and more understandable to Sarawak's political and civic public.

4.2 125th Anniversary: Civic Institutionalization And Sarawak-Facing Legitimacy

Pioneer genealogy gives way to civic institutionalization in the 125th volume. A wider and more bureaucratic association can be seen in its contents. Official messages, prefaces, inscriptions, association history, registration certificate, office-bearer records, celebration documentation, sponsor lists, organizational charts, constitution, temple rules, cemetery materials, Kuching High School sections, education and welfare funds, youth-group records, Sarawak and Malaysian Teochew federations, and commercial introductions follow an opening sequence that starts with photographs of Sarawak's head of state, chief minister, and local political and Chinese community representatives (KTA, 1989). Whereas the 100th volume begins with a commemorative public focused on the association, the 125th volume begins by presenting the association to a local political and civic public.

The association is no longer portrayed only as a virtuous society derived from pioneers. It is also a legally recognized, property-holding, fund-managing, school-supporting, cemetery-administering, youth-organizing, and federated civic organization. Thus, the identity narrative of the 125th volume is both administrative and commemorative. It states that Kuching Teochews belong because they have institutions that benefit both members and the public.

The inclusion of Sarawak leaders and official messages makes this public legibility explicit. In the 100th volume, locality was largely the space of settlement and association building. In the 125th volume, locality becomes a state-facing relationship. The association presents itself to Sarawak officialdom and receives recognition in return. This is also visible in the early pages of the volume, where local Teochew and Chinese leaders dominate the congratulatory field before the reader reaches the association's own historical and administrative materials (KTA, 1989, pp. 1–46). This is not assimilation into the state, because the volume continues to foreground Teochew culture, temple worship, cemetery obligations, and Chinese education. It is civic translation instead. The

association translates Teochew community work into areas that the state can acknowledge like public service, education, welfare, discipline, property, and social harmony.

Constitutions outline the goals of collective activity and the limits of belonging. The parent association constitution, the introduction and constitution of the Teo Khiaw Club (潮侨俱乐部), and temple regulations are all included in the 125th volume. It also includes an organizational system chart, which is absent from the 100th volume (KTA, 1989, p. 76, p. 111, pp. 123–127). In later form, the association's aims include friendship, education, culture, recreation, welfare, cemetery provision, school maintenance, education and welfare funds, and property acquisition for association purposes (KTA, 2025, p. 156). Rules, forms, and institutional records receive considerable attention in the 125th volume, suggesting that these activities were already central to the association's self-representation. Identity manifests as both sentiment and governance.

Sections on temple and cemetery strengthen the argument. While cemetery administration links the association to death, memory, land, and settlement, the Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple links it to ritual origins. Chinese associations in Southeast Asia often serve these traditional purposes, but in the Kuching case they also localize Teochew identity. The history and rules of the Teochew cemetery receive exceptionally detailed space in the 125th volume (KTA, 1989, pp. 129–139). A cemetery in Sarawak turns migrant presence into a claim to land and genealogy, while a temple carried from ancestral religious practice becomes a landmark in Kuching. Burial is one of the strongest signs that a sojourning society has established itself locally.

Min Teck School (later renamed Kuching High School) history materials, student awards, education funds, and loan-scholarship arrangements are included in the association's commemorative archive in the 125th volume (KTA, 1989, pp. 140–165). Chinese self-perception, local politics, and colonial policy have all historically influenced Chinese education in Sarawak (Chew, 2011). In the association's volume, education serves as a link between Sarawakian civic engagement and Chineseness. It maintains language and culture while producing future professionals and citizens. In the 160th volume, Sarawak's premier clearly connects Kuching High School to talent development for Sarawak's future (KTA, 2025, pp. 4–5).

Another shift is the youth group. The 125th volume institutionalizes generational succession through substantial youth-group activity records, whereas the 100th volume focuses on seniors and office-holders (KTA, 1989, pp. 169–196). Youth organizations transform inheritance into administration. They recognize that respect for pioneers alone is insufficient to ensure continuity; newer members must be recruited, trained, and authorized. The 160th volume makes this issue clearer by warning of generational discontinuity and the need to attract young people into association work (KTA, 2025, p. 12).

