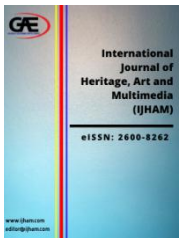
International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HERITAGE, ART AND MULTIMEDIA (IJHAM)
www.ijham.com

GLOBAL ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

TYPOLOGIES OF DATUK GONG: SINICIZED FORM OF KERAMAT BELIEF IN MALAYSIAN CHINESE RELIGION

Tan Ai Boay[1*]

[1] Department of Chinese Studies, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia
Email: tanab@utar.edu.my
[*] Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:
Received date: 30.10.2025
Revised date: 18.11.2025
Accepted date: 02.12.2025
Published date: 12.12.2025

To cite this document:

Tan, A. B. (2025). Typologies of Datuk Gong: Sinicized Form of Keramat Belief in Malaysian Chinese Religionah. *International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia, 8* (27), 34-53.

DOI: 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Abstract:

This paper examines the typologies of Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia, with a particular focus on its Sinicized transformation. Based on archival materials and fieldwork carried out between 2018 and 2025 in Malaysia, southern Thailand, Singapore, and Medan Indonesia. The paper identifies two broad categories of Datuk Gong. The first is the *keramat*-derived form, rooted in Malay animistic traditions and later taken up by local Chinese communities. The second category involves personified figures—especially first-generation Chinese immigrant leaders who died under unusual circumstances and were remembered as martyrs before eventually being deified as Datuk Gong. Although the research covers multiple regions, it remains qualitative. The number of Datuk Gong shrines is very large and unevenly recorded, so this paper selects several representative cases to construct a workable analytical framework. The findings show that *keramat*-type Datuk Gong may appear through stones, mounds, termitaria, snakes, foxes, or even cannons. Besides that, Chinese communities reinterpreted *keramat* beliefs and also turned certain local historical figures into protective deities, allowing collective memory to become part of religious practice. By laying out these two major forms more clearly, the paper offers a typological outline that has been missing in previous studies and helps situate Datuk Gong worship within broader discussions of cultural adaptation, local memory, and Chinese religious life in Southeast Asia.

Keywords:

Typology, Datuk Gong, *Keramat*, Malaysian Chinese, Syncretism, Deification

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Introduction

In Malaysia, it can be said that wherever there is a Chinese community, there is Datuk Gong worship. Datuk Gong is commonly depicted wearing a songkok and sarong, holding a *keris* (Malay dagger) in his right hand, and a golden or silver ingot in his left (figure 1). In the absence of a statue, Datuk Gong may be represented by a stone or a wooden tablet inscribed with the Deity's title. Scholars generally believe that the Datuk Gong cult is a syncretic fusion of the Chinese land deity tradition and the Malay *keramat*. However, the Chinese in Malaya not only reinterpreted the *keramat* concept but also created their own forms of Datuk Gong.

Figure 1: The Commonly Seen Statue of Datuk Gong in Malaysia

The term Datuk in Malay broadly denotes as grandfather, elder or person of esteemed status. Similarly, the Chinese honorific *Gong* (公) means grandfather, seniority, reverence, and ancestral respect. The compound name Datuk Gong thus exemplifies a cross-cultural fusion, reflecting the syncretic integration of indigenous Malay and Chinese deity worship.

This paper argues that Datuk Gong worship is not merely a derivative or accommodative expression of pre-existing religious systems, but also a creative process through which new patterns of belief are generated—such as the deification of Chinese martyrs as Datuk Gong, thereby constructing uniquely localized deity.

Although Datuk Gong is often understood as being derived from the Chinese concept of the land deity, this paper does not delve into that dimension. The notion of the land deity within Chinese religious traditions is itself highly complex and contested. In Chinese contexts, terms such as *Houtu* (后土), *Tudi Shen* (土地神), *Fude Zhengshen* (福德正神), and even Tua Pek Kong (大伯公) are used, sometimes interchangeably. Scholarly interpretations of these figures vary considerably. For instance, while some regard *Houtu* as synonymous with the land deity (Sun Anbang and Lu Fengbo 2006). But, Taoist liturgical texts—such as the Daily Morning and Evening Recitations (*Zaowan Tan Gongke Jing* 早、晚壇功課經)—present *Houtu* as a primordial deity (*Xiantian Shen* 先天神) and one of the Four Sovereigns (*Siyu* 四御) , holding a much higher cosmological rank than the *Tudi Shen*, who is responsible for the local oversight of land, and serves as an intermediary to transmit the wishes of worshippers to the celestial realm. In contrast, Datuk Gong is neither a primordial deity nor one that functions as a celestial intercessor. This paper does not seek to explore the functional attributes of Datuk Gong, as doing so will diffuse its central focus, which is to analyze the typological diversity of Datuk Gong representations in contemporary Malaysia.

Building on this typological orientation, the paper proceeds to examine the two principal categories of Datuk Gong manifestations: firstly, the *keramat*-derived types rooted in local animistic and Malay Islamic traditions; secondly, the personified types based on deified

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003
historical or legendary Chinese figures. These typologies not only highlight the syncretic fabric of Malaysian Chinese religiosity but also offer a lends thought which to understand broader processes of localization and Sinicization.

To clarify the research approach, this paper raises two research questions: Firstly, what major types of Datuk Gong exist in contemporary Malaysia? Secondly, how do these types reflect the ways of Chinese communities in selecting adopt, reinterpret and reshape *keramat* traditions?

The objective of this research is to construct a workable typological framework based on representative cases observed in the field. Although fieldwork was carried out in Malaysia, southern Thailand, Singapore, and Medan Indonesia, the paper eventually focuses on Malaysia, because all the types of Datuk Gong found in neighbouring regions can also be found in Malaysia. The study draws on archival materials and fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2025. However, this remains qualitative research. Datuk Gong shrines in Malaysia exist in very large numbers and are unevenly documented, and some are repeated or similar in form. For this reason, the paper selects only several representative cases for discussion, as the main purpose is to build a typology of Datuk Gong found in Malaysia.

