

Malaysian Cuisine: A Case of Neglected Culinary Globalization

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Abstract

Malaysian cuisine represents a culinary diversity originating from Malaysia's multiethnic society: Malay, Chinese, Indian, Nyonya, Eurasian, and so on. There are many Malaysian favourites such as *nasi lemak*, *beef rendang*, *bak but teh*, *char kway teow*, *curry laksa*, *roti canai*, *nasi goreng*, *nasi dagang*, and so forth. Nonetheless, Malaysian restaurants are very limited in number in virtually all major cities of the world compared with Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian restaurants. In Tokyo, for example, there are only five Malaysian restaurants. Why doesn't Malaysian cuisine become global? The paper attempts to offer interpretations and explanations for this question. Its approach is sociological, inquiring into social processes that take place among social actors, in this case, producers, reproducers and consumers of cuisine. Focusing on the Japanese market, the paper analyses social characteristics of consumers of ethnic food and then looks into some issues regarding reproducers of Malaysian cuisine in the global market such as the role of small businesses and the government.

Yoshino, Kosaku. 2010. Malaysian Cuisine: A Case of Neglected Culinary Globalization. In *Globalization, Food and Social Identities in the Asia Pacific Region*, ed. James Farrer. Tokyo: Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture.

URL: <http://icc fla.sophia.ac.jp/global%20food%20papers/html/yoshino.html>

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Introduction

Food has often been cited as offering a good vantage point for observing globalization, as it highlights close connections among peoples, cultures and places. Indeed, culinary globalization is a subject that is gaining increasing popularity in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. One of the areas that have so far received much attention is the global spread of American fast food (e.g., Ritzer 1993; Watson 1997). Another fairly popular area is the globalization of particular national cuisines, as represented in publications by Bester's "How sushi went global" (2000) and Wu and Cheung's *The Globalization of Chinese Food* (2002). Confining ourselves to Asian examples, Japanese and Chinese cuisines are obviously successful cases of culinary globalization. While more studies should be conducted of other successful Asian cases, such as Thai and Indonesian cuisines, the aim of this essay is to look into a "failed" or rather "forgotten" case of culinary globalization. By doing so, I hope to shed more light on one potential area of food globalization that until now has received little attention: Malaysian cuisine.¹

Malaysian cuisine represents a significant range of culinary diversity originating from Malaysia's multiethnicity. There are many Malaysian favourites such as *nasi lemak*, beef *rendang*, *bak kut teh*, *char kway teow*, curry *laksa*, *roti canai*, *nasi goreng*, *nasi dagang*, and more. Despite the variety of dishes available, Malaysian restaurants are limited in number in virtually all major cities of the world compared with Thai, Vietnamese and Indonesian restaurants. In Tokyo, for example, there are only six Malaysian restaurants (as of December 2008). Thus the question arises, given the wide range of palatable meals, why doesn't Malaysian cuisine fare well on the global market? This essay attempts to examine the question and offers some tentative interpretations of its relative lack of impact on the global market.

The approach adopted in this essay is sociological and makes inquiries into certain social processes that take place between these two social actors: reproducers and consumers of ethnic cuisine.² Considering the Japanese market as a particular example, this study attempts to examine the social characteristics of consumers of ethnic food and then looks into certain issues regarding reproducers of Malaysian cuisine, such as the roles of small businesses and the state. Methodologically, I conducted a number of open-ended interviews with owners and managers of Malaysian restaurants in Tokyo as well as some exploratory interviews with designers

1. This is an unfinished paper. The project is still on-going. I have not been able to complete the empirical research by the time of submission of my paper for the on-line publication of conference proceedings.

2. Many studies of food culture tend to limit themselves to interpretations of the representation of the food.

of ethnic restaurants in both Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur between 2007 and 2009. During this period, I also obtained information from many restaurant customers in the form of casual chats, which proved to be a very useful method since they provided opportunities to understand the reasons and motivations for visiting ethnic restaurants in the contexts of their lifestyles, family relations, friends, and so on. Additionally, I had numerous unstructured interviews with Malay, Chinese, Indian and other residents of Malaysia about their own interpretations of the place of Malaysian cuisine in the national and global culinary markets in 2007-9.