Through Teochew federated structures, the 125th volume also extends beyond Kuching. It introduces the Federation of Teochew Associations Malaysia, the Sarawak Chinese Association Federation, the federation's holding company, its university

scholarship committee, and its youth section (KTA, 1989, pp. 197–209). This type of Chineseness differs from the broad Chinese unity of the 100th volume. Teochew associations are federated and dialect-specific, spanning districts, states, and national institutions. The association becomes a node in a network. Being situated within these larger Teochew circuits strengthens rather than weakens Kuching locality.

The 125th volume prioritizes locally oriented and association-centered materials, such as Sarawak leaders, local Chinese representatives, official messages, registration, organizational charts, constitutions, temple and cemetery management, education and welfare, youth-group records, and federation links. This contrasts with the 100th volume, where Chaozhou geography and history appear relatively early. Chaozhou history, Shantou (汕头) subjects, Teochew cuisine, dialect sayings, opera photos, Han Yu (韩愈) legends, folktales, and literary materials, which may be considered more specifically Chaozhou cultural material, are postponed to the latter pages (KTA, 1989, pp. 267–351). Therefore, after the organization first presented itself as a Kuching, Sarawak civic institution, traditional cuisine and Teochew literary forms emerge as cultural heritage resources to be protected rather than as the starting frame of identity.

The 125th volume therefore produces civic Teochewness. Its identity narrative is based on association law, official recognition, education, welfare, temple and cemetery administration, youth succession, and federation. Teochewness appears as a disciplined institutional culture capable of serving Sarawak society while preserving Teochew particularity.

As a result, the 125th volume represents a transitional point in the identity shift. It increasingly acknowledges Kuching, Sarawak as the community's institutional home, in contrast to the 100th volume's stronger overseas Chinese and China-oriented register. However, local belonging is not yet seen as completely obvious. Official acknowledgement, social service, education, property, cemetery management, disciplined governance, and involvement in Malaysian Teochew federation systems are still needed to prove it.

4.3 141st Anniversary: Archive, Demographics, And The Cultural Public

The association's cultural and archival aspects are strengthened by the 141st anniversary volume. Its contents include official messages, Sarawak Chinese dialect-group population ratios, a Kuching Teochew Association membership table, association history, constitution, education and welfare fund records, Kuching High School materials, cemetery management, pioneer commemorative pavilion materials, youth and women sections, the association newsletter, Chaozhou landscape and culture, Teochew criticism, books and paintings, drama, music, folk customs, paper-cutting, stone and wood carving, cuisine, tea, Malaysian Teochew Federation history, the 141st anniversary/federation conference program, international Teochew fellowship, member lists, and an afterword (KTA, 2005). Compared with the previous volumes, its association history is shorter and more schematic, highlighting important issues such as southern migration, belief,

population, temple, Soon Heng Kongsi, Law Kian Huat, administration, Teochew education, and Min Teck School (KTA, 2005, p. 27).

It should not be mistaken with weaker identity work due to its relative briefness. The association's history has been somewhat compressed, which may indicate that past institutional claims no longer needed to be as detailed, allowing for more focus on the population, membership, cultural knowledge, newsletters, women's and youth sections, and international Teochew networks. Therefore, identity work in the 141st volume may be interpreted as functioning through both expansion and compression.

The membership and demographic sections are important because they make identity countable. Earlier commemorative memory relied heavily on institutional lists, moral prefaces, and portraits. The 141st volume adds charts and population ratios, including membership numbers from 1990 to 2005 (KTA, 2005, p. 30). The Teochew community is placed within both the association's own membership base and the larger Sarawak Chinese demographic field. Counting here is not neutral. It asks readers to see Teochew identity as a measurable component of Sarawak Chinese plurality.