Building on this typological orientation, the paper proceeds to examine the two principal categories of Datuk Gong manifestations: firstly, the *keramat*-derived types rooted in local animistic and Malay Islamic traditions; secondly, the personified types based on deified historical or legendary Chinese figures. These typologies not only highlight the syncretic fabric of Malaysian Chinese religiosity but also offer a lends thought which to understand broader processes of localization and Sinicization.

Literature Review

In recent years, the Datuk Gong topic has increasing scholarly attention—both local and international. In 2024, UTAR Press published The *Studies of Datuk Gong: Historical Materials and Fieldworks,* the first edited academic volume devoted to this subject. (Tan Ai Boay 2024) The book comprises 18 articles addressing the Datuk Gong phenomenon in Malaysia, as well as in Medan (Indonesia), Singapore, and Thailand. While the volume represents a significant step forward in consolidating historical and ethnographic data. It lacks a systematic analysis of typologies of Datuk Gong cult and leaves analytical gap in this Datuk Gong study. Examining these typologies is crucial, as they reveal how the belief has evolved through processes of selective adaptation and syncretism during its Sinicization.

In 1924, R. O. Winstedt classified *Malay keramat* into six categories based on 51 cases. Building upon Winstedt's foundational work**,** Cheu Hock Tong (1998**)** further categorized *keramat* into animals and inanimate object (Cheu Hock Tong 1998)**.** Nearly a century later, Tan Ai Boay and Toh Teong Chuan revisited Winstedt's framework through extensive fieldwork conducted at more than fifty Datuk Gong temples along the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. A *Datuk Gong temple* is defined as a shrine where Datuk Gong is worshipped as the main deity in the temple. In their Chinese joint paper "Sinicization of a Foreign God: The Study of Datuk Kong Belief in Malaysia," they proposed a revised typology, categorizing *keramat*-type Datuk Gong into three groups and excluding the category of "living Muslim saints" originally proposed by Winstedt. (Tan Ai Boay and Toh Teong Chuan 2021) This paper seeks to extend their findings in *keramat*-type of Datuk Gong by incorporating new

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

empirical data gathered in recent years from beyond Malaysia, including Singapore, Southern Thailand, and Medan, Indonesia.

In contrast to studies on *keramat*-type of Datuk Gong, Chinese figures who were deified as Datuk Gong have been discussed separately by different researchers. For instance, Lee Eng Kew analyzed the legend of So Ah Cheong—a Chinese secret society leader who was posthumously venerated as a Datuk Gong—from a Chinese folklore perspective. (Lee Eng Kew 2003) In Lew Bon Hoi's article "An Assessment of Folk Legends in Malaysia and Singapore," he classified Chinese legends into four types: (1) historical figures and legends; (2) local legends; (3) religious legends; and (4) legends of animals and plants. He categorized So Ah Cheong under legends of animals and plant group. (Lew Bon Hoi 2012) This paper challenges such a classification, arguing instead that So Ah Cheong should be understood as a historical figure within the context of Datuk Gong studies. Furthermore, this study revisits overlooked English-language historical accounts of So Ah Cheong, which were neglected in the works of both Lee Eng Kew and Lew Bon Hoi.

The concept of hybridization, syncretism, and Sinicization, which have become central conceptual frameworks in the study of Datuk Gong studies. (Mohd. Razha Rashid, Wazir-jahan Karim 1998; Cheu Hock Tung 1998; Daniel P. S. Goh 2009; See Hoon Peow 2012; Danny Wong Tze Ken et.al 2020; Zhaoyuan Wang 2022) This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing concrete ethnographic and historical examples that demonstrate how the syncretism, hybridization, and Sinicization are manifested in practice.

Research Methodology

As a Malaysian Chinese, the worship of Datuk Gong has always been part of the author's everyday cultural landscape. In 2018, with the sponsorship of Siang Heng Plastic Ware Sdn. Bhd., Datuk Gong belief and practice became the focus of a systematic academic investigation. The research has continued until today.

This study combines archival research and fieldwork. Archival materials were obtained from the National Archives of Malaysia, while the main emphasis was placed on ethnographic investigations. Fieldwork focused on collecting scattered primary sources, including epigraphic records, oral accounts, and the diverse iconographic representations of Datuk Gong found throughout Malaysia.

Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) operates on a three-semester system. Therefore, fieldwork could only be carried out during semester breaks, after teaching hours, or during examination periods. To date, the research team has visited more than sixty Datuk Gong shrines across Malaysia from 2018 until the early 2025. Additional field studies were conducted twice in southern Thailand, three times in Medan, Indonesia, and once in Singapore. After carrying out these investigations in neighbouring countries, it became clear that the full range of Datuk Gong types found abroad also appears in Malaysia. For this reason, the present paper focuses on Malaysian cases.

All photographs used in this article were taken by the research team. Throughout the research process, the team adhered to research ethics and local religious taboos. For example, upon arriving at a Datuk Gong shrine, offerings and incense were first presented to show the respect before any documentation work was carried out. In addition, members of the research team had

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

to take *halal* food for three days before visiting Pulau Besar, the well-known *keramat* sacred site in Melaka.

The research flow of this study can be divided into several stages:

The first stage involved collecting existing written materials, likes articles, books, British colonial records, newspapers and others. At this stage, online searches of Datuk Gong temples were also conducted. This helped establish a preliminary list of Datuk Gong sites and provided the historical background needed to understand *keramat* worship.