It should be made clear at the outset that this is an exploratory study, not a finished paper either in theoretical or methodological terms and should be considered as such. Some empirical generalizations are made on the basis of my own studies and observations, but more rigorous research should be conducted before any confirmed statements can be made.

Malaysia's Multiethnicity and Its Cuisines



Nasi lemak



Satay



Beef rendang



Bak kut teh (肉骨茶)

Photo source: MalaysianFood.net (<http://www.malaysianfood.net/index.htm>)

Before inquiring into the relative lack of globalization of Malaysian cuisine, let us first take a brief look at Malaysia's population composition. As of 1991, the three main categories of this country—Malays, Chinese and Indians—account for the vast majority of the population, at 50.7%, 27.5% and 7.8% respectively, and the remaining part of the population consists of these indigenous groups: Orang Asli, Dayaks, Kadazan and others (Department of Statistics 1991, 40). The basis for this so-called MCIO (Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others) classification can be traced back to the British colonial period, when large numbers of people migrated from China, the Indian subcontinent, Ceylon and elsewhere. During the colonial period, the three main groups were sharply divided into economic sectors, with Malays in the countryside cultivating rice, the Chinese (mostly in the cities) engaged in commerce, industry, and tin-mining, and Indians on the rubber plantations. These groups gave rise to what Furnivall called a “plural society” (Furnivall 1939 [1969]). Of course, MCIO was not such a simple construct, since the Malay, Chinese and Indian peoples were themselves formed from diverse groups and categories (Yoshino 2002).

The Malays as a group are conceptually broad and epitomize a “hybrid ethnicity.” Also, the Chinese consist of a large number of sub-groups (Cantonese, Hokkiens, Hakkas, Teochews, etc.) based on place of origin and dialect. Indians, as well, are divided into groups depending on religion (Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, etc.) or place of origin (Indian Tamils, Malayalis, Telugus, Sikhs, including Punjabis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankan Tamils, and other Sri Lankans). These groups were formed into monolithic categories of Malays, Chinese, and Indians at the time of a census of Malayan Federated States taken in 1911. The population census and the various

administrative institutions that were established during the colonial period served to institutionalize and fix in place the Malay, Chinese and Indian categories (Yoshino 2002).³

The multiethnic nature of Malaysia's population is reflected in its cuisine. So next, let us take a further look into Malaysia's main ethnic groups and briefly discuss the types of cuisine associated with each ethnicity. It should be noted that the description that follows is not a comprehensive one.

Malay cuisine



Char kway teow



Malaysian chicken
curry



Roti canai



Curry laksa

Photo sources: MalaysianFood.net (<http://www.malaysianfood.net/index.htm>) except Curry laksa, which was taken from Rasa Malaysia (<http://www.rasamalaysia.com/labels/Hawker%20Food.html>)

Malays in Malaysia are the descendants of proto-Malays mixed with Indian, Thai, Arab and Chinese forebears. Malay culture, and therefore Malay cuisine, were formed under the strong influences of such ethnic groups as Indians, Thais, Javanese, Sumatran, and others. Regional differences were also significant. For example, in the north, intermarriages with Thais were common, and accordingly the northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu display distinct Thai influences in their cuisine. Indonesian influences were pervasive in the central state of Negeri Sembilan, which was settled largely by the Minangkabau from West Sumatra and thus reflects its history and cuisine. *Rendang* (richly spiced meat curry dish) is a typical example. In the early 20th century, there was a large influx of Sumatran migrants to Kuala Lumpur and other parts of the Malayan heartland, an event that made *nasi padang* a very popular Malaysian dish, which is now served at many Malay restaurants and stalls. *Nasi padang* is a meal of rice served with meat, fish, poultry, and vegetables, originating from the West Sumatran district of Padang. The Malay cuisine in the southernmost state of Johor reflects the influence of the Javanese who settled there over the past two centuries. Despite the regional differences, however, Malay cuisine can be characterized by its use of a variety of spices and herbs. One distinguishing ingredient used in many Malay dishes is *belacan* (shrimp paste). One of the most popular Malay dishes is *nasi lemak*. This is a meal of rice cooked in coconut milk served with *sambal ikan bilis* (chilli anchovies), cucumber slices, hard boiled egg and roasted peanuts and is traditionally packaged in a fresh banana leaf (MalaysianFood.net; Hutton and Tettoni 2005).