This supports Shamsul A. B.'s claim that identity is continuously discussed and institutionalised in Malaysia through both ordinary and authority-defined discourses (Shamsul A. B., 1996). The association's demographic tables reflect a larger Malaysian practice of structuring public life through designated communities, although they are not state census records. Teochew identity is revealed through population, membership, and category in the 141st volume.

Additionally, the 141st volume transforms cultural knowledge into a significant commemorative object. Sections on Chaozhou culture, landscape, drama, music, food, tea, and crafts suggest that the association now views cultural transmission as a task in its own right. The emphasis is no longer only on pioneers and institutions, but also on cultural repertoire. The archive is expanded from local institutional records to broader Chaozhou cultural memory through the inclusion of Qiaopi materials and images, Teochew opera promotion, Teochew music and arts, folk traditions, paper-cutting, carving, cuisine, and Gongfu tea (功夫茶) (KTA, 2005, pp. 106–112). Teochew identity is something to learn, display, and curate.

This is important because cultural inventory often appears when continuity feels uncertain. If everyone already inhabits a culture without anxiety, there is less need to divide that culture into named sections. The cultural portions of the 141st volume suggest that Teochew culture has to be arranged for readers, particularly younger or locally born readers whose connection to Chaozhou may be mediated through texts, images, performances, and association events rather than regular village life.

The institutional subject is further expanded by the inclusion of women and youth sections. The public memory of the 100th volume is predominantly elite and male. By the 141st volume, women and young people are recognized as organized members of the association. This suggests a shift from a pioneer-leader lineage to a more differentiated social institution, although it does not imply that the organization has become egalitarian

in a simple sense. Teochew identity is maintained through gendered and generational differences rather than being represented solely by senior male office-holders.

The newsletter section is another indication of archival self-consciousness. Newsletters make the community periodic by producing regular updates, notices, and records beyond anniversary events. The association bulletin first becomes visible as a commemorative object in the 141st volume of the corpus (KTA, 2005, p. 71). By including newsletter items in the anniversary volume, the association folds everyday institutional communication back into commemorative remembrance. It presents itself as an established association and as an ongoing publisher of community knowledge.

In addition, the 141st volume strengthens Teochew connections across local boundaries. It contains a brief history of the International Teochew Convention and materials on the Federation of Teochew Associations Malaysia (KTA, 2005, p. 144). These parts situate Kuching within a broader Teochew public that is not limited to Sarawak. In this case, the association does not choose between international and local identity. Kuching serves as the local ground; Chaozhou serves as an ancestral-cultural reference; Malaysia offers a federated framework; and worldwide Teochew networks offer status and recognition.

Thus, archival Teochewness is produced in the 141st volume. It depicts identity as a collection of documents, demographic data, cultural expressions, newsletters, organizational divisions, and federated relationships. It is less strictly state-facing than the 125th volume and more self-consciously documentary than the 100th. The association becomes curator of its own public.

At this point, Kuching Teochews are increasingly addressed as members of a local association and as part of Sarawak Chinese plurality. At the same time, Qiaopi materials, Chaozhou cultural studies, opera, music, food, tea, crafts, Malaysian federation history, and worldwide Teochew fellowship continue to demonstrate the affective connection between Chaozhou and China. Although local identity becomes stronger, cultural and ancestral ties are not erased; they are preserved and organized within the archive.

4.4 160th Anniversary: Heritage, Multiculturalism, And Overseas Circulation

The most direct statement on Teochew identity as public heritage appears in the 160th anniversary volume. Its title theme, "感恩 160・潮情永续" (Gratitude at 160: Sustaining Teochew Sentiment), links gratitude, affect, and continuity. Its contents list a comprehensive year-long program: Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple procession, thanksgiving ritual, Chinese New Year gathering, temple fair, celebration activities, Teochew business exhibition, Teochew opera cultural camp, Sarawak Teochew karaoke, Kuching Teochew historical photo exhibition, a talk titled "老会馆、新征程" (An Old Association, A New Journey), food and pastry demonstrations, "Teochew Night," Sarawak Teochew association fellowship, Sarawak River boating, anniversary banquet, "722 Independence Day / I Love Sarawak," the coming-of-age ritual, Kuching Food Festival Teochew food programming, moon worship, elder-respect birthday banquet, and

cultural cooperation with Singapore (KTA, 2025, p. 2). The volume's celebration archive begins with a temple procession and deity-centered ritual rather than a leader biography or constitution, visibly shifting association memory toward public religious performance.