The second stage was on-site fieldwork. Each field trip followed a similar sequence: identifying the site, observing the physical features of the shrine, presenting offerings as a gesture of respect, speaking with caretakers or local devotees, and photographing or documenting the material forms associated with Datuk Gong.

The third stage focused on organizing data, which is a crucial part of academic work. After each trip, the team sorted photographs, wrote interview notes, and discussed the findings with other research members to verify and refine observations.

The final stage was typological construction. Representative cases were selected from each group to illustrate recurring patterns found during the fieldwork.

The flow of research was not strictly linear. At times, new information discovered during the third stage led the team back to the first stage to search for additional materials or archival sources. In this sense, the process moved back and forth rather than following a single direction.

Datuk Gong as a Derived Form of Keramat

The term *keramat*, derived from the Arabic word meaning "miracle-working" or "endowed with supernatural power," encompasses a wide range of sacred phenomena in the Malay world. It may refer to graves, living persons, animals, natural features, or even objects imbued with perceived spiritual potency, such as the "floating" cannon near the ferry pier in Butterworth, Penang. (R. J. Rivers 2003) This paper argues that *keramat* did not transform into Datuk Gong automatically without the mediating role of Chinese popular worship.

Natural Feature And Other Object

Over a decade ago, R. O. Winstedt documented that in Malay society, natural features such as rocks, hills, capes, whirlpools, and ponds were often regarded as *keramat*. While some of these natural features were not retained in Datuk Gong worship. At the same time. The Chinese communities in Malaya reinterpreted or reconfigured certain natural and man-made objects selectively. The entirely new forms were created, including the veneration of inanimate objects such as cannons, which were transformed into localized manifestations of Datuk Gong. Based on the research findings, the Datuk Gong categorized under this typology are as follows. This paper will focus on the most representative examples for discussion.

Stone

Besides wooden tablets inscribed with Datuk Gong's title and statues in traditional Malay attire, one of the most common natural features venerated as Datuk Gong is stone. These stones are

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

typically distinguished by unusual or symbolic appearances. For example, the Datuk Gong Temple in Seremban enshrines a stone that is said to resemble a human figure (figure 2).

Figure 2: A Naturally Shaped Stone Venerated as Datuk Gong, Believed to Bear a Human-Like Form

The uncarved and naturally shaped stone, appears somewhat like a standing human figure. Its shape, wide at the top and narrowing downward, resembles a human torso. Because of this form, devotees believe it carries a spiritual presence and worship it as Datuk Gong.

Mound

Mound-type Datuk Gong shrines are also common. These are usually found in suburban areas. Sometimes the mound-type appear in urban area and often serving as protectors of the land outside temples. At Seng Hin Kiong Temple in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, a small cave-shaped shrine houses a mound that is worshipped as Datuk Gong. Devotees have placed a white hat which symbolizing haji, put on top of the mound (figure 3). This reflecting the common belief among Chninese communibities that Datuk Gong is, or should be a pious Muslim.

Figure 3: The Mound Type of Datuk Gong

Termitarium

Termitarium-type Datuk Gong shrines are relatively rare. The termitarium Datuk Gong could find at the foot of a hill in Gertak Sanggul, Penang (figure 4). According to old stone incense burner found on site, the temple was established as early as 1909. A simple monument-like structure was built beneath the termitarium, while the white mound of the termite nest stands prominently above, resembling a tomb hill rising from the ground.

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Figure 4: The Termitarium Type of Datuk Gong

Charred Tree Trunks

In Tanjung Piandang, Perak, there is a Datuk Gong temple known as the "Truck Datuk Gong Temple." The history of the temple, as well as the origin of the charred tree trunks enshrined remains unclear. These burnt remains are prominently displayed as part of the altar, a relatively rare practice in Datuk Gong worship.

On the opposite side of the wooden tablet inscribed with Datuk Gong's title, a row of sawfish rostral teeth has been placed as an offering (figure 5). The sawfish rostrums have been observed in other temples, where they are often displayed as protective or sacred objects.

Figure 5: The Charred Tree Trunks Type of Datuk Gong

Cannon

In Butterworth, near Penang Sentral, there is a Datuk Gong temple known as the "Temple of Grandpa Big Gun" (*Da Qiang Gong Miao* 大槍公廟), which enshrines a cannon. The term "Big Gun" refers directly to the cannon as the temple's central object of worship (figure 6). The temple is believed to have been established before the late 19th century.

Figure 6. The Cannon Datuk Gong, photographed in 1958 (National Archives of Malaysia, Call No. 2007/00304055).

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Among Chinese communities, the cannon is commonly associated with Panglima So Ah Cheong, who is said to have died in the Larut Wars in 1865. In contrast, the local Malay narrative attributes the cannon to a wealthy Malay merchant named To Johan, who allegedly used it for self-defense while conducting business in Siam. (Tan Jin Ling 2025)

Every 15th day of the eighth lunar month, devotees host a traditional Menora performance in front of the temple. The performance of Menora is not uncommon in Datuk Gong festivals, particularly in the northern regions of the Malay Peninsula. For instance, devotees in Gertak Sanggul, Penang also invite Menora troupes to perform during Datuk Gong celebrations. These performances often incorporate a mixture of Thai and Penang Hokkien dialects.

The Chinese community in Malaysia adopted certain natural features from the existing Malay *keramat* tradition, such as rocks, as objects of Datuk Gong worship. Even so, the Chinese excluding others like hills, capes, whirlpools, and ponds. For worship purpose, Chinese devotees typically require a tangible, localized object. As such, objects like mounds, termitaria, and charred tree trunks have become identified as Datuk Gong. In addition to these natural features, some man-made objects, cannons, were also reinterpreted and sacralised as Datuk Gong. These are often linked to heroic figures such as Soo Ah Chong, whose story will be discussed in a later section.

Beyond these physical forms, the Chinese community also venerates certain sacred animals as manifestations of Datuk Gong.

