

## Research Article

# A Study of the Current Position of Traditional Chinese Hanging Lanterns Among Young Chinese

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**Abstract.**

Traditional Chinese lanterns were invented during the Eastern Han Dynasty and were originally intended to be sources of light. To most Chinese people, traditional Chinese lanterns represent joy, good fortune & social status. However, they are decreasing in popularity and most Malaysian young Chinese regard them as a dispensable decorative item for festivals. The usage of traditional Chinese hanging lantern is on the decline – studies have shown that the advent of modern lighting technology has thrown the production and useage of traditional Chinese lantern into crisis and turned it into an obsolete product. Through content analysis, researchers evaluated the current situation and explored the issues surrounding traditional Chinese hanging lanterns among young Chinese people. Results indicated that Malaysian young Chinese gradually lost interest in traditional Chinese hanging lanterns due to the lack of enthusiasm towards inherited Chinese culture and an increase in available exotic lighting accessories. This study may serve as a supplementary reference in the research and development of new cultural products, providing other researchers with a clearer direction to make their work easier and faster.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese lanterns, Ramadan lanterns, anous, Kandeel

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Current Chinese hanging lanterns evolved from the existence of Chinese paper lanterns invented during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD - 220 AD). They were intended to be a steady light source in the dark. Initially, paper, silk, or animal skin was used to surround an open flame to prevent it from being extinguished by the wind. Eventually, they became the lanterns that we see today.

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Lanterns were often used in ceremonies to worship Buddha. Chinese people believe that lanterns not only symbolize joy and can bring good fortune, but also represent social status and national pride.

At present, Malaysian young Chinese only hang traditional Chinese lanterns at the front door during festivals, celebrations, or other important occasions to invoke joy and happiness, and pray for good fortune. These lanterns are taken down quickly after the celebration ends, and then put up once more during the next festive season even though traditional Chinese hanging lanterns can be used as decorations in places like Chinese assembly halls or Chinese restaurants.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Religion in Malaysia

Malaysia has a multi-ethnic society that practices freedom of religion. The main religions in Malaysia include Islam - 63.7%, Buddhism - 17.7%, Hinduism - 6%, followed by Christianity and other folk or traditional religions - 12.6% [1].

Islam is Malaysia's official religion and under the law, all Malays must be Muslims [2] [3]. Although other races are given freedom of religion, Buddhists in Malaysia are still mostly ethnic Chinese [4], making up around 77.6% of Malaysian Buddhists. Meanwhile, Indians represent around 86.9% of Malaysian Hindus [1].

Malaysian Chinese and Indians are still influenced by their respective religions in terms of traditional rituals or the employment of certain attitudes in life. At certain celebrations and many important occasions, all ethnics will insist on following their religion's etiquette or traditional customs.

### 2.2. Lanterns in Malay culture

Lanterns were often hung in mosques and palaces in the Islamic ages as a source of lighting. Ramadan lanterns, or fanous are perhaps the most significant lanterns in Islam, such that they have now become an important decoration used during Ramadan celebrations and manifestations worldwide (see Figure 1 a). The 'Ramadan Lantern' was invented in Egypt, and the word 'fanous' originated from 'hanos', which means 'lantern' or 'light' in Greek [5] [6].

Fanous occupy an important part in Islamic history. For Muslims, fanous are not merely lighting implements or decorative objects for children, homes, and workplaces, they are part of a tradition that has spanned centuries [7].

### 2.3. Lanterns in Indian culture

Diwali, or Deepavali, is the festival of light celebrated by Hindus or devotees of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth [8]. Kandeels are an indispensable decoration during this festival [9] [10]. Kandeel means 'nested light' and is sometimes known as 'Goodu Deepa' in Southern India's Kannada language. Traditionally, these are made of wooden sticks and papers. For Hindus, the kandeel is like a 'flag' and is essential in welcoming Diwali and giving Hindus a sense of home and family.

During Diwali, Hindus hang kandeel high upon their doors as an invitation for ancestral souls to return and celebrate with the family. This is also why the kandeel is also known as 'lantern of the sky' or 'Akasha Deepa' in Sanskrit (see Figure 1 b) [11].

### 2.4. Lanterns in Chinese culture

Chinese lanterns, or 'Denglong' (see Figure 1 c), were originally invented to prevent a flame from being extinguished. As such, they were commonly used as light sources. During the early Han Dynasty, people hung red lanterns on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month to create a festive atmosphere and to symbolize national and societal prosperity [12]. Ethnic-style lantern riddles were written on the hanging lanterns to show ingenuity and the Han laborers' yearning for a better life. The process created an interesting user experience and reflected the interactions between people and product [13].

Lighted lanterns provide colourful visual effects that bolster the festive atmosphere, thus inducing positive and auspicious feelings. As such, lanterns are often used in Chinese festivals, celebrations, or as interior decorations and items of worship in temples.



**Figure 1:** (a) Malay fanous, (b) Indian kandeel and (c) Chinese "denglong" Source: (a) [14], (b) <https://imagewriter.com/kandil-a-spotlight-on-indian-lanterns/> (c) <http://www.fj.chinanews.com.cn/>.

### 3. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is one of the qualitative research methods used to analyse textual data. This method, used since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Scandinavia [15] [16], aims 'to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study' [17].

The researcher conducted analyses and studies on the relevant information and materials from various disseminated and recorded content, such as newspapers, journals and other published materials; the process changed from 'quality' to 'quantity', then inferred qualitative changes from the quantitative changes in content. Eventually, a conclusion that had equal emphasis on 'quality' and 'quantity' was drawn. Content analysis allowed the researcher to analyse and draw conclusions from materials in their literature review, thus illuminating current issues and problems that led to the decreasing popularity of traditional Chinese hanging lanterns among Malaysian young Chinese.