The association no longer uses portraits, constitutions, or static cultural essays as its main means of presenting identity. Instead, Teochewness is portrayed as event culture: ritualized in temple and life-cycle activities, performed in public, taught in camps, prepared in demonstrations, sung in contests, presented in exhibitions, linked to Sarawak civic festivities, and disseminated through Singapore and Teochew-related networks.

This event culture is anchored in memory by the president's preface. It connects the association to the older Soon Heng Street site, the Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple on Carpenter Street, and the assertion that Teochew traces were present in Kuching before James Brooke's arrival in 1841 (KTA, 2025, p. 3). Because memory can fade, the preface emphasizes the importance of commemorative publications and anniversary events. This is a powerful statement: identity is not taken for granted. It has to be documented, commemorated, and shared.

The official messages then position the association within Sarawak development and multiculturalism. According to the message from the premier of Sarawak, Teochew forefathers came to Sarawak 160 years ago, overcame hardship, and contributed to politics, commerce, education, culture, and society. The message recalls the role of Sarawak's first Yang di-Pertua Negeri at the association building inauguration in 1963 and the 100thcelebration in 1964, and links the association's current planning, including Kuching High School and a proposed modern building, to Sarawak's 2030 development vision (KTA, 2025, pp. 4–5). Teochew identity is publicly valuable not only because it maintains the community's history, but also because it helps shape the state's future. Newspaper coverage, boating on the Sarawak River, and performances such as Iban and Yingge (英歌) dances are included in the celebration archive, showing how Teochew commemoration is staged within a broader Sarawak public culture rather than only inside an internal dialect-group audience.

Another official message from Sarawak portrays the association as a carrier of Teochew cultural tradition and as an actor in Malaysian multicultural exchange and community cohesion (KTA, 2025, p. 6). Teochew tea, opera, gongs and drums, music, embroidery, and language are highlighted in a tourism and culture message, but they are immediately connected to Sarawak's cultural diversity, racial harmony, tourism, and post-pandemic recovery (KTA, 2025, pp. 7–8). This is heritage multiculturalism: Teochew culture is valuable because it is unique and because it can be integrated into Sarawak's public image.

Another scale is introduced in the message from the China consulate. It characterizes the association as one of the earliest Chinese organizations in Sarawak, connects the Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple to the history of Sarawak Chinese society, and presents the association as a bridge for friendly interaction and the transmission of Chinese culture. Therefore, in the 160th volume, "China" is neither just the ancestral homeland nor the

political command center. It is one voice among several. In contrast, “Sarawak” is more than just the association's home or past. It serves as the intercultural and civic framework for the public recognition of Teochew identity. Teochew culture is transformed into the language of contribution, harmony, tourism, variety, and state development through statements from Sarawak state leaders.local politicians, Malaysian Teochew organizations, Chinese association leaders, and overseas Teochew cultural groups all appear. Congratulatory messages from Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, and other Teochew networks, including English messages and translations, further make the volume a multilingual archive of overseas Teochew recognition. This multiplicity is central to the volume’s Chinese overseas character.

Both the official message from the Sarawak and China consulate are work differently. Cultural and symbolic recognition is provided by the Chinese consulate. It shows the organization as a symbol of the larger Chinese community abroad and a carrier of Chinese heritage. The Sarawak government gives civic and local recognition. It shows the association as a regional organization that supports public culture, education, welfare, intercultural harmony, and Sarawak's future development. The 160th volume is important because it places these two forms of recognition together. Kuching Teochew identity is therefore recognized both as Chinese cultural inheritance and as Sarawak local belonging.