Sacred Animals

In the Malay animistic worldview, certain animals are regarded as sacred beings. Their status is sometimes linked to beliefs in transformation or spiritual embodiment. Among these, the tiger and the crocodile are the most revered. Both animals are typically categorized into two types: *Harimau/Buaya Jadian* (shapeshifting of tiger/crocodile) and *Harimau/Buaya Keramat*. The former refers to a transformation between human and animal form, or vice versa; the latter refers to animals believed to be inherently sacred and protective in nature. (Azharudin Mohamed Dali 2023)

While the concept of *jadian* is significant in the Malay worldview, it is absent in the religious practice of the Malaysian Chinese. Instead of adopting transformation beliefs, the Chinese community recognized the spiritual power of sacred animals through another cultural form—spirit mediumship (*tangki*, 乩童). Through mediums, the Chinese identify certain Datuk Gong manifestations as tigers or crocodiles.

In addition to tigers and crocodiles, other animals, such as snakes and foxes have also been venerated as Datuk Gong. In Medan, the Chinese also worship white horse and black dragon as Datuk Gong. However, this paper focus solely on cases in Malaysia. Hence, the following section introduces four representative case studies of sacred animals worshipped as Datuk Gong in Malaysia.

Tiger

In several Datuk Gong temples in Klang, Selangor, statues of Datuk Gong are depicted standing on a tiger. These statues generally retain the standard iconography of Datuk Gong, who holding

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

a *keris* in the right hand and a pouch or ingot of wealth in the left, while incorporating the added element of a tiger beneath his feet (figure 7).

Figure 7: "Tiger Datuk Gong" Statue, Depicting Datuk Gong Standing on A Tiger While Holding a *Keris* and An Ingot.

Whether the tiger represents a transformed aspect of Datuk Gong himself or simply serves as his mount remains unclear. Oral accounts from temple devotees do not provide a consistent explanation. Nonetheless, this imagery appears to reflect a fusion of Malay *keramat* beliefs and Chinese folk religious traditions. In Chinese religious symbolism, the tiger is notably the mount of *Zhao Gongming* (趙公明), the Martial God of Wealth, who is often depicted wielding a metal whip (鋼) in his right hand and carrying a treasure basin (聚寶盆) in his left.

It is likely that in incorporating the tiger *keramat* into Datuk Gong worship, the Chinese community adapted familiar visual and symbolic motifs from their own religious traditions.

Crocodile

Compared to the tiger-associated Datuk Gong, the crocodile Datuk Gong presents a more complex range of forms. Based on fieldwork, it can be categorized into several types:

Iconographic Similarity to Tiger Datuk Gong:

Similar to the tiger-associated statues, some Datuk Gong statues stand atop crocodiles (figure 8). This type of imagery is relatively common in certain temples, particularly in the Klang area.

Figure 8: "Crocodile Datuk Gong" Statue

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

***Crocodile Representation in Object Form*:**

In a Datuk Gong shrine in Melaka, the deity venerated is referred to as the "Princess of the White Crocodile" (白鱷公主). Its ridged, scale-like texture closely resembles crocodile skin, leading devotees to interpret it as a physical manifestation of the Datuk Gong spirit (figure 9). The central object of veneration, placed in a ceramic incense burner (used for *kemenyan*), is a piece of hardened lime or stone.

Figure 9: The Crocodile Datuk Gong, Whose Venerated Form Is Believed To Resemble Crocodile Skin.

Crocodile Datuk Gong Identified through Spirit Mediumship:

In Gertak Sanggul, Penang, a predominantly Chinese fishing village, there is a seaside Datuk Gong shrine known as "Datuk Panglima." The temple has existed since at least 1917. Local belief holds that no fishing boats should anchor near the temple's stretch of coastline. The local fisherman believed that who doing so will result in poor catches or even a completely empty haul. The local spirit medium revealed that Datuk Panglima is a crocodile Datuk Gong. When the deity possesses the medium, he slithers across the floor in a crawling motion, mimicking the movement of a crocodile.

Snake

Similar to accounts of crocodile-associated Datuk Gong, spirit mediums also describe which Datuk Gong manifests as a snake. During trance rituals, the medium may mimic the writhing movements of a snake to signify the Datuk Gong is a snake. However, none of the mediums interviewed were able to name a specific temple that venerates a snake Datuk Gong without a statue.

Based on field research, two primary iconographic forms of snake-related Datuk Gong have been identified:

Cobra Imagery:

At a Datuk Gong temple in Klang, three small cobra statues are enshrined beneath the main altar. Devotees believe the cobra figure represent manifestations of Datuk Gong, although the origin or reasoning behind their inclusion remains unclear.

Snake-Draped Statue:

On Pulau Ketam in Selangor, one temple houses a highly unusual statue of Datuk Gong draped with a green serpent. The figure features the typical attributes of Datuk Gong—Malay attire,

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

songkok, and *keris*. The Datuk Gong distinguish himself with a snake coiled across his shoulders and chest, its head resting on his cane (figure 10).

Figure 10. The Datuk Gong Distinguished By A Snake Coiled Around His Shoulders And Chest.

According to Mr. Ong, President of the Datuk Nenek Temple in Pulau Kegan, the snake is regarded as a "auspicious symbol" (*Jixiang Wu*,吉祥物) or mount of vehicla (*Zuoqi* 坐騎) of Datuk Gong.[i] In keramat traditions, sacred animals were already integral to the belief system. Chinese devotees reinterpreted this presence through their own cultural framework, viewing the snake as Datuk Gong's *Zuoqi*. This reflects the dynamics of popular religion, where the absence of centralized authority enables worshippers to construct meanings and attributes for deities according to their own understanding.