3. This essay focuses only on Peninsular Malaysia. Sabah and Sarawak are not included in this discussion.

Malaysian Chinese cuisine

Sea-faring Chinese merchants and traders have long had a presence in the South China Sea and a link to the Malay Peninsula. Some of these early comers eventually intermarried with local Malays and integrated with the local communities. But it was later in history during the British colonial era of the 19th century that the Chinese came in masses to the Malay Peninsula, attracted by the tin mining industry in that area. Most of the Chinese were labourers from the southern provinces of China, while others became small business merchants or worked as artisans. The Chinese brought with them their cultures, languages and skills as well as their cuisine with its various provincial styles. The basic ingredients for these dishes included noodles, tofu, and soy sauce. Since these times, the Hokkien (Fujian) and Cantonese have been the dominant Chinese ethnic groups in Malaysia. Hokkien food is probably the best known in Malaysia, but there are also other Chinese cuisines such as Cantonese, Hainanese, Teochew, and Hakka. *Bak kut teh* (pork rib soup) is a very popular Hokkien herbal soup dish. *Char kway teow* is also popularly believed to be a Hokkien dish. Malaysian Chinese cuisine has added a variety of favourite Malaysian spices such as cinnamon bark and star anise which has served to indigenize and re-flavour the traditional Chinese dishes (MalaysianFood.net; Hutton and Tettoni 2005). As a result, many “Chinese” dishes in Malaysia have gone native, for example, the many different kinds of curries and other items using local ingredients like *daun kesum* (polygonaceae), *bunga kantan* (torch ginger flower), *galangal*, *daun kadoh* (wild pepper leaf vine), lemon grass, *cencalok* (fermented shrimp or krill), and *buah petai* (twisted cluster bean).

Malaysian Indian cuisine

As with the Chinese, the Malay Peninsula had a long history of commerce with merchants from India. The flow of trade waxed and waned over the centuries, but the commerce always brought Indian influences in its wake. However, it was not until the 19th century, after the British took control of the Malay Peninsula, that traders and labourers from India came in large numbers. As a consequence, Indian food became “Malaysianized,” as in the case of Chinese food, and distinctive versions of Indian food, not normally found in India, were invented. In today’s Malaysia, not only will one find many Indian restaurants serving “authentic” northern and southern Indian cuisine, but also Indian-Muslim stalls and eateries that form an interesting cross-section of Malaysia’s culinary landscape. Locals refer to the latter as “Mamak” or *nasi kandar* stalls or restaurants, which serve Indian-Muslim food—a culinary fusion of Indian and Malay cooking styles.⁴ Its curries and ingredients are Indian but the dishes are very

4. “Mamak” is an almost derogatory term for Indian Muslim. *Nasi kandar* refers to cuisine usually sold by Indian Muslims.

Malaysian in terms of its combination of ingredients and the way it is served. *Roti canai*, for example, would be considered a popular and typically Malaysian Indian breakfast, served with, lentil or *dhall* curry (MalaysianFood.net; Hutton and Tettoni 2005).

Nyonya cuisine

The early Chinese settlers (mentioned above) who became localized are called Straits Chinese or “Peranakan.” The males are called “Baba,” and females are called “Nyonya.” The language of the Peranakans, is Baba Malay (Bahasa Melayu Baba), a dialect of the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu), which contains many Hokkien words. Acculturation with Malay culture and society naturally followed, and a strong hybrid culture has resulted in producing a unique cuisine. This would be known as Nyonya cuisine, resulting from a marriage of Chinese, Thai, Indonesian and Malay cuisines. Although Nyonya food contains traditional Chinese ingredients and Malay spices and herbs, an eclectic selection of preparation and cooking methods, ingredients, herbs and seasonings makes the taste and aroma different from either Chinese or Malay food. One can easily recognise Nyonya food by its cooking style, which is, I dare say, is the epitome of fusion cuisine. As in Malay cooking, *belacan* is a key ingredient in Nyonya cuisine. Whereas Nyonya food in northern Malaysia (namely, Penang) has a Thai influence, Nyonya food in the south (Malacca and Singapore) has characteristics influenced by Indonesians. *Laksa* (a noodle dish served in a tamarind based fish soup blended with shallots, chillis, *belacan* and *otaku dang* or shrimp paste) is probably one of the most famous Nyonya dishes among Malaysians. Nyonya cuisine is also known for its *kuih* (local cakes) (MalaysianFood.net; Hutton and Tettoni 2005).