The 160th volume also updates the association's organizational self-description. Its constitution continues to define the association through friendship, education, culture, recreation, welfare, cemetery provision, school maintenance, education and welfare funds, and property acquisition (KTA, 2025, p. 156). The volume also makes internal divisions such as property, education, culture, temple, welfare, public relations, youth, and women more visible. The festivalization of Teochew heritage does not replace older institutional functions. Temple, cemetery, school, welfare, property, and public relations remain the infrastructure beneath public culture.

The section titled 砂拉越的潮州人 (Sarawak Teochew) gives the 160th volume a historical synthesis. It describes Teochew people as residents of Chaoshan and their descendants at home and abroad; narrates migration from coastal Chaoshan under late Qing and early Republican hardship; places Teochew presence in Sarawak before or around the early Brooke period; identifies Kuching streets associated with Teochew commerce; and describes trades in groceries, local products, sago, import-export, pepper, and gambier (KTA, 2025, p. 154). It links the Hiang Thian Siang Ti temple to the carrying of ancestral religious practice into Kuching and describes the early association as emerging from ritual organization, mutual aid, welfare, burial, and education (KTA, 2025, pp. 154–155).

This history is not new in every detail, but its placement in the 160th volume is important. It appears after the celebration archive and before the constitution, organizational tables, school and welfare sections, temple records, federation materials, maps, museum-like object pages, scholarly essays, demographic data, and cultural essays.

The volume moves from event to institution to archive to culture. In doing so, it presents Teochew identity as a total social world.

The later cultural essays deepen this move. The 160th volume includes essays on temples, cemeteries, overseas Chinese social construction, Teochew leadership organizations, Sarawak and Kuching Chinese dialect-group populations, Malaysian Chinese cultural resilience, Teochew Xianshi music（弦诗乐）, Qingming and Hanshi（清明和寒食）, Teochew percussion music, food molds, and art works (KTA, 2025). Some of these materials are scholarly; others are journalistic or heritage-oriented. The volume creates a usable knowledge archive rather than a single academic genre.

Food offers a particularly good illustration of layered localization. The essay on kueh (粿) molds describes peach-shaped cakes and their meanings, notes Sarawak terminology such as "rice wrapped in rice," and recounts a story of collecting wooden molds from Kuching, Kuala Lumpur, and online markets. It also connects Teochew ritual food to offerings for deities and ancestors (KTA, 2025, p. 362). The object is simultaneously Sarawakian, Chaozhou, familial, diasporic, collectible, and worthy of heritage attention. A mold transported to Nanyang（南洋）becomes an artifact of both continuity and separation.

Music functions in a similar way. The Teochew percussion section explains historical forms, performance contexts, instruments, ritual settings, and international circulation (KTA, 2025, pp. 345–363). It emphasizes that Teochew musical genres travelled with overseas Chinese and connects sound to memories of one's birthplace. This material supports contemporary cultural camps and performances in the context of the 160th anniversary. The association is recontextualizing music for Sarawakian audiences and international Teochew exchange, rather than simply preserving it.

The "722 Independence Day / I Love Sarawak" event is particularly revealing. The Teochew association is positioned as part of Sarawak civic identity. The phrase links Sarawakian patriotism to Teochew identity without weakening Teochewness. This is the most overt example of layered localization: a Teochew association continues to organize temple processions, Teochew opera, food, language, and ancestral customs while also celebrating Sarawak as home.

The 160th anniversary volume thus produces heritage Teochewness. It is event-based, multilingual, state-recognized, culturally pedagogical, tourism-compatible, transnationally connected, and future-oriented. It gives the association a role as guardian of tradition and partner in Sarawak's development narrative.

Compared with the earlier volumes, the 160th anniversary volume no longer organizes Teochew identity through a China-first or overseas Chinese frame. Culture and history are largely localized through Kuching and Sarawak: temple processions, public rituals, local media coverage, food demonstrations, cultural camps, Sarawak civic celebration, Iban dance, Yingge performance, multilingual congratulatory messages, and overseas Teochew networks. China remains present, but as one layer within a wider field

of Sarawak, Malaysian, and overseas Teochew belonging rather than as the dominant center of the narrative. By this point, the volume presents Kuching Teochews as local ethnic Chinese: they remain culturally Chinese and Teochew, but their social home and civic location are clearly Kuching and Sarawak.