Fox

In Chinese classical literature and folklore, the fox is among the most depicted animals capable of shapeshifting into human form. Tales of fox spirits appear frequently in works such *as Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi 聊齋誌異)* and *In Search of the Supernatural (Soushen Ji 搜神記*). While the notion of fox spirits is prevalent in Chinese tradition, it is rarely found in Malay *keramat* belief. However, one remarkable case of a fox-related Datuk Gong has been documented in Penang.

At Sin Fah Thong Temple (成化堂), a century-old Taoist temple in Penang which founded by *Quanzhen* (全真) Taoist priests and dedicated to Guanyin, a unique statue of Datuk Gong is enshrined beneath the main altar. Local legend stated that this Datuk Gong was originally a fox with high spiritual potential. The fox did not harm the people, but the livestock such as chickens, ducks, and pigs were found dead or mysteriously missing. Later, a Taoist priest from the temple guided the fox to cultivation. The priest consecrated a golden statue for Him, for the purpose the devotees to worship Him. The devotees name Him as Datuk Musang (literally "Fox Datuk"). They believe that this Datuk Gong possesses miraculous powers, particularly in healing mysterious and difficult illnesses.[ii] However, the statue currently worshipped at Sin Fah Thong Temple does not bear any visible features of a fox.

The sacred animals venerated as Datuk Gong by the Chinese community include the tiger, crocodile, snake, and fox. Among these, the crocodile is the most common found, aligning with its established role as a *keramat* in Malay society. However, the most story-rich and legendary among them is the crocodile Datuk Gong, which will be further explored in the section on historical figures. In addition to adapting existing beliefs, the Chinese community also created

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

new sacred animal forms of Datuk Gong. The most distinctive example is the fox, which likely reflects the influence of Chinese literary traditions and cultural knowledge. In addition, some local Chinese applied their own religious traditions to interpret these animals, for instance by regarding them as Datuk Gong' s *Zuoqi.*

Sacred Muslim Grave

In 1924, Winstedt categorized *keramat* graves into three types: the graves of magicians, the graves of settlement founders, and the graves of Muslim saints. However, after conducting fieldwork, it is often difficult to verify the actual identity of the grave's occupant. The only consistent characteristic is that the grave belongs to a Muslim. Therefore, in this paper, Datuk Gong worship in the form of grave sites will be collectively referred to as Sacred Muslim Grave.

Grave *keramat* is not uncommon in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. However, this paper focuses on a specific context when Chinese devotees worship such graves and address as Datuk Keramat or Datuk Gong. In other words, the emphasis here is on Chinese devotional practices directed toward sacred Muslim graves. Without the devotional practice of Chinese, the grave *keramat* does not attributed as Datuk Gong worship.

Pulau Kusu in Singapore, Datuk Keramat graves have long attracted Chinese pilgrims. As early as the 19th century, English and Malay newspapers reported on multi-ethnic devotees making vows at these *keramat* sites. In Medan, well-known *keramat* graves include Datuk Darah Putih and Makam Syech Said Bachrin. Many Chinese devotees make offerings at these sites. According to the caretaker of Makam Syech Said Bachrin, people of different religions come to pay respects to the sacred grave.

As this paper focus on the Malaysian context, the following discussion will focus exclusively on examples from Malaysia.

Pulau Kechil / Datuk Gong Island in Penang

Pulau Kechil, locally known among Chinese devotees as Datuk Gong Suu, is a small island located about half a mile from the Tua Pek Kong Temple at Tanjong Tokong's coastline. Suu is a Penang Hokkien pronunciation for "island" (嶼), hence the name Datuk Gong Island.

On the island stands a Datuk Gong temple in grave form, where the spirit worshipped is identified as Seyad Mohamed Kuddoos Oliyulliah (figure 11). As of the time of this research, this site holds the only known English epigraphical material directly related to Datuk Gong worship. Similar to Pulau Kusu in Singapore where 19th-century newspapers recorded Peranakan devotees making supplications, the Pulau Kechil in Penang also reflects a multi-ethnic devotional landscape.

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Figure 11: A Muslim Saint Venerated as Datuk Gong on Pulau Kechil, Penang

The English epigraph, dated 1937, lists Khoo Sian Ewe (1886–1964), a prominent Peranakan and local elite in Penang, as the top donor. Notably, some of the other donors were not of Chinese ethnicity, indicating that the Datuk Keramat belief had already transcended ethnic boundaries during that period.

Pulau Besar, Melaka

Pulau Besar is mentioned in ancient Chinese records during the Ming dynasty, referred to as Wu Yu (五嶼). A 1930 report in the *Straits Times* noted that the island attracted a significant number of pilgrims. In 1950, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* published a travel account that described a Datuk Gong temple on the island, which enshrined *keramat*. The article also mentioned that there were six Datuk Gong graves on the island.

In April 2019, the research team visited Pulau Besar and found several rectangular tombs still present, though most were restricted from worship. However, in a more remote part of the island, there exists a tomb referred to as Datuk Nenek. Devotees, including Malaysian Chinese, Malaysian Indians and Indonesians offering prayers in their own ways. Sarongs are sold nearby, which worshippers use to cover the length of the tomb as a form of respect. Because Chinese devotees are also involved, a joss stick holder has been placed in front of the tomb, and the site is known as Datuk Nenek.

The Sacred Muslim Grave form of Datuk Gong worship is widely distributed and likely represents a key element through which Chinese communities accepted the *keramat* tradition and localized it into the Datuk Gong belief system.

The next section of this paper will explore another major typology of Datuk Gong worship—personified figures. This category, in some cases, is also closely connected to the veneration of sacred Muslim graves.

Personified figures

The second major typology of Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia is the personified figure. This paper categorizes personified Datuk Gong into three types: historical figures, legendary figures, and those who revealed their identities through spirit mediumship. Among these, historical figures are the least common.

