



## Functional changes of Malaysia's small towns in the era of globalization: Evidences from Tanjong Malim, Perak

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### Abstract

Economic globalization has paved the way for a greater concentration of modern economic activities in metropolitan cities. Development of manufacturing and office-based economic activities together with residential areas in turn have resulted in the metropolitan cities to grow in size and eventually led to the expansion of urban region incorporating the surrounding large and small towns. However, only towns located along the development corridors will be impacted by the prevailing process, leaving other settlements relatively untouched and stagnant. This study examined current functional changes characterizing small towns in Malaysia with particular reference to Tanjong Malim, Perak. Using data obtained through observations and a household survey, the study found that there was a significant change in the role of Tanjong Malim from mainly acting as a collecting center for agricultural products to a center of manufacturing and services that provided non-farm employment opportunities to its surrounding population. This change suggested that economically Tanjong Malim was growing and would continue to play an important role as a major development centre in Perak. The finding is an important indicator that a small town located outside the mainstream development corridor is capable of transforming its role from a traditional collection centre to a more modern manufacturing and service centre if properly planned. This finding also suggests that a small town can still play a significant role in the economic development of a country even in the era of globalization that often tends to favour metropolitan regions.

**Keywords:** changing roles, core area, economic globalization, periphery, small town, Tanjong Malim

### Introduction

A small town is widely regarded as an important urban center within the context of regional development, particularly for regions that are experiencing rapid development. This is mainly due to its structure, size and perceived ability to address issues of urbanization and development compared to larger cities (Von Bloh, 2008). Economic activities of a small town are usually very much dependent on agriculture. Therefore a small town essentially is just a place for local agribusiness community to conduct trading activities (Khaw, 1985). The small town also acts as a collection point for goods distributed to other smaller settlements located in the surrounding areas besides serving the local residents with basic daily needs of goods and services (Hamidah, 1981). Other roles that are also normally performed by a small town include marketing of goods and services, transport and service hub, intermediary center of wealth flow from urban to rural areas, and finally the role as a development center (Satterthwaite & Tacoli, 2003; Tacoli, 2004). It is with such roles that small towns in developing countries normally grow up to become larger collecting centers.

The recent process of economic globalization has changed the phase of world urbanization which has a clear spatial impact on a country, particularly the urban areas including small towns in developing countries. This is because the process of economic growth tends to be concentrated in cities, especially

metropolitan cities. Economic agglomeration of industrial and service activities in the cities under the influence of globalization has further been enhanced by the convergence of political, social and cultural activities in the centers that eventually lead to the emergence of large urban conurbations and many of them are mega cities.

In theory, as the industrialization process occurs in a metropolitan center and its surrounding areas, the region begins to experience the problems associated with excessive concentration of population and economic activities. Previous studies showed that recently many manufacturing activities have begun to move out of the metropolitan area to the periphery (Morshidi, 2003). Nowadays such process is indeed a norm. In Southeast Asia, the region that combines metropolitan cities and rural-urban settlements in the periphery, is widely known as an extended metropolitan region (Mc Gee, 1991). At the edge of this metropolitan region exists small towns which are central to the developers to develop housing estates, industrial estates, hypermarkets and large-scale recreational areas (Anuar, 2006). The emergence of such a modern urban functions has given a kind of pressure on the existing rules of small towns, particularly the traditional once. The development and integration of outlying small towns into a metropolitan city is seen by many as the beginning of the process of formation of a mega city.

