

The Ancestral Bridge: A Framework for Shared Cultural Futures between Malaysia's Orang Asli and the Bulang of Yunnan, China

Jambatan Warisan: Kerangka Kerja untuk Masa Depan Budaya Bersama antara Orang Asli Malaysia dan Etnik Bulang Yunnan, China

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cultural practices of the Semai and Bulang ethnic communities using the "Indigeneity as Practice" concept, which defines Indigeneity as a dynamic performance rather than a fixed identity. With the goal of showcasing indigenous agency in the context of state-led modernity and promoting global discussion on cultural preservation, it draws attention to how Chinese and Malaysian state development has affected local traditions. The study uses "The Ancestral Bridge" as a comparative framework to examine how these groups preserve their identities. This qualitative study investigates cultural commonalities and shared futures between Yunnan's indigenous inhabitants and Malaysia's Orang Asli. It focuses on document analysis as a data source, collecting and synthesising indigenous rights material from Malaysia, China, and Southeast Asian countries, such as speeches, research reports, and credible news sources. The findings focus on thematic synthesis and the creation of a conceptual framework. The study focuses on the Semai and Bulang tribes of Southwest China and Southeast Asia, highlighting their indigenous agency and modernity. Both tribes have addressed socioeconomic issues by combining traditional institutions with capitalist economies, preserving socio-cultural autonomy and claiming control over their futures while expressing their indigenous identity. The "Ancestral Bridge" framework highlights the connection between Malaysian Orang Asli and Yunnan indigenous communities, focusing on their common struggle for indigenous identity. It promotes transnational knowledge-sharing networks to foster a collaborative cultural future. By working together on traditional tea planting and sustainable agroforestry, these indigenous communities can enhance their environmental practices and achieve greater economic independence.

Keywords: Shared culture; Malaysia; China; Orang Asli; Ethnic minorities

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji amalan budaya yang dilakukan oleh komuniti etnik Semai dan Bulang dengan menggunakan konsep "Identiti sebagai Amalan", yang mentakrifkan identiti sebagai persembahan dinamik dan bukannya identiti yang kekal. Ia menarik perhatian kepada bagaimana pertumbuhan ekonomi di China dan Malaysia telah memberi kesan kepada tradisi tempatan. Tujuannya adalah untuk menunjukkan agensi penduduk asli dalam konteks kemodenan yang dipimpin oleh negara dan mendorong perbincangan antarabangsa mengenai pemeliharaan budaya. Untuk mengkaji bagaimana kumpulan-kumpulan ini mengekalkan identiti mereka, kajian ini menggunakan "Jambatan Warisan" sebagai rangka kerja perbandingan. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada mengumpul dan menyintesis bahan hak asasi penduduk asal dari Malaysia, China, dan negara-negara Asia Tenggara, seperti ucapan, laporan penyelidikan, dan sumber berita yang boleh dipercayai, dan menggunakan dokumen sebagai sumber data. Melalui sintesis tematik dan penciptaan rangka kerja konseptual, hasil kajian ditunjukkan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa penggabungan institusi tradisional dengan ekonomi kapitalis, mengekalkan autonomi sosiobudaya dan menuntut kawalan ke atas masa depan mereka sambil mengekalkan identiti pribumi mereka adalah cara kedua-dua puak menangani isu sosioekonomi. Dengan menumpukan pada perjuangan bersama mereka untuk identiti pribumi, rangka kerja "Jambatan Warisan" menekankan hubungan antara masyarakat Orang Asli Malaysia dan masyarakat pribumi Yunnan. Ia memupuk masa depan budaya kerjasama dengan menggalakkan rangkaian perkongsian pengetahuan di seluruh dunia. Komuniti pribumi ini boleh meningkatkan amalan alam sekitar dan mencapai kebebasan ekonomi dengan bekerjasama dalam penanaman teh tradisional dan agroforestri lestari.

Kata kunci: Budaya bersama; Malaysia; China; Orang Asli; Etnik minoriti

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century indigenous discourse is progressively rejecting western-centric, colonial frameworks in favour of cooperative approaches that prioritise shared cultural epistemologies, ecological stewardship, and self-determination. Indigenous communities around the world are using digital platforms and cross-border dialogues to reclaim their sovereignty as globalisation speeds up environmental deterioration and cultural assimilation. This changing environment acknowledges the worldwide interdependence of indigenous populations' resilience strategies and the difficulties they encounter (Smith, 2021).

The Semai of Peninsular Malaysia and the Bulang of Yunnan Province, China, are two unique indigenous communities that provide an interesting comparative lens for this study. Both the Austroasiatic-speaking Semai, traditional inhabitants of tropical rainforests, and the Bulang, who live in the mountainous, tea-rich highlands of southwest China, have deeply ingrained animistic traditions that are entwined with their natural environments and produce profoundly resonant cultural and ecological philosophies throughout Asia (Nicholas, 2023).