Images of Malaysian Cuisine

Let us now consider why Malaysian cuisine, despite its distinctive heritages, has not won much respect among the international restaurant crowd. Before inquiring into market mechanisms, however, it may be instructive first to see how Malaysians and non-Malaysians (in this case, the Japanese) themselves react to the question as to why Malaysian cuisine has not gone global.⁵

Lack of distinctive identity (as perceived by outsiders)

The first reaction by the Japanese on any discussion of Malaysian cuisine would likely be that they cannot think of any specific dish. While one can think of *tom yam*

5. Interviews were conducted with 30 Japanese and 30 Malaysians in August and September of 2007 and 2008. Since the study was exploratory, random sampling was not used.

as a representative Thai dish, or raw spring rolls and *phô* as typically Vietnamese, and *nasi goreng* as something Indonesian (though it is in fact also Malaysian), it is simply not possible for any ordinary Japanese person to identify a specific Malaysian dish. This of course probably has something to do with the relatively small number of Japanese who have been exposed to Malaysian food. Japanese visitors to Malaysia are still fewer than those who travel to Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam, as Table 1 shows. (The difference between Malaysia and Vietnam is rather marginal, however).

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals in ASEAN from Japan, 2007

Destination	No. of tourists
Brunei	4,154
Cambodia	161,973
Indonesia	517,356
Laos	29,770
Malaysia	367,567
Myanmar	15,623
Philippines	395,012
Singapore	594,511
Thailand	1,277,638
Vietnam	411,557
Total	3,775,161

Source: ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade, *Investment and Tourism 2007*, 100.

Civilizations encapsulated in a nation-state

These figures alone do not wholly explain the relative lack of distinctive identity of Malaysian cuisine as perceived by non-Malaysians. A more fundamental reason would likely be that when perceived by non-Malaysians, Malaysian-Chinese and Malaysian-Indian dishes appear—and indeed are—very similar to Chinese and Indian dishes in China and India. As one commentator remarked, Malaysian dishes are “only variations of Indian and Chinese cuisines,” and the Malaysians themselves tend to say that the distinctiveness of the Malaysian cuisine derives from its plural and multiethnic society.

The Malaysian Tourist Authority’s slogan, “Malaysia truly Asia,” is well phrased: it effectively reveals the country’s multi-layered identities and social relationships and networks involving all Malaysians. If we limit ourselves to formal categories, there is

first, the intra-national dimension of ethnic categories comprised of Malays, ethnic Chinese, Indians and “others,” second, the dimension of Malaysia’s national identity, and third, the dimension of transnational interconnections between Malaysia’s domestic ethnicities and the broader categories of the world’s people—often called “civilisations.” Malaysian Chinese identity connects with the broader Chinese world or the Chinese civilisation, Malaysian Indians identity with the Indian civilisation, and in religious terms, Malay identify with the broader Muslim world, and so on. Needless to say, these relationships are constructed categories. Nevertheless, it is a social fact that these formal categories effectively prescribe the boundaries of people’s daily lives and world-views.

It is for this reason that, when Malaysian residents overseas want to feel a touch of home, they are quite content to eat dinner in a Chinese or Indian restaurant. Malay restaurant food cannot easily be found abroad. Malaysian cuisine is so hybrid that most Malaysians (that I have spoken with) are quite at ease with anything Asian: Thai, Indonesian, Indian, and so on.

Malay cuisine as home cuisine

In response to the question as to why Malay cuisine has not diffused globally, many Malaysians I interviewed remark that Malay cuisine is basically home-cooking and that Malays have not come up with any particular ways of presenting it to consumers as “ethnic cuisine” in a commercial setting. Malay food is considered best when served in Malay homes, they say. This, of course, does not really explain the relative failure of Malaysian cuisine to go international but may be regarded as a cultural interpretation on the part of the Malaysians themselves.