In Malaysia, the process of industrialization has been largely concentrated in the core area located in the Klang-Langat Metropolitan Region (KLMR). The core area also becomes the focus of location for modern producer services activities. There has been a clear evidence to show that residents of the core areas have moved to the peri-urban areas of the metropolitan region. This was followed by a rapid growth of many small towns on the edge of the region (Katiman, 2007). The administrative local government status of small towns on the peripheral areas of KLMR such as Nilai (Negeri Sembilan), Rawang and Dengkil (Selangor) respectively have been upgraded to become municipal councils, reflecting their importance in terms of size and function of the centers. Gradually, the towns have abandoned their traditional roles of providing basic goods and services for rural agricultural communities for modern productive roles associated with manufacturing and services besides serving the needs of the emerging new industrial and services communities. Modern urban functions emerge to cater for the needs of mainly the young and rapidly growing urbanized societies. In contrast, other small towns such as Tanjung Karang, Sungai Besar and Sabak in north west of the state of Selangor; Tapah and Slim River in southern Perak, located away from the influence of KLMR remain with their original role mainly as rural service centers. In due time however, small towns such as Kuala Kubu Bharu and to a lesser extent Tanjong Malim, located along the main north-south secondary development corridor will be integrated within the KLMR metropolitan region system of cities, enabling them to play similar roles of Nilai, Rawang and Dengkil in the future. The small towns should be able to attract investments thus generating employment opportunities that benefit the towns' population. Relocation of selected manufacturing and service activities to these small towns will certainly increase their prospects to grow to become important centers in the future (Fatimah, 2007). Tanjong Malim has been one of the small towns that undergoes a rapid rate of functional transformation in the recent years. The present article intends to provide some insights into these matters.

## **Objective and method of the study**

This article aims to discuss the current role of Tanjong Malim as a growth center. More specifically, this article aims to examine whether or not Tanjong Malim still play her traditional small town's role of servicing the surrounding rural population. The examination is based on six indicators that represent traditional functions of small towns as have been discussed previously by researchers such as Funnell (1976), Maude (1983), Rondinelli (1983), Hamid (2000), Hinderink and Titus (2002), Satterthwaite and Tacoli (2003), Wanscheinder (2004), Tacoli (2004) and Owusu (2005), namely: (i) agricultural service center, (ii) social service and transportation center, (iii) dissemination of ideas and innovation center, (iv) planning and administration center, (v) goods and services supply center and (vi) employment provider

and business supply center. Functions of the small town will be analyzed to see if Tanjong Malim still play the role of a traditional small town. The result of the analysis will be crucial in determining whether or not the small town is able to grow and develop to become the main sub-regional center of the southern region of the state of Perak.

Apart from field observations to record the existing functions of Tanjong Malim, a questionnaire survey was also carried out involving a total of 370 respondents representing the heads of households, selected using stratified random sampling method. The choice of sample size is made by applying the method (table) that was introduced by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) at the level of confidence of 95 percent and a margin of error at the level of five percent. Samples were drawn from three concentric zones proportionately based on the focus and the distance from the town center. In depth interviews were also conducted on a number of selected informants including government officers, village heads, hoteliers, retailers, restaurant operators, employees of the University of Education Sultan Idris (UPSI), Proton workers and others.

Tanjong Malim is located in Batang Padang district in the state of Perak Darul Ridzuan. Tanjong Malim is situated in Bernam Valley Region irrigated by two major rivers, namely Sungai Bernam and Sungai Inki. The town is located in the southern part of the state of Perak, 90 km (55.92 miles) north of metropolis Kuala Lumpur. Through the North-South Expressway, the connection between the two areas can be considered close. In this article, Tanjong Malim is referred as a small town, covering the area within 10 kilometer radius from the town center. The study area includes Bandar Proton, Behrang 2020, Behrang Stesen and Ulu Bernam (Selangor). Therefore, the terminology 'Tanjong Malim' in this article refers to this area unless otherwise specified (Figure 1). The process of urbanization in the southern state of Perak has made Tanjong Malim grown rapidly in the recent years, business and manufacturing activities are booming. Many business and trade activities have shifted from Hulu Bernam in the state of Selangor to the small town.