Despite the rich cultural heritage of the Semai and Bulang, dominant national discourses frequently marginalise modern indigenous identities, portraying them as static, historical, or backward. Both the Semai and the Bulang suffer enormous socioeconomic pressures, ranging from state-driven development and resource extraction to forced assimilation programs that jeopardise their ancestral lands. Examining how these communities actively use indigenous knowledge with contemporary technologies and preserve cultural continuity in the face of ongoing state-level change is therefore an urgent academic and social obligation (Gomes, 2019).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study specifically examines how contemporary indigeneity is defined by indigenous cultural practices for the Semai and Bulang ethnic groups, as well as the significant effects of Chinese and Malaysian state developmental objectives on these indigenous customs. The creation of shared strategies for their cultural futures is emphasised. In showing how indigenous agency negotiates state-led modernisation and ultimately promotes transnational discourse on heritage preservation, the primary purpose of this study is to develop a comparative framework, known as "The Ancestral Bridge," to investigate how the Semai of Peninsular Malaysia and the Bulang of Yunnan, China, perform and maintain their identities.

Furthermore, the choice of the Semai in Malaysia and the Bulang in Yunnan, China, as study subjects provides a strong empirical testing platform for the "Indigeneity as Practice" framework, as both groups contradict conventional stereotypes of the Orang Asli as detached from the world. Instead, they actively negotiate their identities at the convergence of large-scale state-led development and environmental issues. The Semai live in Peninsular Malaysia's modern landscape, while the Bulang reside along the ancient Tea Horse Road (Freeman and Ahmed, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu (1977) and Ortner's (1984) unique contribution to this particular comparative study lies in their subversion of geographical determinism. They present the egalitarian social structures of the Semai and the tea ceremony of the Blang as active, strategic survival "performances" against governmental power, thus revealing an "ancestral bridge." This bridge demonstrates that a shared cultural future is actively constructed through agency and provides a transnational framework for understanding the agency of indigenous peoples in the modern world.

THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

It is believed that there are over 476 million indigenous people, divided into around 5000 groups and dispersed throughout 90 nations globally, accounting for approximately 6.2% of the world's population (FAO, 2026). They practise distinctive traditions and retain social, cultural, economic, and political qualities that differ from those of the dominant societies in which they dwell. They are the descendants of those who lived in a country or geographical location when people of different cultures or ethnicities came. They can be found all over the world, from the Arctic to the South Pacific. Most other indigenous peoples have kept specific qualities that distinguish them from the rest of the national population (Mercadal, 2024).

Many indigenous people live in poverty as a result of centuries of invasion and colonisation (Hall and Patrinos, 2012). They are frequently subject to discrimination, neglect, and exploitation. Despite their diversity, many indigenous communities around the world share the struggle for representation, self-determination, and recognition of their identities, lands, and ancestral and cultural rights. Indigenous Peoples continue to be among the world's poorest of the poor, according to a recent World Bank study titled "Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development" (Hall and Patrinos, 2012). They have higher rates of poverty, less education, and a higher incidence of disease and discrimination than other groups. However, the 2007 ratification of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations (UN) was a major accomplishment (Mercadal, 2024).

The Americas, Asia, India, Africa, Australasia, Northern Europe, the Middle East, and Russia are all home to indigenous peoples. Indigenous Peoples frequently have a strong and even spiritual bond with their land and environment because they were the first people to live in a region. Indigenous peoples frequently possess unmatched expertise in protecting the environment and making sustainable use of natural resources. This is a result of centuries or perhaps millennia of local wildlife and generations residing in specific areas.

According to estimations, Asia is home to two-thirds of the world's indigenous peoples (World Bank, 2011), with one-third of them living in poverty (ODI 2014). In other terms, nearly 260 million individuals represent 2,000 different civilisations and languages (United Nations, 2014). Indigenous peoples' distinct nature stems from their individual lifestyles, cultures, customs, and social structures, as well as the way in which their culture and existence are based on their unique relationship with the lands and territories that they have traditionally occupied or used.

According to a study conducted by Hall and Patrinos (2012), certain Indigenous Peoples' native countries are making progress in poverty reduction. The most promising news is that poverty rates among Asia's Indigenous Peoples have significantly decreased. China and Malaysia were two of the 48 Asian countries considered in this study on the shared destiny of the Indigenous Peoples of Peninsular Malaysia and Yunnan, China. The indigenous inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia are also known as Orang Asli. In Yunnan, indigenous people are referred to as ethnic minorities, with the Bulang ethnic minority being the focus of this study.

ORANG ASLI OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

In Peninsular Malaysia, Orang Asli, or "original peoples" in Malay, refers to three core tribal groups (Figure 1): Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay, each with six sub-ethnic groups (Nicholas, 2012; Syamil Imran et al., 2024). Senoi group includes sub- ethnic Temiar, Semai, Mah Meri, Jahut, Che Wong and Semoq Beri. Melayu Proto group includes Jakun, Temuan, Semelai, Orang

Kuala, Orang Kanaq and Orang Seletar. Meanwhile, Negrito group includes Kensiu, Kintaq, Jahai, Mendriq, Bateq and Lanoh.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025), Peninsular Malaysia had a projected 227,900 Orang Asli in 2025, up 1.2% from 213,461 in 2020. Pahang has the most Orang Asli, at 82,824 (38.8%), followed by Perak at 58,942 (27.6%) and Selangor at 21,312 (10%). The percentage of Melayu Proto grew to 44.4 percent (2020) from 40.9 percent (2010), while Senoi and Negrito declined to 53.5 percent and 2.1 percent (2020), respectively, from 56.0 percent and 3.1% in 2010.