This paper does not intend to include the case of Karpal Singh (1940–2014), a prominent Member of Parliament from Penang and former National Chairman of the Democratic Action Party, who was reportedly venerated as Datuk Gong at a Chinese temple in Teluk Intan, Perak

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

in 2017. As the worship seems to be a recent and personal phenomenon that has not yet become a recognized religious tradition, it is not included in this study.

Based on current research, only one historically rooted example of a personified Datuk Gong has been confirmed.

Historical Figure

The Larut Wars of the 1860s were among the key events that eventually led to the signing of the Pangkor Engagement in 1874 between the British colonial authorities and local Malay rulers and Chinese leaders. The Pangkor Engagement is widely regarded as a watershed moment in Malayan history, marking the beginning of formal British political intervention in the Malay states. One of the Chinese leaders involved in the Larut Wars was So Ah Cheong, who is also recognized as the first historical Chinese figure to be venerated as a Datuk Gong.

So Ah Cheong, a Hakka from Fui Chew (Huizhou), was the head of the Ghee Hin, one of the major Chinese secret societies active in Larut. During the 1860s, a series of violent clashes broke out in Larut between the Ghee Hin and their rival society, the Hai San, resulting in several large-scale armed conflicts.

According to historical records, following the Larut Wars, approximately 2,000 Fui Chew Chinese were forcibly expelled from Klian Bahru. They fled in small groups through the jungle toward Province Wellesley. Many were severely weakened by wounds, ulcers, and hunger. So Ah Cheong, along with his wife Chew Noah, their child, with a young trader Chew Sweet Poh and his wife Soh Kim Len, as well as another companion, attempted to escape to Penang via Kurau. However, Ngah Ibrahim, the Malay administrator of Larut, issued orders for So Ah Cheong's arrest should he pass through the area. During the escape, So Ah Cheong suffered a serious fall, and his companions fashioned a hammock from tree branches to carry him. Upon reaching Sungai Kurau, they sought help from a local man named Pandak Korik, who instead detained and bound them, handing them over to Ngah Ibrahim at Ujong Tembok. So Ah Cheong and several men were later executed at Teluk Kertang. The women were detained and later takn away by Penan police. (Khoo Kay Kim 1972)

In local folklore, So Ah Cheong appears quite differently in Chinese and Malay cultural memories.

Chinese Versions

In Chinese oral traditions, So Ah Cheong is often portrayed as a heroic and semi-mythical figure. One popular story claims that he was gifted a magical boar tusk amulet (commonly referred to as *shan zhu lian* 山豬鍊) by an old wild boar who had cultivated spiritual powers over many years. This amulet was said to be hidden in his left leg and rendered him invulnerable.

In one version, he used his powers to rob the rich and help the poor. When arrested by British officers, his wife who unable to bear his suffering, chose to reveal the secret of his protection, leading to his capture and eventual downfall.

In another version, So Ah Cheong tried to mediate the conflict between rival Chinese secret societies in Larut, but the situation worsened. Under pressure from the British, the Perak Sultan

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

allegedly sent the penghulu to persuade his adopted son, So Ah Cheong, to surrender. (Lee Eng Kew 2003)

Some versions claim that upon death, he transformed into a tiger if buried on land, or into a crocodile if buried at sea. This story connects him to the sacred animal typology of Datuk Gong worship.

Malay Version

In Malay oral tradition in Perak, So Ah Cheong is remembered differently. A local belief holds that a white crocodile in the Larut River is the transformed spirit of So Ah Cheong. According to this version, he was a Ghee Hin leader who desired to learn *silat*, the traditional Malay martial art. He vowed not to use his knowledge against the Malays. However, after breaking his vow, he was "cursed by his own oath" and eventually leapt into the river, transforming into a white crocodile. (Azharudin Mohamed Dali 2023)

So Ah Cheong was executed in 1865. By 1895, a Chinese-style incense burner had already been dedicated to him, indicating that within thirty years of his death, he was venerated by the local Chinese community as a Datuk Gong. The devotees of Datuk Gong So Ah Cheong are predominantly Chinese, and thus the Chinese version of his legend is the one most widely circulated.

Today, in the entering of the So Ah Cheong Datuk Gong Temple, a signboard explicitly states that Western alcoholic beverages and foreign ritual items are not allowed as offerings. This prohibition is reflecting efforts to preserve the cultural boundaries and ritual propriety in worship.

The question arises: Why would local Chinese worship So Ah Cheong as a Datuk Gong?

Historical context offers a plausible explanation. According to R. O. Winstedt's records, by the 18th century, a sacred grave in the Klian Bahru area belonged to a midwife of Acehnese origin, named Toh Bidan Lanjut, who had delivered babies across various ethnic communities. Her tomb, located beneath a large tree, became a site of petition and offering, where people hung cloth or stones on the branches. Chinese tin miners often employed Indian Muslim caretakers to tend the site, signifying their participation in *keramat* worship.

This historical background suggests that the local Chinese were already familiar with *keramat* veneration. Therefore, when they lost a community leader such as So Ah Cheong, it may have been a natural response to honor him in the form of Datuk Gong, adapting a preexisting local *keramat* religious model to their own cultural framework.

The next type of Datuk Gong to be discussed also belongs to the personified figure category. However, unlike So Ah Cheong, whose historical existence is documented, the figures in these cases are known primarily through oral traditions and local legends circulated among devotees and within the local community.

As no verifiable historical records of these individuals have been found to date, this paper classifies them as legendary figures within the typology of Datuk Gong worship.

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Legendary Figures

This category of Datuk Gong includes individuals believed to have once lived, but whose historical existence cannot be confirmed due to the absence of reliable primary sources. Their stories are preserved through oral traditions and local memory. Unlike those Datuk Gong figures whose identities were revealed through spirit mediumship, legendary figures were not identified through possession. Based on these criteria, this paper selects Datuk Gong Teh as a representative example.