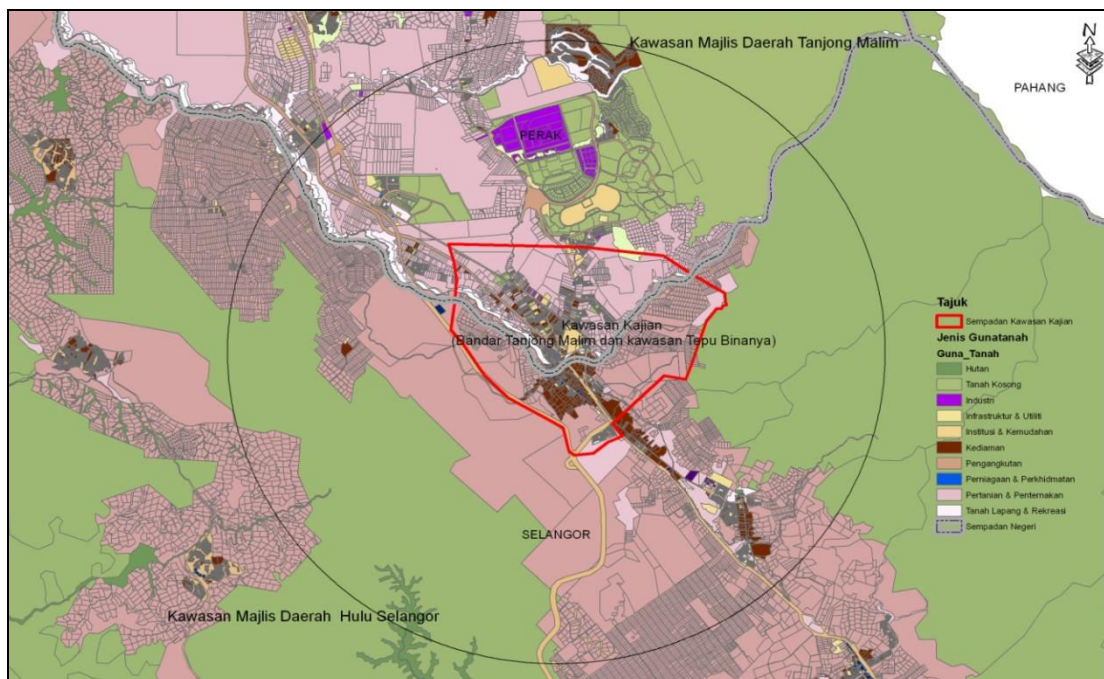


Figure 1. Tanjong Malim and areas within 10 kilometer radius

## Results and discussion

Analysis of the function of Tanjong Malim tends to indicate that currently the small town is undergoing a process of rapid change. The small town is no longer performing its traditional collective and distributive roles. The presence of manufacturing and high order service activities, particularly that of assembly plants associated with automobile production and the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, in and around small towns are clear evidences of functional changes of Tanjong Malim. The following discussion highlights the major findings of the study.

### The present role of Tanjong Malim

Tanjong Malim has emerged from a rural service center to become a secondary regional growth center for southern Perak. At present, many functions that can be closely associated with traditional of rural service centers such rubber and oil palm dealers, agricultural tools suppliers, fertilizer shops and farmers association are clearly absent (Table 1). Batang Padang was formerly known for tin mining and smallholding agricultural activities and Tanjong Malim was a famous collecting center for tin and agricultural products. The establishment of proton industrial complex and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) has significantly changed the functions of Tanjong Malim. The town not only has experienced the booming of business in retailing activities by the opening of many super markets, modern shopping malls and restaurants including the exclusive type of dining malls, but also the thriving of new service facilities particularly in banking, insurance, construction, courier services, private hospital and clinics, car repair services and cyber cafes. This has been made possible because of the emergence of the more affordable society in the town. Demands for non basic goods and services have steadily increased in the recent years due to the growth of middle class households, mainly employed in non farm economic activities particularly Produa factories and UPSI.

**Table 1. Present functions of Tanjong Malim**

| Type of function  | No. of function |
|---|-----------------|
| Restaurants /eating stalls  | 180             |
| Hardware/car/motorbike spare parts/tyre /car battery/ accessories | 108             |
| Sundry shops/mini markets/retail outlets                          | 86              |
| Clothing /bags/bundles  | 79              |
| Computer/accessories outlets                                      | 56              |
| Bookshops/ stationeries/ photocopying services                    | 44              |
| Hand phones/Top -up services                                      | 44              |
| Insurance agents// <i>Takaful</i> /Unit Trust                     | 30              |
| Home/kitchen appliances   | 29              |
| Saloon/hair dressing  | 29              |
| Electrical appliances/repairs                                     | 28              |
| Cyber Cafe/Video Games/Software/CD/DVD                            | 25              |
| Beauty centre /agents   | 23              |
| Tailors /boutiques  | 23              |
| Wholesalers / distributors  | 22              |
| Furniture shops   | 19              |
| Iron engineering workshops/Grill/ welding                         | 19              |
| Car dealers   | 17              |
| Chinese medicines/pharmacy/health care kiosks                     | 17              |
| Association/ social clubs/Gymnasium                               | 16              |
| Banks/other financial institutions                                | 16              |
| Private hospital/clinics (general/dental)                         | 16              |