According to Section 3 of the Malaysian Law, Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954, revised 1974), an Aborigine (Orang Asli) is defined as: any person whose male parent is or was a member of an aboriginal ethnic group, who speaks an aboriginal language and habitually follows an aboriginal way of life, aboriginal customs, and beliefs, and includes a descendant through males of such persons (The Commissioner of Law Revision, 2006).

Despite the Malaysian government's resettlement program, only a few (0.7%) of Orang Asli communities were willing to relocate and live in urban or semi-urban areas, while the majority remained in rural (62.0%) and remote (37.0%) areas (Pah et al., 2017; Mohd Shah et al., 2018). Like other indigenous peoples, the Orang Asli consider customary land to be vital to their way of life. Because it ensures their survival in the subsistence economy and holds their history and sense of identity, they regard customary land as sacrosanct (Hamimah Hamzah, 2013). In the strictest sense, a customary land is a unique human-nature symbiosis in which an indigenous group has identified itself in connection to certain lands that they have occupied for generations and have adapted to.

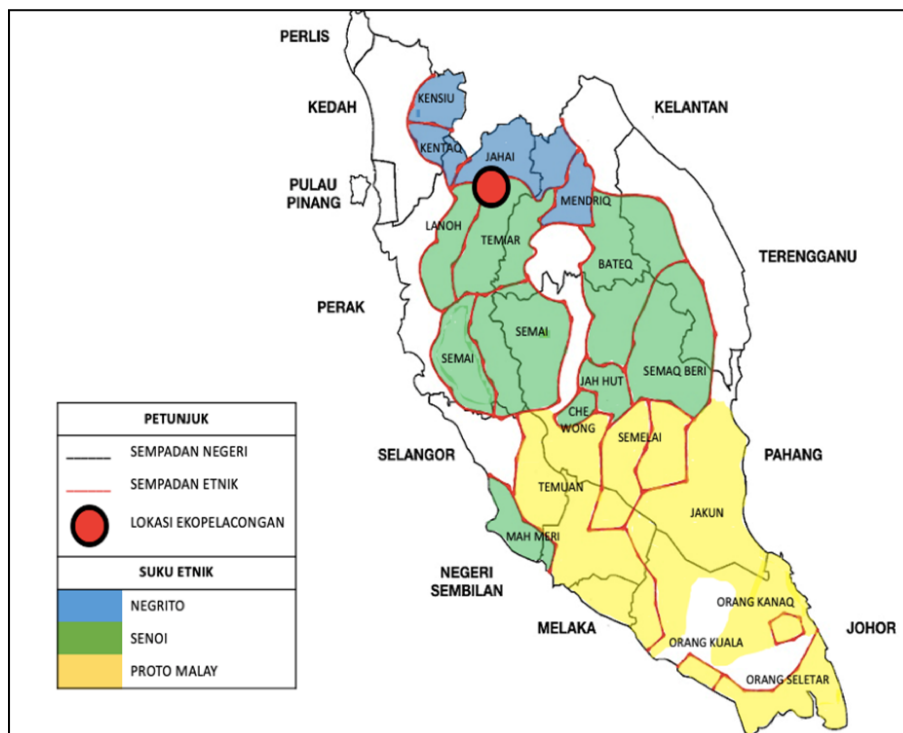


FIGURE 1. Distribution of 18 sub-ethnic groupings of Orang Asli on the Peninsular Malaysian map
 Source: Yew et al. (2023)

In the past, the term "customary land of the Orang Asli" has been used to refer to a particular area that an indigenous group acknowledges as their home or territory. The region is considered customary since it has been inhabited, used, and occupied by the indigenous people for thousands of years in accordance with their customary rules and traditions. In terms of dwelling and habitation, farming and subsistence, burial, and other ceremonial purposes, it includes, but is not limited to, the land itself. It includes all natural resources, including water, that are present both above and below the surface of these regions (Hamimah Hamzah, 2013).

As previously said, land is essential to Orang Asli survival and is a source of life. Orang Asli view land as having particular social significance in addition to material value. Through shared "ownership" of land, it establishes a social relationship that binds a community to society (William-Hunt, 1995). However, according to Juli Edo's (2004) research on the Semai community, the Semai see land as the basis for rights like the ability to live and cultivate.

According to Orang Asli customs, every community had a right to land, which included the right to occupy and exploit the community's broad territory. In Semai, the general territory is referred to as negri. A negri is made of smaller regions known as saka' (hereditary land). These are mainly the valleys of smaller tributary streams that are controlled by kinship groupings. Every member is linked to one another through blood or marriage and has the right to their own negri. This means that the Semai have exclusive rights to dwell, plant, harvest, hunt, fish, and bury in the negri (Juli Edo, 2004).