The greater reliance of the 160th volume on event photography, media coverage, and documentary assemblage may also reflect contemporary editorial practices and the availability of contributors; it should not be attributed solely to identity change.

5.0 Layered Localization And The Politics Of Teochewness

Across the four volumes, Kuching Teochew identity changes in form, audience, and scale. Yet the change is not best described as a movement away from Chineseness. Chineseness itself changes. In the 100th volume, Chineseness is pioneer morality, commercial leadership, dialect solidarity, Chinese cultural continuity, and insertion into early Sarawak history. In the 125th volume, it becomes civic institutionality: state-facing messages, registration, organizational charts, schools, funds, rules, temples, cemeteries, youth organizations, and federations. In the 141st volume, it becomes archive and culture: numbers, membership, bulletins, heritage categories, women's and youth sections, Qiaopi memory, and international connections. In the 160th volume, it becomes public heritage: temple processions, festivals, exhibitions, tourism, media attention, youth education, Sarawak civic identity, China consular recognition, and international Teochew circulation.

As a result, the four commemorative books correspond to four moments in the association's identity narration. The 100th volume is an example of an early localizing Huaqiao moment, where Teochews continue to describe themselves as overseas Chinese whose moral and cultural values are still connected to Chaozhou and China, while also situating Kuching and Sarawak in the narrative of association building, education, trade, and settlement. The 125th anniversary volume represents a more overt shift toward local identity, as Kuching and Sarawak become the community's institutional home, although this belonging still has to be shown through organizational legitimacy and civic engagement. Using membership information, demographic figures, newsletters, cultural inventories, and federation networks, the 141stanniversary volume documents the community's trajectory in an archival manner. A more stable self-understanding is presented in the 160th anniversary volume: Kuching Teochews are local people and ethnic Chinese from Sarawak who preserve Teochew heritage while identifying Kuching and Sarawak as home.

Ang cautions against viewing diaspora as a straightforward assurance of common Chineseness (Ang, 2001). The Kuching materials confirm this warning. The association does not portray Chineseness as a singular transnational essence. It consistently specifies Chineseness through Teochewness, and Teochewness through institutions. The

publications do not, however, give up on the idea of Chinese cultural inheritance. They use it, interpret it, and integrate it with other identities.

Being Chinese outside China has historically been diverse and influenced by local conditions, according to Wang Gungwu's research on Chinese identities in Southeast Asia (Wang, 1988). This variation is visible at the level of institutional print in the Kuching Teochew publications. Across the volumes, "China" takes on several meanings, including ancestral geography, civilizational culture, lost or remembered homeland, site of Chaozhou culture, source of ritual practice, global Teochew connection during the reform era, and consular voice. None of these meanings fully captures what it means to be Chinese and Teochew.

Sarawak and the association have a similarly layered relationship. Sarawak first emerges as a settlement frontier, a place of hardship, and a field of Chinese commercial leadership; then as a state authority and civic field; then as an institutional and demographic context; and finally, as a multicultural heritage space and development project. Teochew contributions to Sarawak's culture, society, education, economy, politics, tourism, harmony, and 2030 aspirations are frequently linked in the official messages of the 160th volume. These are more than compliments. They demonstrate which types of minority cultural identity are publicly legible in contemporary Sarawak.

This has implications for research on overseas Chinese communities. The Kuching Teochew publications link Kuching to Chaozhou, Sarawak to Malaysia, temple ritual to heritage tourism, Chinese associations to state multiculturalism, and local memory to overseas Teochew circulation. They demonstrate that a straightforward comparison between homeland attachment and local assimilation is insufficient to characterize overseas Chinese identity. It is created by institutional practices that make several scales of belonging available at the same time.