In the town center of Parit Buntar, Perak, stands a prominent Chinese temple dedicated to Datuk Gong. This temple plays an important role in preserving and promoting Chinese culture, particularly Teochew language and traditions in this Teochew-majority town. A street in the town, Jalan Teh Peh Kong, is even named after this deity.

This temple is likely the earliest officially registered Datuk Gong temple during the British colonial period, recorded as "La-tok Kung Kiong" in the Perak Government Gazette in 1900. (Perak Government Gazette 1900). It also possesses the oldest known Datuk Gong incense burner in Malaysia, dated 1886.

Who was Datuk Gong Teh? Local oral traditions offer two main versions of his story:

Version 1: He is a sugarcane plantation foreman. During a massive fire on the plantation, he helped workers escape but was himself trapped in the blaze. The fire burned for days, and afterward, his body was never found. People believed he had sacrificed himself for others. Then, the local community began worshipping him as Datuk Gong.

Version 2: He was once a servant in a wealthy household. One day, he left on an errand and never returned. The household searched for him in vain. Later, he appeared to his master in a dream and instructed that “the place where you find the walking stick is where I now reside.” A walking stick was found at the future temple site, where worship then began, eventually leading to the establishment of a Datuk Gong temple.

Having examined legendary figures, the paper now turns to the final category: Datuk Gong whose identities were revealed through spirit mediumship—individuals who introduced themselves directly during trance rituals.

Revealed Through Spirit Mediumship

In many cases, devotees worship Datuk Gong without knowing the deity’s precise identity. The devoteeseeking only protection and blessings. However, over time, especially in temples where spirit medium practices are active, the identity of Datuk Gong may be revealed. Through trance rituals, the deity may disclose a name or personal details, or devotees may directly inquire about the identity during the session. This type of Datuk Gong, whose identity is revealed through spirit mediumship, is categorized here as self-revealed.

This form of identity revelation is particularly prominent in Kuala Kurau area in Perak, where at least one Chinese Datuk Gong temples belong to this type: the temples of Datuk Gong Chua Wen Long (蔡文龍).

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Datuk Gong Chua Wen Long temple is located along the riverside of Kuala Kurau. Oral accounts suggest that Datuk Chua was originally referred to as the "Jetty Datuk" (渡头拿督). His main duty is to guard the sea and tides. The temple's location was said to be chosen by the Datuk himself through spiritual means. One notable legend recount how a spirit medium once warned villagers not to go out to sea before the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; a fisherman who ignored this advice narrowly escaped disaster and later returned to the temple to give thanks.

Although the temple does not allow frequent trance rituals, when necessary, the Datuk selects a specific spirit medium to convey instructions. It was through such a trance session that the deity revealed his name—Chua Wen Long—and clarified his Chinese identity.

On the streets of Kuala Kurau, there are several Malay-style Datuk Gong temples, such as those dedicated to Datuk Bunya, Datuk Ali, and Datuk Alai. Another notable temple in the area is the Lim Tian Lai (林天來) Datuk Gong Temple, which venerates a Chinese Datuk Gong. This temple is located at a sharp road junction where vehicles are required to make a wide turn. Local residents believe that the Datuk's presence is the reason why no fatal accidents occurred at that location.(Tan Ai Boay 2018)

However, unlike the case of Datuk Gong Chua Wen Long, there is not sure that the name "Lim Tian Lai" was revealed through spirit mediumship or not. In other word, the origin of the name remains unclear. As such, although the temple is respected and follows Chinese ritual practices, this paper does not classify it under the "revealed through spirit mediumship" typology, due to the absence of clear self-revelation by the deity.

This paper does not aim to categorize every Datuk Gong temple into a fixed typology. Rather, it seeks to illustrate the diversity of Datuk Gong worship through selected representative examples for each category.

Conclusion

The paper contributes to the study of Datuk Gong by providing concrete examples and proposing a typological framework. It identifies two main categories. The first includes those derived from *keramat*. New forms have emerged, such as mounds, termitaria, and charred tree trunks, remains as natural objects in essence. However, the appearance of cannons represents an entirely new development. The Chinese reverence toward Datuk Gong, shaped by the animistic nature of Malay *keramat*, generated new material expressions, including technological objects. In other words, the Chinese popular religious mindset favors tangible and visible objects for veneration rather than distant whirlpools. This tendency is also seen in the worship of sacred animals, where animal spirits are represented through plagues or statues, such as tigers, crocodiles, and more recently snakes and foxes.

In terms of tomb veneration, Chinese communities generally avoid worshiping the other families' ancestors, except when the tomb is regarded as sacred. Among those considered "holy tombs," all known examples are Muslim graves. So far, no Chinese graves have been found to be transformed into Datuk Gong sites. This preserves an important feature of the original *keramat* model.

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

In general, living individuals are not worshiped in Chinese culture. Thus, unlike the *keramat* tradition where holy persons may be venerated during their lifetime, this does not occur in Chinese society in Malaya. The Chinese community venerates them only after they have passed away. This paper identifies three subtypes of personified Datuk Gong: historical figures, legendary figures, and self-revealed figures, with the latter being the most common, usually identified through spirit mediumship.

This selective adaptation of Datuk Gong belief resulted in a hybrid practice. The reinterpretation of *keramat* elements through a Chinese lens was not only a process of localization but also of Sinicization. While adopting existing *keramat* forms, the Chinese community simultaneously reinterpreted them through their own cultural framework, for instance, understanding the snake associated with *keramat* as Datuk Gong's *Zuoqi*. At the same time, they created new forms, such as deifying Chinese pioneers, treating them as martyrs, and venerating them as Datuk Gong.