Robert Dentan, an anthropologist and long-time Semai culture researcher, once described Semai territory as "a green and beautiful world," with the Semai serving as its custodians. These terms inspired the title of a very incisive paper he co-authored with a Malaysian ethnobotanist, Ong Hean Chooi, about the significance of the forest environment for the survival of the Semai culture (Dentan and Ong, 1995). Dentan defined the Semai knowledge system as memorate, which means it is made up of practical know-how and ancestral wisdom gathered over time by trial and error and thorough study of how the natural world works.

The majority of Semai people still live in rural areas, and their spirituality still heavily relies on the forest. Many Semai ancestral regions are located in forest reserves, which are distinctive cultural landscapes. These landscapes, which include old graves and swiddens, umbilical cord burial sites, historical landmarks, ceremonial spaces, and the living cultural sites of Semai daily life, are a unique feature of the Semai homeland. These places must be preserved for their distinctive indigenous cultural legacy and valued for both their natural and human heritage, particularly for upcoming Semai generations (Heikkila, 2023).

ETHNIC MINORITIES OF CHINA

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the Chinese government, however it is not implemented in China because it does not recognise the phrase "Indigenous Peoples." The People's Republic of China's Law on Regional National Autonomy serves as a crucial foundation for ethnic minority peoples' government. It covers the creation of ethnic autonomous areas, the ability to use their own language and culture, and the creation of their own local administration. About 60% of China is made up of autonomous ethnic regions (IWGIA, 2026).

The Chinese government acknowledges 55 minority ethnicities inside its borders in addition to the majority Han Chinese. The combined population of minority nations is 125,467,390, or 8.89% of the nation's total population, according to the most recent national census

conducted in 2020 (Seventh National Population Census Bulletin, 2021). There are 836,488 members of China's "minority nationalities," which includes "unidentified ethnic groups." In the Chinese environment, minority nationalities are socially and culturally marginalised.

Minority nationalities or ethnic minorities in China have traditionally been defined as those with distinct cultures (especially languages and religions) from the Han Chinese majority (Benton Lee, 1997). Because of the significance on teaching Chinese, the majority of mother tongue instruction in China's ethnic minority regions has been neglected. The Chinese government's language and education policy seeks to increase literacy in Putonghua (standard Chinese) among ethnic minorities and rural communities. Due to the importance of teaching Chinese, the majority of mother tongue instruction in China's ethnic minority areas has been neglected. The goal of the language and education policy is to increase Putonghua (standard Chinese) literacy in ethnic minority areas and rural populations.

Additionally, many Indigenous Peoples in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia continue to face difficulties due to the fight over land expropriation and forcible relocation of residents. Locals have objected to the leasing of their pasture lands to mining firms and real estate developers, citing the illegality of land transfers and rentals as well as the pollution and environmental damage caused by mining operations (IWGIA, 2026).

Chinese ethnic minorities are mostly located in Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and other parts of Southwest, West, Northwest, and North China. The minority kingdoms include Yi, Bai, Naxi, Hani, Miao, Dong, Zhuang, Yao, Tibetan, Uyghur, and other regions. The Bulang ethnic group's location in the Xishuangbanna region, the topic of the study, may be seen on the Kunming Yunnan map (Figure 2). The Bulang (or Blang) are a small ethnic minority tribe who have long resided in Sipsong Panna, also known as Xishuangbanna area of southwestern Yunnan (Friedrich and Diamond, 1994).



FIGURE 2. Yunnan Ethnic Map

Available at: <https://www.chinadiscovery.com/ethnic-minority-culture-tour/maps.html>

The Bulang have traditionally been animists and shamans, and ancestor worship is an important aspect of their way of life. The villages where the Bulang reside are surrounded by tall cliffs and situated in 2,000-meter-tall mountains. Bulang elders make a lot of decisions. They speak a language that is part of the Myanmar-Khmer language family in South Asia. Yunnan Province is home to 80,388 Bulang, according to the 2010 Chinese National Census (CCOSC 2010). Bulang ethnic groups reside in Yunnan Province, China's Xishuangbanna. Beijing, the capital of China, is 2,603 kilometres away from Kunming, the city of Yunnan. In Yunnan Province, Xishuangbanna lies roughly 536 km southwest of Kunming (Zhu and Liao, 2021).

Chinese is not as extensively spoken among the locals as Bulang, which is their common tongue. Some country ladies and the elderly are still unable to speak Mandarin fluently when conversing with outsiders. The cultivation and gathering of pine resin from all across the town provides them with a living. In their research on Bulang's indigenous knowledge, Su et al. (2020) highlight that the Mangba village's residents' dread of supernatural forces and reverence for nature are the main sources of forest conservation. The Bulang people consider banyan trees to be sacred. The act of worshipping trees is a long-standing religious tradition. According to Anthwal et al. (2010), the Bulang's beliefs are comparable to stories of believing in sacred trees and forests from all around the world.

