

## **Pekan Cina, Pekan Melayu: A World Of Mutual Respect**

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ALOR SETAR (Bernama) -- Two kilometres from the Alor Setar city centre is an archway that indicates to visitors that they were about to enter a place where two cultures converged.

The words 'Muhibah', 'Pekan Cina' (Chinese Town) and 'Pekan Melayu' (Malay Town) are displayed on the arch that is built across Persiaran Sultan Abdul Halim. The arch, erected by the Kedah Chinese Chamber of Commerce, was to celebrate the solidarity between the Chinese and Malay communities in Alor Setar.

Beyond the arch, Jalan Seberang Perak runs through both towns, with Pekan Cina located on its left and Pekan Melayu on the other side.

Pekan Cina and Pekan Melayu are over 150 years old and were a busy business hub, back in the day. Today, business is still on as usual with shops lined up on both sides of the street, but is perhaps not as lively as it used to be.

Villages, shops, and houses of worships of different faiths stand side by side, a testament of the diversity of the population there.

THE MODERNISATION OF KEDAH

Pengerusi Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia Cawangan Kedah, Datuk Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof

ketika di ditemui mengenai Sejarah Pekan Melayu dan Pekan Cina baru-baru ini.  
--FotoBERNAMA (2018) HAK CIPTA TERPELIHARA

Many of the shops along the area dated back to the beginning of the 19th century and bore the architectural detail synonymous to that period.

Kedah historian Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof said the towns were opened during the rule of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Mukarram Shah, the 24th Sultan of Kedah who reigned from 1854 to 1879.

“He was the pioneer for the modernisation of Kedah. Many Chinese were brought into the state during his rule.

“He allocated two areas for trade for the Chinese and Malays, which we today know as Pekan Cina and Pekan Melayu,” the 86-year-old told Bernama when met, recently.

Mural Tunku Abdul Rahman menghiasi bangunan lama Pekan Melayu. --FotoBERNAMA  
HAK CIPTA TERPELIHARA

Wan Shamsudin, who is also the chairman of the Kedah chapter of the Malaysian Historical Society, said that Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin had also appointed a Chinese leader dubbed “kapitan” to look after the business and welfare of the Chinese community in the state.

The Chinese were also brought in to work at the royal farms where coffee, pepper and cloves were planted. The farms were in Bukit Pinang, which at the time was the capital city of Kedah before it was changed to Alor Setar in the mid-18th century.

“Kedah produced rice, tin ore, coffee and spices which were exported to the Nusantara

region at the time," he explained.

Wan Shamsudin said that both towns were treasure troves of history and therefore needed to be protected and preserved.

## A TOWN FOR ALL

The changing times have caused many of the traders to shift their businesses to bigger cities. However, the businesses that remained in both towns are still attracting a steady stream of customers from among the locals.

Despite the division of the towns by race, many Chinese businesses have today opened up in Pekan Melayu due to the dwindling number of Malay businesses in the area.

Local resident Fariza Ahmad Yasifon, 39, believed that both towns should go by one name – Pekan Muhibbah. She thought it better reflected the peace and harmony of its multiracial population.

"I remember going to the shops with my late father when I was younger. The shop owners were so warm and friendly. Today, I would go with my mother and be received with the same friendliness and warmth," she said.

Four shops within the towns were her favourite, all of which sold tableware and kitchen supplies.

"Some of these shops still sell tableware with water spinach flower motifs like the ones they used in the olden days. The shops here are family businesses and as such are passed down

from one generation to the next. The best part about shopping here is that you can haggle with the sellers.

“Despite the towns being called Pekan Melayu and Pekan Cina, you can still find a shop selling saree around here,” she said.

Tobacco trader Cheong Wooi Kean, 52, said that the residents of both towns were close knit and knew each other well.

“We have even planned to celebrate the eve of the National Day together,” he said.

Meanwhile, Lin Mei Lian, 42, who sells plastic items at Pekan Melayu said she always felt welcomed and at ease conducting business there because the locals respected everyone, regardless of race or religion.

“I really hope that our children can continue the culture of mutual respect that we have been practising here so that we can continue to live in peace and unity,” she said.

## TOURIST ATTRACTION

The locals are also asking the state government to invest in beautifying the towns' landscape and to provide more recreational facilities.

The State Youth and Sports, Culture, Art and Heritage, Entrepreneurship Development and NGO Committee Chairman Mohd Asmirul Anuar Aris believes that Pekan Cina and Pekan Melayu both have the potential to be developed into a tourist attraction.

“The development of both towns can be a symbol of interracial unity in the state. This is one of the items on the agenda of the state government in its effort to boost the tourism industry outside of Langkawi,” he added.

The side of two shophouses in Pekan Cina – one of which from the prewar age – have been painted with murals depicting the current prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

Mohd Asmirul said that more murals and paintings would be featured on the walls of the shophouses in both towns as a means of tourist attraction.

“What is most important is to preserve the uniqueness of these heritage buildings as they carry with them each a unique history,” he said.

Translated by Sakina Mohamed

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