Asian Ethnic Restaurants in Tokyo: Consumers of Ethnic Tourist Culture

Let us now look into some aspects and processes of the globalization of ethnic cuisine using Tokyo as an example. It is not easy to obtain accurate data on the number and variety of ethnic restaurants in any big city, but it is possible to get some idea about Tokyo’s ethnic restaurants by using the “Tokyo Restaurant Search” search engine, which lists 79 different kinds of ethnic restaurants in Tokyo and the neighbouring prefectures. As far as Malaysian restaurants are concerned, I find this search engine accurate and up-to-date, though I do not know about other types of restaurants. As of 23 June 2009, I found 7 Malaysian restaurants as compared to 296 Thai restaurants, 105 Vietnamese restaurants and 33 Indonesian restaurants (Tokyo Restaurant Search). So it is obvious that the presence of Malaysian restaurants

and cuisine in Tokyo is still so slight that if one were to ask a typical Tokyoite to recommend a Malaysian restaurant, he or she would simply respond with a look of surprised incomprehension.

In our attempt to explain the relative neglect of Malaysian cuisine in the global market, we might place the question in a more general and comparative light. A general question might be: who are the consumers of Asian ethnic food in Japan? One important social category would be Japanese tourists of Southeast Asia who want to re-experience this culture back home. Visitors to this region can partake in a number of cultural experiences in one tourist package, normally consisting of an exotic and tropical atmosphere, appreciation of ethnic food, relaxation in spas often accompanied by an “oil” massage, shopping for *zakka* (sundries), and so on. Usually Thailand, Indonesia (Bali) and Vietnam are destinations for this kind of tourist package. Thai cuisine is obviously a successful case of culinary globalization, thus making it a good candidate for a comparative study. But our purpose would be better served if we considered Indonesian cuisine in view of the fact that Malaysian and Indonesian cuisines are very similar to each other. Yet it is Indonesian, more than Malaysian cuisine that is so well known globally.

Indonesian restaurants and the “Bali factor”

Bali has played a central role in developing this kind of tourist culture. The development of Bali as “the world’s last paradise” involved the development of a refined culture (including cuisine) and manner of presentation to its Western tourists (e.g., Yamashita 1999). Bali has become a symbol of this kind of tourism. Accordingly when the image of an exotic Southeast Asian atmosphere comes to mind, Bali is foremost in peoples’ thoughts. This may be referred to as the “Bali factor” in the ethnic restaurant industry, which normally implies the use of “orientalistic” Balinese-style décor in interior and exterior design, the skill of presenting food for foreign customers (including the notion of starters, the main course, desserts), and so on. Interior and exterior designers I interviewed in Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur affirmed my point, saying that the Balinese style is actively favoured not just in ethnic restaurants but in what may be called the therapeutic industry, including spas, massage parlours, and even hair dressers. Thus designers play a significant role in furthering the globalizing of ethnic restaurants. This in turn calls our attention to the role of cultural intermediaries in the ethnic restaurant industry.⁶

Many Indonesian restaurants in Tokyo actively pursue the use of Balinese décor, of which Café Ubud in Osaki Gate City would be the epitome. (Ubud is one of the

6. For the concept of “cultural intermediaries,” see Yoshino (1999, ch.1).

most popular tourist destinations in Bali) This restaurant was invited by Osaki Gate City to create a space that would add value to the whole shopping complex. This was a good choice because, according to a tourist promotional website, Ubud is a kind of place that “draws people...who are actively involved in art, nature, anthropology, music, dance, architecture, environmentalism, ‘alternative modalities,’ and more” (Bali and Indonesia on the net). This restaurant uses furniture imported from Bali, and its interior décor creates the kind of relaxing and “healing” atmosphere so characteristic of Balinese resorts. Another Indonesian restaurant, Sura Baya, has a number of branches in and near Tokyo including Aqua City, in Odaiba, and Lalaport Toyosu. It is interesting that, although this restaurant serves mainly Javanese foods, it uses Balinese interior design to enhance its appeal and familiarity and (according to the restaurant manager) feels more comfortable to Japanese customers.⁷

It is important to note that women are typical consumers of the therapeutic tourist culture and ethnic cuisine in Japan, so it follows that ethnic restaurants should be made appealing to women. To achieve this, Balinese-style décor is commonly used. Ethnic restaurants are often featured in women’s magazines, and in fact many of my female respondents at ethnic restaurants mentioned that such magazines are important sources of useful information about Thai, Vietnamese and other ethnic restaurants. On the other hand, my male respondents said that if they had eaten at such ethnic restaurants it was because their girlfriends or wives wanted to go there.