According to Long et al. (2025), the Bulang people's ancient tea ritual on Jingmai Mountain reflects a philosophy of peaceful coexistence with nature. Jingmai Mountain's cultural landscape legacy is based on tea culture, and its genesis is closely linked to the unique natural and geographical conditions of southern Yunnan. Jingmai Mountain's tea culture is more than just an agricultural activity; it is also the consequence of a complex interplay of ethnic customs and ecological surroundings. This cultural landscape's regional features include notable local factors. For example, the traditional tea ritual of the Bulang people expresses a philosophy of peaceful coexistence between humans and nature.

The above study by Long et al. (2025) emphasises how crucial it is to include modern technology, such virtual reality and digital archiving, in the preservation of cultural heritage, especially for the Jingmai Mountain Ancient Tea Forest. In order to guarantee the sustainability of cultural practices and economic vitality, it emphasises the necessity of strong local community involvement in revitalisation initiatives. The report also cautions against over-commercialization and promotes balanced policies that, through sustainable tourism and stakeholder partnership, support both economic development and heritage protection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PURSuing A GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF SHARED FUTURE

For more than a decade, a number of multilateral resolutions and declarations have incorporated the vision of creating a global community of shared future, along with its rich contents, such as shared human values, a new kind of international relations, true multilateralism, and a global governance approach featuring shared growth through discussion and collaboration (CPC Central Committee Bimonthly, 2023) . The idea was first incorporated into a UN resolution in February 2017 when the 55th session of the UN Commission for Social Development unanimously approved the resolution on "Social Dimensions of the New Partnership for Africa's Development."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated that the purpose of multilateralism is to build a global community with a common future. Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu, who took over as Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs on May 1, 2017 (United Nations, n.d.), stated that the concept of establishing a global community of shared future is highly compatible with the UN concept of common security and peace, is a Chinese approach to a world full of uncertainties, and supports the international community's common interests.

Chinese leader President Xi Jinping outlined the vision for creating a global community of shared future in a historic speech at the UN Office in Geneva at the beginning of 2017. The speech covered five major areas: creating a world of enduring peace through dialogue and consultation; creating and sharing a world of common security; creating a world of common prosperity through mutually beneficial cooperation; creating an open and inclusive world through exchanges and mutual learning; and creating a clean and beautiful world by pursuing green and low-carbon development. Additionally, from a pragmatic perspective, President Xi outlined strategies for creating a global community of shared future and affirmed China's commitment to working tirelessly to create this community.

According to President Xi, "No civilisation in the world is superior to others; every civilisation is special and unique to its own region." The Global Civilisations Initiative was developed by China with the intention of fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual education as well as the advancement of humanity overall. Finding common ground while putting aside differences, achieving harmony in diversity, strengthening cooperation, and pursuing mutually beneficial outcomes are all made possible by aligning with the fundamental concept of a global community of shared future (Xi Hail Restorations, 2021). China will collaborate with an increasing number of nations and areas to create a global community with a common future and to advance human civilisation and the development of all nations.

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL INDIGENEITY

The Orang Asli, who have historically been acknowledged as the peninsula's original inhabitants, are frequently left economically and socially insecure as a result of their current identity being extensively negotiated against prevailing national frameworks (Nagata & Dallos, 2001). These communities confront serious systemic obstacles despite government-sponsored integration initiatives, such as high rates of school dropout, remote location, and continuous struggles for land rights and cultural preservation that further break their ties to ancestral lands and customs. In Southwest China, where scholarly discourse centers on ethnic minorities, especially in Yunnan Province's hilly, biodiverse setting, parallel phenomena are apparent. These mountain communities are understood under China's state-classified ethnic framework, which strikes a balance between regional autonomy and national integration, rather than under a single legal definition of indigeneity.

In order to maintain local livelihoods and avoid the commodification of their deeply ingrained ancestral traditions, scholars note that indigenous communities are under constant pressure from state-led development programs to change their cultural practices. It is highlighted that the survival and prosperity of indigenous sovereignty are guaranteed by the equitable coexistence of traditional ecological knowledge and contemporary governmental structures (Sillitoe, 2020; Ludlow et al., 2016). This relational approach emphasises that indigenous groups preserve their originality and indigenous identities, not by resisting change, but by dynamically adapting their traditions to modern technologies.

Recent comparative studies of Indigenous communities around the world have clarified how various ethnic minorities deal with and express their status and identity. These studies are based on the theoretical framework of "Indigeneity as Practice," which sees Indigeneity as a performance of dynamic relations and political strategies rather than a fixed essentialist identity. First, both the Mapuche of Chile and the Zapatista Maya of Mexico employed distinctive indigenous practices. While the Maya utilised a well-known, armed, but discursive autonomous movement against globalised capitalism, the Mapuche concentrated on land reclamation and legal and cultural resistance against state-backed forestry enterprises and territorial displacement (Arias, 2021; Stahler-Sholk, 2024). Furthermore, in the Asia-Pacific region, comparative studies can be conducted between the Ainu people of Japan and the Maori people of New Zealand. These studies discovered that the Maori use a formal bicultural state framework (the Treaty of Waitangi) to consolidate institutional power and resist Western assimilation into a monocultural society (Tocker, 2017), whereas the Ainu have suffered severe state-mandated assimilation, severing their ties with their ancestral lands and cultural customs (Lewallen, 2016). As a result, current Ainu practices prioritise recovering visible cultural legacy, preserving their language, and achieving public recognition in a structurally homogeneous community (Lewallen, 2016).