Even when a Datuk Gong is dressed in a Malay sarong, the internal framework often reflects Chinese cosmology. For example, the configuration of five Datuk Gong deities which found in Labuan, Melaka, Sarawak, and Medan, corresponds to the Chinese theory of the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, represented by white, green, blue/black, red, and yellow. Although the external appearance is Malay, a closer look reveals distinct Chinese religious layers.

Overall, the objectives of this research have been achieved. By selecting representative cases from different regions and comparing their forms, the paper has outlined the major typologies of Datuk Gong currently found in Malaysia. The proposed typological framework provides a clearer structure for understanding a belief that is often mentioned but seldom systematically analyzed.

This study also makes several contributions. It offers a grounded classification that future scholars may refine, challenge, or expand. The typology helps explain why Datuk Gong worship appears so diverse and how its forms emerged through long-term cultural encounters between Chinese and Malay communities.

Finally, the study acknowledges the limitations of qualitative fieldwork. Many Datuk Gong shrines remain undocumented, and some oral traditions are fragmentary. Future research, especially collaborative work with local communities, may reveal additional forms or variations. Even so, the typologies proposed in this paper offer an crucial point for further discussions on localization, memory-making, and Chinese popular religion in Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgement (Mandotary)
This research was supported by a research grant from Siang Heng Plastic Ware Sdn. Bhd., led by Managing Director Dato' Teoh Boon Thong. The author gratefully acknowledges his generous support. Appreciation is also extended to the research team members—Dr. Toh Teong Chuan, Dr. Song Yanpeng, Heah Huey Iang, Cheong Man Ying, Cha Zhi Ting, Raymond Tang, Ho Sin Ni, and Tan Jin Ling—for their assistance and cooperation during the fieldwork.

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

References

Azharudin Mohamed Dali (2023), *Dunia Haiwan di Alam Melayu: Mitos, Mistik dan Sejarah*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2023.

Cheu Hock Tong (1998). The Sinicization of Malay Keramats in Malaysia. *Journal of the The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 71 (2) (275), 31—32.

Goh, Daniel P. S. (2009). Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridization and Transfiguration. *Asian Journal of Social Science* (37), 107—137.

Khoo Kay Kim (1972). *The Western Malay States 1850 – 1873: The Effects of Commercial Development on Malay Politics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Mohd. Razha Rashid, Wazir-jahan Karim (1988). Ritual, Ethnicity and Transculturalism in Penang. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*. Vol. 3 (1), 62—78.

Lee Eng Kew (2003*). The Chinese Historical Figure of Taiping*, Penang: Nan Yang Folk Culture. **李永球**。《**移国**——**太平**华裔历史人物集》。

Lew Bon Hoi (2012). An Assessment of Folk Legends in Malaysia and Singapore. *Journal of Chinese Literature of National Cheng Kung University*. (39), 169—196. **廖文**辉。〈马**新民**间传说初探〉《成大中文学报》。

Perak Government Gazette 1900.

Rivers, R. J. (2003). Keramat in Singapore in the Mid-Twentieth Century. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 76 (2)(285), 93 – 119.

See Hoon Peow (2012). From Keramat to Datuk Gong: A Religious Exchange Between The Malays and The Chinese. *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)*. 17 (2), 185–204.

Sun Anbang and Lu Fengbo (2006) , Houtu is the Same as the Tudi Shen. *Journal of Yuncheng University*, 24(3),13–16. 孙安邦、陆峰波。〈后土就是土地神〉《运城学院学》。

Tan Ai Boay (2018). Preliminary Study of History and Legends of Chinese and Foreigner Datuk Gong in Malaysia. *Overseas Chinese Journal of Bagui*. (4), 15—23 陈爱梅。〈浅析马来西亚唐、番拿督公信仰的史料与传说〉《台北大学中文学 报》。

Tan Ai Boay, Toh Teong Chuan (2021). Sinicization of Foreign God--The Study of Datuk Kong Belief in Malaysia. *Journal of Chinese Language and Literature of National Taipei University*. (30) 601−634. 陈爱梅、杜忠全。〈番神唐化—马来西亚拿督公信仰〉《**台北大学中文学**报》。

Tan Ai Boay (ed) (2024), *The Studies of Datuk Gong: Historical Materials and Fieldworks*, Selangor: UTAR Press. 陈爱梅（主编）。《拿督公研究：史料与田野调查》。

Tan Jin Ling (2025). The Brief History of Chinese Community and Temples in Butterworth (1856—1957). Tan Ai Boay (ed), *Commemorative Issue for the 2024 The Great Ritual Prayers and Offering to Heaven at Tow Boo Kong Temple Butterworth*, Penang: Rumah Berhala Tow Boo Kong. 陈矜伶。〈**北海**华人及庙宇历史〉《北海斗母宫启建 2024 **甲辰年金**箓罗天大醮特刊》。

The Cannon Datuk Gong, photographed in 1958 (National Archives of Malaysia, Call No. 2007/00304055).

International Journal of Heritage, Art and Multimedia
IJHAM
EISSN: 2600-8262
Volume 8 Issue 27 (December 2025) PP. 34-53
DOI 10.35631/IJHAM.827003

Winstedt, R. O （1924）. Keramat: sacred places and persons in Malaya. *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.* 2 (3)(92) , 264—279.

Wang, Danny Tze Ken, Wang Zhaoyuan, and Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (2020). The Alien Communal Patron Deity: A Comparative Study of the Datuk Gong Worship among Chinese Communities in Malaysia. *Indonesia and Malay World*. (48), 206–224/

Wang, Zhaoyuan (2022). The Dynamic Process of Syncretism: Datuk Gong Worship in Malaysia. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*. 78 (4), 1–6.

[i] Interview with Mr. Ong, President of the Datuk Nenek Temple in Pulau Ketam, Klang, Selangor, on 19 Sept 2025.