| Type of function   | No. of function |
|--|-----------------|
| Building contractor/ plumber/ electricians/wiring services | 14              |
| Others /mixed stores                                       | 14              |
| Car wash services  | 11              |
| Wet market/fresh food market (meat/fish/vegetable)         | 11              |
| Hotel  | 10              |
| Jewelries  | 9               |
| Spectacles / optometrists /opticians                       | 9               |
| Factories  | 7               |
| Music/Video/musical learning centres                       | 7               |
| Shopping malls   | 7               |
| Sport outlets  | 7               |
| Chinese religious needs                                    | 6               |
| Dhobis   | 6               |
| Motorcycle dealers   | 6               |
| Currier service providers                                  | 5               |
| Driving schools  | 5               |
| Gambling shops (Toto/four digits)                          | 4               |
| Petrol kiosks  | 4               |
| Photoshops   | 4               |
| Bicycle shops  | 3               |
| Fruit stalls/market  | 3               |
| Money changers   | 3               |
| Toy shops  | 3               |
| Fertilizer outlets   | 2               |
| Mortgage/pound shops                                       | 2               |
| Shoes/footwear store                                       | 1               |

Source: Field observation, 2010

At present, there are a total of 593 units and 559 units of lower and medium order functions respectively offered by Tanjong Malim mainly in retailing and basic services. In addition 231 units of higher order functions such as banking and finance, insurance agencies, hotels, colleges, maternity clinics or hospitals, car showrooms, motorcycle dealers and shopping malls, are also increasingly become available. This shows that the households in Tanjong Malim are becoming more affordable. The higher the income the more complex needs and demands of the households which in return increases the number of functions, type and variety of function, and it's levels of availability of the small town.

The role of Tanjong Malim can further be analysed by examining the households involvement with all six roles Tanjong Malim (Table 2). The six roles are used as an indicator of change. It is clear that the most dominant role of the town is supplying goods and services, followed by provision of social service and transportation facilities. These findings are very much similar to, and consistent with the views of previous scholars such as Funnell (1976), Ruddle and Rondinelli (1979) and Wanscheinder (2004).

**Table 2. The role of Tanjong Malim**

| Roles                                     | Number of Households | (%)  |
|---|----------------------|------|
| Provision of goods and services           | 319                  | 86.2 |
| Social and transportation services        | 295                  | 79.7 |
| Planning, coordination and administration | 229                  | 61.9 |
| Providing employment                      | 226                  | 61.0 |
| Dissemination of ideas and innovation     | 170                  | 45.9 |
| Agricultural products dealers & suppliers | 85                   | 22.9 |

Source: Household Survey, Mac 2011

As pointed by Rosmin (2007) in his study on rural growth center in Kedah, small settlement centers still play a major role in providing basic goods and services; serving social service and transportation facilities to their surrounding population, and to a lesser degree engaging rural households in non-agricultural employment, particularly in manufacturing and services.

As a service center, Tanjong Malim is capable of providing a variety of basic goods and services to meet the daily needs of the town's residents. This is the basic role of a small town. The goods and services provided by the town is sufficient to fulfill the needs of the households living in and around it. They do not have to go to other places to get most of goods and services they require. Thus at this point in time, the role of Tanjong Malim as a service center providing goods and services is still going in importance. However, the role of diffusing innovation become less important. Traditionally, residents of the town learn about new knowledge, technical knowhow and latest various information on things such as the price of groceries, health, diseases and consumer products in the market, directly from mass media particularly news paper, radio and television. In this case, the role of Tanjong Malim in diffusing innovations, disseminating ideas and information has no longer important. News paper subscription, television and radio ownership are very common among the households. The same can be said to ownership of modern communication equipments such as mobile phones, computers equipped with internet services at home. These have made the households become more aware of new information, ideas and the latest innovations. Using these modern communication facilities, information, new ideas and innovations can easily be accessed with a very fast rate.