THE COMPARATIVE GAP

Researchers are unable to find common ancestral approaches and philosophies that could connect Southeast Asia and Southwest China because there are no direct frameworks connecting the indigenous groups of Peninsular Malaysia with the mountain communities of Yunnan. Given that both indigenous areas experience the same, growing pressures from corporate land encroachment, aggressive state development, and climate change, this comparative study is especially obvious. The traditional subsistence economies, resource governance, and spiritual attachments to the land of the Orang Asli and the highland ethnic minorities of Yunnan are all under risk due to significant ecological disturbances. Analysing how these geographically dispersed ethnic minorities use relational indigeneity to fend off environmental degradation and displacement in order to create shared cultural futures and secure indigenous existence in an urbanising and modernising world requires a cross-border framework.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Drawing from anthropological practice theory "Indigeneity as Practice", which was developed by theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Sherry Ortner (1984), the conceptual foundation of this study asserts that indigeneity is an ongoing performance of identity rather than a static, primal status. The dialectical link between everyday human agency and historical structures shapes this dynamic process (Bourdieu, 1977). Through everyday interaction, the physical landscape is turned into a spiritual geography, and the domain of land use and subsistence acts as a fundamental place where identity is actively developed and regenerated. Foraging and swidden agriculture are examples of practices that are embodied representations of ancestral connectedness rather than just economic survival measures.

The theory offers a strong lens through which to view the shared cultural resonances between the indigenous people of Yunnan, China, and Peninsular Malaysia's Orang Asli, emphasising how identity is lived rather than merely inherited. These groups constantly rebuild their indigenous identity through farming the land and traversing these scared spaces. Shamanic

activities, animism, and ancestral reverence, which characterise daily life, clearly represent the dynamic regeneration of culture, rituals, and cosmologies. For example, the sacred tea ceremonies of the Bulang people in Yunnan are not frozen artefacts from the past. Instead, they are lived cosmological practices that help these societies navigate their current circumstances. These rituals function as spiritual bridges, allowing indigenous actors to express their own worldviews while maintaining cosmic equilibrium in a rapidly changing world.

METHODOLOGY

This study mostly uses qualitative approaches to examine the cultural similarities and shared futures between the indigenous populations of Yunnan and Malaysia's Orang Asli. This article explores the use of documents as a data source in qualitative research, with a focus on document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The process of document analysis (Yadav, 2022) comprises gathering, synthesising, and closely examining indigenous rights from Malaysia, China, and Southeast Asian states; speeches by leaders; research reports from academic and international organisations; peer-reviewed articles; and reliable news sources.

A comprehensive literature search using general search terms like "Shared Future" and "Indigenous Communities" was carried out for this paper across numerous databases. Because of the large number of results, the following databases were chosen for the literature search: ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. This method is appropriate for investigating complicated, bounded systems across geographical regions, providing for a thorough, contextualised knowledge of common ancestral and cultural occurrences. Using a comparative perspective, the study methodically examines the diverse yet overlapping cultural frameworks of both groups of Malaysia's Semai and Yunnan's Bulang, as well as establishing a solid structural foundation for investigating cross-border indigenous connections and cultural preservation measures (Yin, 2018).

The following procedure involves combining keywords or concepts using Boolean operators ("George Boole", n.d.). The Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT are named after mathematician George Boole. The following keywords (and their combinations using Boolean connectives) were used in the literature search: indigenous population, shared future, indigenous knowledge, Semai, Bulang, etc. The search included every journal and conference proceedings published after 1950 and ending in 2026. Other articles collected from the references of the papers found through the electronic search were also included. Furthermore, the literature search adheres strictly to the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the search procedure.

The research framework then identifies important gaps in the current literature and creates a conceptual bridge between the two regions of Peninsular Malaysia and Yunnan China by integrating a variety of secondary literature to be inferred and evaluated, of which secondary sources are material derived from primary source literature (Cronin, 2008). A thorough literature review is an essential research tool for combining knowledge from several domains, as Snyder (2019) points out. This creates a solid basis for developing new conceptual frameworks and policy recommendations. Furthermore, because the study conducted a comprehensive review, the Findings and Discussion sections concentrate on thematic synthesis and conceptual framework development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous agency stresses the indigenous people's role as active participants in social, political, and economic processes and contradicts victimisation myths, as mentioned by Cornell (2015) in the previous literature study. The comparative research between the Semai and the Bulang emphasises the transnational framework for Indigenous agency and modernity, demonstrating that Indigenous agency is a regional dynamic throughout Southwest China and Southeast Asia rather than an isolated phenomena. Due to their integration of traditional systems with capitalist economies, both indigenous populations have been perceived as active ethnic minority groups.