### 4. PROBLEMS & FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Comparison on the significances of fanous, kandeel and deng-long

The origins of fanous are closely related to Islamic culture and beliefs. Many historical records and stories associated with the holy month illustrate the beautiful origins of fanous. In addition, the Quran mentions Allah's light in conjunction with lanterns, highlighting the importance of lanterns in Islam [18].

In Hinduism, kandeels are also called 'lanterns of the sky'. They are essential in welcoming the festival of light, Diwali, and giving Hindus a sense of belonging.

In contrast, Chinese lanterns were used mainly as a lighting tool. Initially, the brilliance of lighted lanterns showed positive energy and Chinese people considered them decorations that conveyed a propitious message, which led to their use in religious celebrations. Eventually, lanterns became ornaments that enhanced the festive atmosphere and created a sense of abundance (see table 1).

TABLE 1: Justification on the Significance of Fanous, Kandeel and Denglong.

Ethnic name and of lantern	Name derived from cultural beliefs	Usage	Festival and cultural significance	Current circumstances
Malay (Fanous/ Fanoos)	Ramadan lantern	In houses and shops during Ramadan	Muslims worldwide consider the fanous an important part and sign of the holy month [6] [5]. It is also a symbol for an important anniversary [19].	People willing to buy it to decorate houses and shops [14].
Indian (Kandeel/ Kandil)	<i>Akasha Deepa</i> (Lantern of the sky)	In front of houses during Diwali festival	Hindus place kandeels in high places to serve as an invitation and homing beacon for ancestral souls [11].	The demand for kandeel among Indians is higher than in previous years [20].
	Diwali Lantern		Kandeel is an art worth cherishing. It gives people a feeling of home and acts as 'flag' to celebrate Diwali [20].	
Chinese (Denglong/Tang)	Nil.	Infront of houses, balconies, and shops during Chinese New Year	Nil.	Unpopular and slowly becoming obsolete [21] [22].

#### 4.2. Current circumstances of traditional Chinese lanterns in Malaysia

Most exotic decorative lanterns are sold in major shopping centres or home accessories outlets. In contrast, traditional Chinese lanterns can only be purchased from certain old Chinese stores. In general, Malaysian Chinese only hang traditional Chinese lanterns in places of worship, during cultural activities or festivals to invoke a joyous atmosphere and hope for prosperity. Lanterns are not hung inside or outside the house during regular daily life.

Compared to traditional Chinese hanging lanterns, most exotic lanterns from overseas are rich in colour, more diverse in style and size and are better suited as interior decorations or ornaments for home furnishings in modern living.

Traditional Chinese hanging lanterns are less popular compared to angpows during Chinese New Year. Additionally, demand for these traditional Chinese lanterns deteriorates every year [23]. The advent of modern lighting, science and technology have brought a multitude of new changes to the way Malaysians use lighting sources. This directly affects the demand for traditional Chinese lantern culture. Moreover, the inexpensive nature of handmade lantern products and their limited usage scenarios has contributed to the crisis that threatens to the continuation of traditional Chinese lantern culture [13].

As times evolve, traditional Chinese lanterns have decreased in popularity and are slowly descending into obsolescence. At present, these lanterns are only seen in temples, specific stores, during weddings and funerals, or ceremonies that follow traditional ancient rituals [21] [22].

Meanwhile, young Malaysians are adopting foreign cultures and habits into their lifestyle [24], eschewing traditional values in favour of more contemporary ones; it appears that Malaysian young Chinese have lost confidence in Chinese culture, which in turn leads to a decline in their recognition of traditional Chinese culture [25].

### 4.3. Meme on traditional Chinese hanging lanterns

A meme refers to the transfer of ideas via non-hereditary methods. People imitate each other, spreading ideas or thoughts in cultural fields such as language, beliefs, customs, and behaviours, thus passing concepts from generation to generation [26] [27].

The lantern's original purpose was to provide a convenient and stable lighting tool in dark conditions. Chinese people would eventually begin to hang red lanterns during the first lunar month to symbolize reunions and to create a festive atmosphere [12] [28].

In some of Malaysia's local languages, the pronunciation of 'Tiandeng' (add lantern) is very similar to a phrase that means 'add people', which indicates a flourishing family. As such, people believed lighting lanterns would bring prosperity and thus, lanterns were classified as auspicious decorative objects [21].

In contrast to the Muslim fanous and the Hindu kandeel, there are no records that indicate that traditional Chinese lanterns are directly related to Chinese cultural beliefs, nor do their names contain any significance derived from the culture or festivals.

## 5. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Traditional Chinese hanging lanterns and most of the exotic hanging lanterns meet the basic requirements for their intended usage; they often include a buckle for hanging, a setting within the lantern for a light-emitting object, and a light-transmitting lantern body. However, lanterns differ in the colours used, the diversification of forms, the volume or size, the materials used, and surface designs. These factors have created a variety of visual effects and uses for traditional Chinese and exotic hanging lanterns.

With the changing of the times, Malaysian Chinese youth are often influenced by Western cultures and contemporary values; they ignore the importance of traditional values, thus causing their awareness and recognition of Chinese culture to gradually decline [25]. Similarly, most Malaysians prefer contemporary products and minimalist designs over traditional designs [29].

The factors in the design and creation of traditional Chinese hanging lanterns are often treated quite conservatively, which also leads to a rigid and unchanging appearance. This could influence the preferences of Malaysian young Chinese, and affect their usage of traditional Chinese hanging lanterns.

When designing products with cultural elements for Malaysians, product designers should consider integrating the identity and essence of traditional culture with current Malaysian preferences and aesthetics. Doing so will not only enable the creation of contemporary products that are more well-received among Malaysians, but also allow the continuation of traditional culture.

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