The preceding discussion suggests that Indonesian restaurants play a major role in the global consumer market, thanks in part to the aesthetic and cultural values they provide with their food. As such, they fit quite comfortably into global urban landscapes. By contrast, we cannot find any similar approaches or strategies for Malaysian restaurants, as will be discussed later. Malaysia has simply not yet established itself as a popular destination for such therapeutic tourism, and it should be apparent by now that this is a major reason why Malaysian restaurants are still a very minor entity in the Japanese restaurant industry. Interestingly, as part of the Malaysian government’s campaign to promote tourism for the past several years, many Malaysian hotels, resorts, and restaurant operators themselves have started making use of Balinese interior and exterior design to create an exotic, Southeast Asian atmosphere in Malaysia.

7. These observations are based on discussions with my students who have interviewed the managers of these restaurants. The findings are reported in Yoshino Zemi (Seminar) (2008, 31-42).

Reproducers of Malaysian Cuisine in Tokyo

As has been argued, the use of therapeutic tourist culture as a means of appealing to consumers is one contributory factor behind the success of globalization of Indonesian restaurants, and the lack of a similar strategy makes for an evident contrast on the case of Malaysian cuisine. But, to explain further why Malaysian cuisine has not really entered the global market, we should also take into account the lack of “social bearers” of culinary globalization. Let us next take a brief look at each Malaysian restaurant in Tokyo from this perspective. In the recent past some restaurants came into, but then went out of, business, so as of December 2008 there are six Malaysian restaurants in Tokyo. (The seven restaurants listed by the “Tokyo Restaurant Search” include one in Kanagawa, which we exclude from our discussion [See Table 2]).

Table 2: Malaysian Restaurants in Tokyo (as of December 2008)

Name	Location	Years of operation
Malaychan	Ikebukuro	18 years
Malaysia Malay	Soshigaya-Okura	9 years
Malay Fuku Bishoku (馬來風光美食)	Ogikubo	8 years
Mahathi	Shin-Okubo	Closed in 2009
Rasa Malaysia	Ginza	5 years
Jom Makan	Ginza	1 year

Malaysian cuisine reproduced by Japanese

As we can see from this short list, Malaychan in Ikebukuro, which is run by a Japanese woman, is the oldest Malaysian restaurant in Tokyo. The way she started the restaurant is quite indicative of how a Japanese person might become an agent in diffusing ethnic food. Earlier in her life she was active in supporting overseas students, the majority of whom were Malaysians. While she was creating opportunities for students to cook commercially and earn some money, she herself became increasingly involved in the cooking. Eventually she went to Malaysia and fell in love with its mix of cultures and food. Upon returning to Japan, she started her own restaurant, thinking about the Malay students who had no halal restaurant to go to in Tokyo. With much effort she obtained a halal licence and even succeeded in signing a contract to supply halal food to ANA for its in-flight meals, and among the students who frequented her restaurant was the CEO and chef for Jom Makan (to be discussed later). While Malaychan is the pioneer in the Malaysian restaurant business

in Tokyo, Malaysia Malay in Shoshigaya-Okura is also run by an elderly Japanese couple who had visited Malaysia numerous times and wanted to share their culinary experiences with the Japanese. Their restaurant is more of a salon rather than a strictly commercially run restaurant, where people who love Southeast Asia can get together for the enjoyment of conversation and food.

Malaysian Chinese and small business: their Malaysian restaurants

Two restaurants in Tokyo are run by Malaysian-Chinese women married to Japanese. Malay Fuko Bishoku, in Ogikubo, is somewhat typical of how a Malaysian Chinese person might start a Malaysian restaurant overseas. Ten years ago the owner, from Ipoh, met a Japanese businessman in Kuala Lumpur and got married. She had always wanted to own a *kedai makan* (eating shop) like her mother, who used to sell food at a stall in Ipoh, and cook using her mother's recipes. When she came to Tokyo

with her Japanese husband, she made this dream come true by renting a small space in the basement of a building. The size and shape of the space is meant for a bar, and like many Tokyo bars is a somewhat “dingy” place where she is both cook and “mama-san” and chats with customers over the counter while cooking. The small place is always full of regulars as well as new customers, the majority of whom have lived in Malaysia and miss its food.