Bulang and Semai have actively negotiated socioeconomic restraints by adapting their traditional ways to meet contemporary issues rather than passively succumbing to modern demands. For example, the Bulang and Semai use adaptation as a conscious agency in their strategic navigation of ecotourism (Ahmad Izzudin and Zeenat Begam, 2025) and land advocacy in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as the intentional commodification of sacred tea landscapes in Yunnan (Long et al., 2025). Both Semai and Bulang ethnic communities creatively maintain their socio-cultural autonomy by turning aspects of their tradition into economic leverage. As a result, this intentional adaptation is an essential tool for expressing their unique indigeneity and claiming authority over their shared futures.

THE SEMAI CASE (PENINSULAR MALAYSIA)

A large number of Semai identify as *mai darat*, or "People of the Hinterlands." Their primary sources of income have changed over time to include hunting, trading forest products, shifting cultivation, and arboriculture. The more traditional Semai cultivate maize, millet, and mountain rice in small, remote camps on the slopes of steep mountains. Some cultivate mountain rice and reside at lower elevations. When compared to other Orang Asli tribes, the Semai have a comparatively higher literacy rate. The Semai community's indigenous knowledge offers insightful perspectives on social structures, nature, and spirituality—all of which are essential for preserving their cultural heritage (Jamilah Shaari et al., 2024).

According to Ahmad Izzuddin and Zeenat Begam (2025), Peninsular Malaysia's Semai people have a strong spiritual and physical connection to their ancestral homeland. Pos Telanok, according to their study, is an ideal setting for the Orang Asli Semai in Cameron Highlands because of its dynamic and fertile soil. The Semai people have preserved the area's beautiful natural surroundings and strong community-driven development. It protects whatever ancestral land they have left, as well as cultural practices, while sticking to community-led ecological efforts. The Semai people are noted for their deeply ingrained connection and belief in animism (Gianno, 2023).

However, due to economic growth and deforestation, the Semai people have restricted access to their ancestral land, which has an impact on livelihoods, the Semai way of life, and the Semai's cultural and heritage value. Furthermore, these compounding issues impair their traditional social systems and jeopardise the preservation of their particular indigenous identity (Nicholas, 2026). As a result, Semai-led ecotourism is often seen as a means of preserving their traditional and social beliefs while also providing them with a source of income.

From the standpoint of product commercialisation, ecotourism has a number of unique characteristics that make it an experience for tourists. First of all, it is essential for the preservation of cultural heritage. In addition, the reinvestment of earnings to sustain a steady level of resource

quality and conservation is a crucial component of ecotourism. Additionally, ecotourism needs to be sustainable in terms of the environment, economy, and society. Finally, the key to successful ecotourism is ethical education about biodiversity, environments, and cultures. Ecotourism demonstrates how to support the Orang Asli Semai in conserving their culture and heritage while also boosting their economic.

THE BULANG CASE (CHINA)

The protected Jingmai Mountain cultural environment is a prime example of the Bulang ethnic group's rich cultural legacy in Yunnan, China, which is focused on traditional tea-growing methods (Xie and Tan, 2026). According to Taylor and Lennon (2011), heritage revitalisation offers potential synergies between cultural transmission and socioeconomic benefits, serving as both an economic engine for local communities and a way to strengthen cultural identity. Tea culture is at the heart of Jingmai Mountain's cultural landscape heritage, and its development is intimately related to the distinctive geographical and natural features of southwestern Yunnan.

The Bulang people's history, culture, and ecology are profoundly interpreted in light of the cultural landscape of the ancient tea forests in Jingmai Mountain, which is a prime example of the fusion of nature and culture (Fu et al., 2024). The Bulang people's traditional tea ceremony demonstrates the profound cultural significance of this Bulang cultural heritage by highlighting a philosophical idea of peaceful cohabitation between humans and environment (Long et al., 2025). However, the Bulang suffer contemporary socioeconomic challenges that jeopardise the preservation of their unique cultural heritage. Widespread youth movement to metropolitan areas causes a major generational gap in heritage transmission, and the commercialisation of their heritage of tea forests through ecotourism commodification and state-managed development schemes runs the risk of diluting their genuine traditions.

Employing the framework of the rural revitalisation strategy (Long et al., 2025), tea culture can be integrated with ecological agriculture by transforming tea estates into multi-functional complexes that mix tourism, education, and production. This would not only raise economic gains but also improve cultural transmission of the Bulang ethnic group. Furthermore, by working with industries including as film and fashion, Jingmai Mountain's tea culture might be incorporated into contemporary cultural products.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SEMAI AND BULANG ETHNIC GROUPS

Although both Bulang and Semai communities exhibit agency in maintaining their indigenous identities, there are significant structural challenges to the Bulang and Semai indigeneity's long-term survival. According to Nicholas (2020), Orang Asli tribes must continually balance their legal status against their cultural reality because state-defined identities frequently conflict with indigenous self-perceptions. On the other hand, China's ethnic minority classification system places the Bulang in a strict state-led hierarchy that acknowledges them as a unique nationality but links their identity to developmental goals approved by the state. Previous research and observations on Semai and Bulang support the premise of "indigeneity as practice," which challenges the colonial notion that cultural change equals to a loss of authenticity.