The same applies to the role of marketing of agricultural products. Rondinelli (1983), Satterthwaite and Tacoli (2003) and Wanscheinder (2004) argued that small towns play the key role as a center for agricultural marketing. Typically a small town is surrounded by agricultural land that produce goods for domestic or foreign markets. A small town acts as a collecting center besides supplying a variety of input and needs that support agricultural activities such as fertilizer, seeds and agricultural machineries to farmers. In Tanjong Malim, not only that farmers do not market their products to, or obtaining their agricultural inputs from the small town, agriculturally related functions are no longer present. The absent of such functions is a clear evidence to show that Tanjong Malim has lost its traditional agricultural marketing and collecting roles. The deminishing role of Tanjong Malim as an agricultural service center is closely linked to fundamental and structural change of its economic base from agriculture to manufacturing and services. Various ancillary activities emerge to cater for the growing needs of mainly the young factory workers, staffs and students of UPSI.

## **Employment patterns of the households**

The district of Batang Padang where Tanjong Malim is located is currently undergoing a rapid economic change. Agriculture is no longer the economic mainstay of the district. In 1980, approximately 18.0 percent of the district's labor force were in the agricultural sector. In 2010, the figure decreased to 3.7 percent. In contrast labor force in non-agricultural sector increased from 75.9 percent to 96.8 per cent within the same period (Department of Town & Country Planning, 2008). Manufacturing and service sectors have contributed significantly to the district's economy. In 2008, manufacturing sector contributed RM640,319,203 to Gross Domestic Products (GDP) of Batang Padang and provided most non-farm employment opportunities to the district. Since Tanjong Malim is the main growth centre of the region, the economic transformation tended to occur mainly around the small town. This structural economic change explains the current shift in employment patterns among households in the district.

Result of recent survey tended to confirm the above patterns of employment shift among households in and around Tanjong Malim. Table 3 shows that only about 10.4 percent of respondents are still engaged in agricultural activities compared to 77.8 percent in non-agricultural activities. The percentage is generally very low. This shows that the contribution of agriculture to the region's economy is declining. In contrast, contribution of manufacturing and service sectors are increasingly important. This finding

confirms the functional analysis conducted earlier. The opening of an industrial area and the rapid growing workshops associated with automobile in Proton City strengthens the economic base of Tanjong Malim. In service sector, the small town witnesses expansion of employment in UPSI as a catalyst to its economic growth. The survey found that 46.3 percent of the head households are employed in the service sector such as retailers, teachers, clerical staffs, drivers and salespersons. Expansion in both manufacturing and service sectors have contributed significantly to employment changes in Tanjong Malim. These pattern and trend of change are in tandem with the national economic development plan, to transform the country's economic mainstay from agricultural and mining sectors to advanced manufacturing and service sectors. These findings suggest that in terms of role as shown by its functional and household employment patterns, Tanjong Malim is currently in the process of transformation to become a more developed city. Proportion of middle class in the society is on the increase as the majority (71.3 percent) of households are earning more than RM1, 500.00 a month. Only 4.5 percent households can be categorized as poor earning less than RM750.00 a month. The growth of a middle-income society in Tanjong Malim is an evidence that the purchasing power of the population has increased creating high demand potentials for various types of consumer goods and services. This is a key factor that promotes the development of business and trade activities in this small town.