The idea of layered localization helps avoid two common reductions. The first is the assimilationist reduction, which holds that local belonging rises as ancestral identity weakens. The Kuching case demonstrates that the reverse may happen: ancestral culture may become more prominent when it is localized through public festivals, school initiatives, and heritage events. The second is the diasporic reduction, where overseas Chinese identity is seen mostly in relation to China. The Kuching case demonstrates that Chaozhou and China matter, but they are only one part of a larger field that also includes local business sponsorship, Singaporean cultural organizations, Sarawak state politics, Malaysian Chinese association networks, and Kuching urban memory.

Layered localization also helps interpret continuity. Temple, cemetery, school, welfare, membership, property, and publication are recurring functions of the association that continue across the volumes. What changes is how these functions are sequenced and narrated. They demonstrate pioneer sacrifice and commercial respectability in one moment, civic legitimacy in another, archival data in a third, and public heritage in a fourth. Identity transformation occurs through re-accenting durable institutions.

Lastly, the volumes reveal an anxiety of succession. Cultural pedagogy, education funding, and youth organizations are all included in the 125th, 141st, and 160th volumes. The 160th volume is particularly clear about youth involvement, cultural camps, coming-of-age customs, and the need to prevent generational discontinuity. This implies that heritage performance is a reaction to perceived loss as well as a celebration. The association stages Teochew culture in order to make it inheritable.

6.0 Conclusion

The commemorative publications of the Kuching Teochew Association demonstrate identity as an institutional accomplishment. They do more than document an already-existing community. Through page order, genre, image, list, message, table, and archive, they compose the community. Across the 100th, 125th, 141st, and 160th anniversary volumes, the association repeatedly asks what it means to be Teochew in Kuching, and each volume provides a historically specific response.

The 100th volume highlights pioneers, merchants, Law Kian Huat and Yishun Kongsi, deceased leaders, present office-holders, association buildings, Chaozhou knowledge, Sarawak local history, Chinese education, and Chinese cultural continuity. It still uses a Huaqiao register for the most part. The 125th volume shows a shift toward local identity by emphasizing state recognition, registration, organizational structures, constitutions, temple and cemetery governance, education, welfare, youth, and federated legitimacy. The 141st volume transforms the association into an archive of demographic information, membership, cultural knowledge, newsletters, women's and youth organizations, Qiaopi memory, and worldwide Teochew connections; it records the community's past development and future direction. In the 160th volume, Teochew identity is remade as a local ethnic Chinese identity through official communications, recognition by the Chinese consulate, deity procession, event culture, food, opera, music, ritual, exhibitions, media visibility, civic celebration, and Sarawak multicultural belonging.

The resulting identity is a shift from Huaqiao self-understanding to local ethnic Chinese self-recognition rather than a break from Teochewness. It is Kuching Teochew, a multi-layered formation that is constantly reorganized through Chaozhou lineage, Chinese cultural inheritance, Sarawak belonging, Malaysian civic affiliation, and overseas Teochew networks. The association becomes local by letting Teochewness function, symbolize, and persist in Kuching rather than by abandoning it.

The fact that variations across the four commemorative publications cannot be exclusively ascribed to changes in collective identity is one of the study's limitations. As edited institutional publications, their format, focus, and content may also represent the association's priorities and activities at specific times, as well as the resources available and the knowledge, passions, and editorial preferences of specific editors and

contributors. These elements cannot be completely separated from changes in institutional self-representation since this research mainly concentrates on the published commemorative volumes and does not rebuild the editorial decision-making process through interviews with editors or editorial committee members. Therefore, rather than asserting that every textual variation directly relates to a shift in the Kuching Teochew community as a whole, the argument of layered localisation should be read as an interpretation of shifting forms of commemorative self-representation over the four volumes.

There is more to this case than one association. It demonstrates how small commemorative print archives can shed light on important issues in Chinese overseas studies: how institutions tell stories of belonging, how ethnic identities become civic resources, how heritage responds to loss, and how trans-local Chinese connections are created outside metropolitan centers. Lists, photographs, tables, and greetings are not incidental to identity, according to the Kuching Teochew volumes. They are among the methods through which identity is made.

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