Source: ZoooM!GourmetTokyo, <http://www.zoom.jp/zoom/detail.do?id=90000734> (accessed 23 June 2009)

At the other location, Mahathir in Shin-Okubo, the cook is a woman also from Ipoh, and her elderly Japanese husband helps by serving the customers. However, this restaurant closed its business in early 2009. These restaurants are typical cases of family enterprise. There is another restaurant by the name of Rasa Malaysia in Ginza, run by a group of Malaysian Chinese family members; however, I have not been able to gather information about this restaurant at the time of writing this essay.

These small-business restaurants do not actively seek out “exotic” images of Malaysia in promoting their business. Malay Fuko Bishoku serves a fairly “genuine” Malaysian cuisine, but the restaurant’s interior has few traces of “Malaysianness.” Like many small-business Chinese restaurants in Japan, their main concern is to serve food commercially, though of course some representative images may be displayed.

For example, Mahathir displays a number of objects that are symbolic or reminiscent of Malaysia such as an orang-utan doll, a picture of former Prime Minister Mahathir, a tourist map of Malaysia, and an indoor semi-tropical plant, but because they are displayed in such a haphazard manner they hardly produce the kind of aesthetic effect that Balinese style does.

The preceding discussion has focused on the role of Malaysian Chinese migrants in setting up Malaysian restaurants (though the number of such cases is very limited in Tokyo). In the process of explaining the lack of global diffusion of Malaysian food, it is not difficult to understand the lack of interest on the part of Malaysian Chinese and Indians to export their cuisine, as *their* cuisine would simply be considered a variant of Chinese and Indian cuisine. But this does not apply to Malays *themselves*, whose culinary culture is more distinctive. However, the Malay social and political culture has much to do with the reason why Malaysian cuisine has not received a global reception. As will be discussed below, Malay middle classes have had a strong tendency to work as civil servants and furthermore, have a stronger propensity to stay in Malaysia and not work overseas as migrants (in contrast to Malaysian Chinese).

The role of the state and the new Malay middle class

The role of migrants and immigrants is often given much weight in literature on ethnic restaurants (e.g., Collins 1995). By contrast, the role of the state is relatively unexplored. It may be argued that the state can also play a non-negligible role, as the Thai case shows. Thai cuisine is a prime example of a successfully globalized ethnic cuisine, and the role of the Thai government deserves attention. The “Thai Select” certification program of Thailand’s Department of Export Promotion, is designed “to recognize and endorse the quality of Thai restaurants...to increase the recognition of quality Thai restaurants,” and “to encourage Thai restaurateurs to raise their quality standard so that they are at an international level.” This certification program is considered to have facilitated the globalisation of Thai cuisine (Thai Select).⁸

The Malaysian Government is endeavouring to follow suit. Its Ministry of Entrepreneur and Co-operative Development recently initiated the “Malaysia Kitchen Programme.” Its website explains the program as follows:

The Malaysia Kitchen Programme is a national initiative by the Economic Planning Unit of the Government of Malaysia, aimed to add value to the tourism and agriculture sector by looking at opportunities to expand the food processing industry of the country. The programme is also to promote Malaysia to the rest

8. See Yoshino Zemi (2008, 3-18).

of the world through its delicious cuisine via a comprehensive and complete business value chain.

The Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development is entrusted to implement the programme by developing Malaysian restaurants and retail outlets overseas, product development, franchise development and branding Malaysia overseas as well as develop culinary skills and related training. The implementation involves close cooperation between the Government and the private sector where the Government plays the facilitator role and the private sector (entrepreneurs) drives the initiative of opening Malaysian restaurants overseas (Malaysia International Franchise Sdn Bhd).

The “Malaysia Kitchen programme” is part of the Government’s 9th Malaysia Plan. The first restaurant to have been materialized under this program was Jom Makan in Ginza, opened in May 2008. The second one is in London. It is too early to make any judgemental comments about this project, but it may be argued that this is symbolic of a number of interesting developments regarding Malays or, more precisely, the Malay new middle class, of which the Jom Makan project is very much representative.