**Table 3. Employment, employer and households Income (n = 491)**

| <i>Type of Employment</i>          | Total | %    |
|------------------------------------|-------|------|
| Retail                             | 68    | 13.8 |
| Teacher/Lecturer                   | 67    | 13.6 |
| Clerical/Administration            | 54    | 10.9 |
| Manufacturing                      | 51    | 10.4 |
| Agriculture                        | 51    | 10.4 |
| Workshop/Machinery/Mechanic        | 34    | 6.9  |
| Police/Army/Uniform                | 27    | 5.5  |
| General Labor                      | 24    | 4.9  |
| Driver                             | 22    | 4.5  |
| Salesperson                        | 17    | 3.5  |
| Others                             | 76    | 15.6 |
| <i>Employer</i>                    |       |      |
| Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris | 48    | 9.8  |
| Proton Plant/Vendor                | 44    | 9.0  |
| Public Services                    | 132   | 26.9 |
| Private Services                   | 131   | 26.7 |
| Self Employed                      | 136   | 27.6 |
| <i>Monthly income</i>              |       |      |
| Less RM 750                        | 22    | 4.5  |
| RM 751 - RM 1,500                  | 119   | 24.2 |
| RM 1,501 - RM 2,250                | 150   | 30.6 |
| RM 2,251 - RM 3,000                | 132   | 26.9 |
| RM 3,001 and above                 | 68    | 13.8 |
| <i>Workplace</i>                   |       |      |
| Around Tanjong Malim               | 338   | 68.8 |
| Outside Tanjong Malim              | 153   | 31.2 |

Source: Household Survey, March 2011

Economic base of Tanjong Malim will continue to grow in strength and vibrant generating a wide range of employment opportunities in manufacturing and services. Population of the town also has shown a rapid growth in recent years mainly due immigration. The role of Tanjong Malim as a sub regional growth center offering employment opportunities and improving socioeconomic status of the town's population has been established. This clearly proves that Tanjong Malim is undergoing a rapid process of change.

Finding of the present study shows that, as a small town, Tanjong Malim is different with what commonly found in other developing countries. Functionally, the number of units that offer middle and higher order goods and service facilities of Tanjong Malim are very much larger compares to those found in African and other Southeast Asian small towns where lower order goods and services are much more dominant (See Funnell, 1976; Hopkins, 1979; Hinderink & Titus, 2002; Satterthwaite & Tacoli, 2003). Similar can be said with the patterns of employment of households living in and around the small town. Majority of the people in Tanjong Malim are no longer engaged in agricultural activities. Whereas population of many African small towns in countries such as Sudan (Abdel Ghaffar & Mustafa, 1979), Tanzania (Tacoli, 2004), Kenya and Ghana (Kabwegyere, 1979; Owusu, 2005) are mostly employed in agricultural sector. The above findings indicate that Tanjong Malim is a modern subregional growth centre performing a much more critical role in the development process of the southern region of Perak.

In many Asian countries, majority of it's small urban population is no longer working in low-skilled sector but began to focus on sectors that require high skills mainly industrial. For example, the Philippines is currently working to place an industrial area in small towns rather than big cities as previously, as a strategy of development in backward rural areas. In addition, the Philippines is also currently working to exploit tourism resources in the small town that it is not only able to raise the living standard of the population but attracts migrants from nearby areas (Basa et al., 2009). Such situation according to Von Bloh (2008) sooner or later will reduce the agriculturally related roles of small towns and that will have an impact on the occupational structure of the population. Similar is also occurring in Tanjong Malim. High skilled labors are progressively replacing manual and routine semiskilled labors in many proses of production particularly in factories belong to Proton vendors. In service sectors, UPSI staffs in particular are mainly trained and skillful. Although tourism activities are yet to develop, hotels and modern exclusive restaurants are thriving and recreational areas begin to emerge to cater for growing demands of many young executives. This is another indication to show that Tanjong Malim is undergoing rapid changes.

## **Conclusion**

Tanjong Malim is a dynamic small town in southern Perak. The functions and roles of Tanjong Malim have changed and the town has grown from a traditional collecting and marketing center to a modern subregional service center. It's functional changes can be attributed mainly to the new manufacturing and service roles played by the center. Tanjong Malim has become an important center for manufacturing automotive parts for Malaysia's national car Proton. The present of UPSI in the small town is also important in terms of strenghtening it's role as service provider. Both manufacturing of automotive components of Proton and UPSI have provided employment opportunities for the small town's population. Households income increase which in turn has created a laten demand for middle and higer order goods and services. Population of the small town increase rapidly mainly due to migration. Trade, commerce and other business activities are thriving serving the small town's growing population. The study suggests that although the small town is located outside the main development corridor, if properly planned, still capable to grow and play a greater role in regional development.



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