Being indigenous is a continuous process of doing and becoming, as the Semai and Bulang indigenous cultures show. The Bulang of Yunnan and the Semai of Peninsular Malaysia have maintained their identities through a dynamic interaction with modernity rather than a static preservation of the past. The Malaysian model concentrates on land rights and integration, whereas

China's system emphasises cultural tourism and tea-based economy. These communities make sure that their cultural characteristics change without disappearing by incorporating traditional knowledge into modern economies. According to Lye (2021), the Semai's connection to their forest landscape in Malaysia continues to be a fundamental aspect of their identity, acting as a living record that resists the homogenising processes of national development. On the other hand, Yunnan is implementing new technologies for tea cultivation while preserving Bulang cultural traits. Their social cohesiveness's basic logic is still intact, demonstrating that adaptation is a survival tactic rather than a cultural betrayal. According to Li (2017), indigeneity permits flexible changes that preserve the integrity of the ancestral bridge.

Aside from commonalities between the two ethnic minorities of Orang Asli and Bulang, within the "Ancestral Bridge" paradigm, state-to-indigenous interactions and policy contexts in Malaysia and China diverge greatly. Malaysia's 1954 Indigenous Peoples Act has a paternalistic approach, regarding indigenous people as objects of state guardianship and focused on socioeconomic integration, which frequently undermines their customary land rights (Subramaniam 2013). On the other hand, China uses a rigorous system of regional ethnic autonomy, including the Bulang ethnic group in frameworks for ethnic tourism and top-down, state-led initiatives to reduce poverty (Isaksson, 2020). These policy practices have led to radically different power dynamics: the state is purposefully commodifying the cultural heritage of the Bulang, whereas direct territorial deprivation threatens the cultural preservation of Orang Asli (Nicholas et al., 2010).

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION, ORIGINALITY AND CHALLENGES

The "Ancestor Bridge" framework represents a new paradigm shift in Indigenous studies that transcends regional and ethnocentric study by creating a transnational comparative axis between the Bulang of Yunnan, China, and the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. Its main innovation is the concept of "Indigeneity as Practice," which rejects rigid and antiquated definitions of Indigenous identity in favour of seeing it as a dynamic and evolving collection of ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and South Asian cultural markers (Scott, 2009). By shedding light on this cross-regional socio-ecological synergy and demonstrating how historically marginalised communities use shared ancestral memories to confront modernity and protect their cultures' future sovereignty, the framework offers a new decolonising approach to global Indigenous discourse (Smith, 2021).

Although this framework broadens the scope of modern indigenous theory, it has serious practical drawbacks. The stark disparities between the two nations' political environments present a significant obstacle to "Indigeneity as Practice." While the Bulang people function within China's highly centralised, state-defined ethnic (minority) framework (Harrell, 2001), indigenous peoples in Peninsular Malaysia negotiate their identity within a complex dynamic of indigenous groups and a continuously changing framework of state recognition (Endicott, 2015). The influence and limitations these inflexible, top-down state systems have on the realities of indigenous existence may be underestimated if indigenous identity is only seen as a fluid 'practice'.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Bulang ethnic villages in China and the Semai tribes in Peninsular Malaysia demonstrate their agency in an increasingly interconnected world by strategically navigating modern socio-economic constraints, preserving their languages, and managing their ecosystems. The implications extend beyond national borders. Both nations' indigenous peoples are capable of acting on their own initiative and making decisions that are consistent with their own cultural values, beliefs, and interests. Indigenous agency challenges victimisation myths and asserts their rights and sovereignty in a variety of circumstances, emphasising their role as active participants in social, political, and economic processes (Cornell, 2015). The comparative study of the two indigenous populations, the Semai and the Bulang, reveals that both are active, self-determining agents of their own cultural destinies. From an ethnic standpoint, this concerns the shared future of all ethnic groups. Finally, the "Ancestral Bridge" concept proposes that the important link between these two civilisations is based on a common, active human struggle to remain indigenous on their own terms, rather than on shared practices.

RECOMMENDATION FOR SHARED FUTURE ACROSS THE SEAS

In order to develop a durable and shared cultural future, Malaysian Orang Asli and Yunnan indigenous groups should establish transnational knowledge-sharing networks in addition to community-led digital preservation programs. These two indigenous communities can improve their ecological practices and economic independence by working together on traditional tea-planting methods and sustainable agro-forestry. At the same time, youth-led digital archives can serve as virtual spaces for archiving and sharing vibrant expressions of identity. This two-pronged approach maintains Indigenous cultural legacy while also leveraging modern technology to create a digitally interconnected future. Finally, these collaborative frameworks allow Indigenous youth to actively integrate old wisdom with contemporary global realities, ensuring the long-term viability of communities. Younger generations hold the key to cultural inheritance. The indigenous wisdom passed down includes not just indigenous languages, dialects, and customs, but also the spirit of perseverance and determination.

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