As mentioned earlier, Malaysian society and its economy have been characterized by an ethnic division of labour. Traditionally, the majority of Malays were based in *kampung* (villages) and engaged in agriculture. In modern Malaysia, a considerably larger percentage of middle class Malays are being employed in the government sector, both federal and local, than are other ethnic groups. In this sense, the Malaysian state is largely a Malay ethnic realm. Whereas the Malay middle class (from the time of its independence in 1957 until fairly recently) consisted of civil servants and teachers, the new middle class that has developed since the 1980s consists of professionals, technical people, managers, salesmen, and other office workers employed in private enterprise. This is a class of Malays formed as a result of the New Economic Policy⁹ and of export-oriented industrialisation (Abdul Rahman Embong 2002).

The Malays engaged in the “Jom Makan” project share attributes of both the old and new middle class. They are highly educated, trilingual, and cosmopolitan professionals with Master’s degrees from Japan’s national universities and are, as well, married to Japanese. The restaurant’s CEO has the experience of working in the Malaysian government ministry as well as the private sector, and travels back and

9. The New Economic Policy (NEP) is an affirmative action policy instituted in 1971. It was intended to eliminate poverty, remove the identification of ethnicity with occupations, and foster Malay entrepreneurship. It was also aimed at correcting the income inequality between Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous groups) and non-bumi (mainly Chinese and Indians) and increasing the proportion of “bumi” capital ownership from 2% in 1970 to 30% in 1990.

forth between Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur. The manner in which they conduct business is very different from Malaysian Chinese enterprises in that as a semi-governmental corporation, the restaurant is supported by the Malaysian state. We may even say that they are agents of Malaysian economic nationalism.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it is much too early to make any generalizations about whether this state-led culinary globalization will succeed. We need to watch for further developments, especially with regard to the tensions between market forces and government support.

Summary and Conclusion

In this essay I have deliberately chosen a forgotten case of culinary globalization. The value of examining a number of negative factors in this case or considering certain absent factors that might have enhanced globalization, enables us to highlight the mechanisms and processes that contribute to success in the positive cases—in this instance, the globalization of certain *national* cuisines. This paper may be summarized as having indicated three points of theoretical importance: First, that the globalization of a particular national cuisine should be understood in the larger context of global consumer culture, of which one of the most important components is tourism. Second, that in order to explain how a particular national cuisine becomes globally diffused, it is important to adopt a sociological approach as a means of identifying those actors who “reproduce” the cuisine for “culinary tourists.” (In the context of Malaysian cuisine in the Japanese market, these reproducers would be Japanese individuals attracted by Malaysian culinary culture, Malaysian Chinese migrants to Japan, and the Malaysian state with its nationalistic agenda.) This leads to our third point—that is, it is important for sociology and anthropology to pay more serious attention to the role of the state in diffusing a nation’s popular culture in the global market. There is now some literature on the role the state might play in promoting audio-visual popular culture (Consider, for example, Japan’s manga, anime, and J-pop promotions; however, few, if any, have addressed this question with reference to a culinary culture (e.g., McGuigan 2004; Iwabuchi 2008). The state

10. Here is an episode to illustrate my points about business practices and economic nationalism. *Nasi lemak* was served at Malaysia Kitchen in Daikanyama, a precursor to Jom Makan before the latter was opened in May 2008. Cucumber slices and small roasted peanuts, which normally accompany coconut rice, hard boiled egg and dried anchovies in *nasi lemak*, were not served then. I commented on the lack of the necessary ingredients to the Malay CEO there, who said that due to the lack of a good economic partnership agreement between Malaysia and Japan, they could not import Malaysian peanuts (which are smaller than the Japanese ones). However, Indonesian restaurants could import cheap peanuts because of the EPA between Indonesia and Japan. He attributed this to the relative lack of globalization of Malaysian cuisine. Overhearing this conversation, a Malaysian Chinese person present there said, “Who cares where peanuts come from? Malaysian Chinese would buy peanuts from just about anywhere, including Indonesia or China.” A Japanese customer also commented: “Why don’t they try to use thin Japanese cucumbers? It’s just a matter of cutting them diagonally so that they look like larger Malaysian cucumber slices.” It should be noted for the sake of fairness that the Malaysia Kitchen project is not just to promote Malaysian cuisine but also more broadly the agricultural sector in Malaysia.

and its culinary culture is thus a far neglected area of interest and deserves serious sociological study.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Patric Pillai, Koo Yie Lie, Lim Kim Hui and Khoo Boo Teik for their helpful comments and criticisms.

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