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Historical and contemporary perspectives of the Nyonya food culture in Malaysia



Chien Y. Ng, Shahrim Ab. Karim*

Department of Food Service and Management, Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Nyonya cuisine echoes the cultural identity of the Peranakans, who are both Chinese and localized. Despite the fact that the food is much localized, its symbolism remains traditionally Chinese. This paper explores the history, ingredients, and cooking methods crucial in the production of the cuisine, the types of food served for daily consumption, festivities and ancestral worships, as well as their Chinese symbolism. Furthermore, this paper also discusses factors that contributed to the obscurity of the culture and the cuisine after the Second World War. Lastly, the revival of the culture through the immense interest in its cuisine, especially from the 1980s, and the extent of globalization of this cuisine are also examined. Findings reported are expected to highlight the significance of Nyonya cuisine in Malaysia in the past and the present.

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1. Introduction

Food has always been the sustenance of human beings from as long as they can remember. Over time, the primary role of food has evolved into something more complicated. There is a popular adage “you are what you eat,” which explains that the food one eats defines who one is and what one has become [1]. Thus, food is a powerful cultural symbol that represents a person. Most people associate food of their culture with warm memories of their childhood, and thus it becomes a form of comfort in difficult times [1]. The familiarity of the Peranakans with the food of their ancestors and the knowledge that they have discerned from their environment bring Nyonya cuisine to life. The cuisine is a vital creation of the Nyonyas, womenfolk of Peranakan communities fostered by the intermarriage of offspring of Fujian and Guandong seafarers who married native women. The word *Peranakan* is originated from Indonesia or Malaysia and comes with multiple meanings. It signifies *locally born* or *the offspring of intermarriage between a local and a foreigner*.

This article focuses solely on Chinese Peranakan, the largest group of Peranakan in the Malay world, though there are other

kinds of Peranakan such as Jawi Peranakan and Indian Peranakan. At present, this marginalized group of people can be found throughout Malaysia and Singapore with the heartland in Malacca, Singapore, and Penang [2]. This cuisine invented through this hybridized culture is not merely for daily consumption but as a method to nurture family bondage during auspicious celebrations, ceremonies, and ancestral worship. According to Peranakan context, food serves three main functions: as offerings to the deities and ancestors, to seal vows, and as an indicator of social relations—to celebrate marriages and the many seasons and festivals [3]. Despite the fact that the Peranakans have adopted many elements of local culture into their ways of life, the symbolism of their food remains Chinese. Tan [4] explained the connection between Nyonya cuisine and Chinese symbolism through three principles, namely, color symbolism, symbolism by linguistic association, and symbolism by physical association.

Nyonya cuisine or Peranakan cuisine is the creation that arises from cultural borrowing and cultural innovation through contact with local ingredients and non-Chinese principles of food preparation [5]. Chinese cultural principles are applied in the local environment by the Peranakans, as a result of which some principles are modified and new ones are made [5]. Hall [6] summarized the cuisine as one that combines Chinese cooking techniques and ingredients with Malaysian and Indonesian spices and flavors [6]. Moreover, the cuisine is influenced by Thai, Indian, Dutch, Portuguese, and English techniques. This cuisine owes its existence to early Chinese immigrants who found that the local food did not suit

* Corresponding author. Department of Food Service and Management, Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

E-mail address: shahrimkarim2@gmail.com (S. Ab. Karim).

their taste buds [7]. As they were also unable to cook the food of their homeland due to the unavailability of the ingredients, they tried to produce their own food with local materials [7].

Initially formulated in the kitchen, the dominion of the Peranakan womenfolk, the cuisine is famous for its painstaking and lengthy preparations that can take up to days. In the mid-19th century, their wealth plummeted with the loss of their exalted status after Japanese occupation and Malayan independence and their culture experienced a steep decline. However, there is a revival of interest in the forgotten culture in the mid-80s with the surging number of Nyonya cookbooks and restaurants. At the same time, the food has become globalized thanks to the Peranakan diaspora. Ethnic restaurants selling Nyonya fare overseas help the natives to reconnect with their mother country though the familiarity of the food that they served. For other patrons, consuming food of a different ethnic will be a novel experience and a culinary adventure [1].

Nyonya food can be divided into three categories [5]: The first is traditional Chinese (Hokkien) food with some alteration [8], the second is Malay-style dishes [5,9], and last but not the least are the innovated foods [5]. In addition, the Nyonyas are famous for their colorful and delightful *kuehs* (cakes or sweets). Nevertheless, Nyonya food of Malacca, Penang, and Singapore are not thoroughly alike. According to Ong [10], Penang dishes are influenced by Thai cuisine due to their close proximity to Thailand with the addition of South Indian tastes. This factor gives the cuisine a significant sweet–sour or tangy taste [8]. By contrast, Malacca and Singapore fares are much inspired by Portuguese and Indonesian cuisines. Therefore, the southern dishes are usually sweeter and less spicy than those made by their northern counterparts as they employ a generous amount of coconut milk [11] and Malay spices such as coriander and cumin.

2. Historical perspectives

2.1. The birth of Nyonya cuisine

The inventive Peranakans altered the traditional Chinese food bought from China due to the limited availability of main ingredients and to suit the local palates [6]. By also mingling the dissimilar cooking methods, they created the exotic Nyonya cuisine [6]—one of the most enduring components of their distinctive culture. The Peranakans are localized Chinese, a distinct ethnic group with its own unique customs developed from the blending of Malaysian and Chinese cultures [6]. The arbitrary term is an Indonesian/Malay word with multiple meanings. They can mean *locally born* or *the offspring of intermarriage between a local and a foreigner*. The Peranakan communities of today live in tropical Southeast Asian locales, mainly in Malacca, Penang, and Singapore [6]. There is also quite a large community of Peranakans in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia [2]. Nonetheless, many Peranakans in Singapore are Christians unlike their counterparts in Malacca [12], and are therefore more Westernized in mannerisms [13]. Because of the different processes of nation building between Singapore and Malaysia, there are considerable differences between the Peranakans in Singapore and those in Malacca [12] and Penang.

The Peranakans were descendants of the male seafarers who sailed from Southern China to the *Nusantara* (Malay Archipelago). Most of them are of Hokkien ancestry because they came from Southern Fujian (Min Nan) Province, although there are also a small number of people who are of Teochew or Cantonese descent [14] from Guangdong. The word *Min* is a short form in Chinese for the province of Fujian and *Nan* means south. However, outside of China, Min Nan people addressed themselves as Hokkien in their own dialect [15]. Tan [16] remarked that Chinese men from southern

provinces frequently migrated overseas and their numbers peaked in the middle of the 19th century.

As these first-generation Chinese immigrants were unaccompanied by their women, who were not legally allowed to leave China [17], they intermarried with the Siamese and Burmese women who lived in these ports, and also with the indigenous non-Muslim women of Acehnese, Javanese, Balinese, and Batak descents [18,19]. The intermarriages were motivated by the fact that these women were good housekeepers and saleswomen, keeping the business running when they went on a business trip to China [16]. The menfolk partially adopted Malay customs so that they could blend into the local communities [14]. The migration of Chinese women only truly began toward the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century.

The first striking Chinese settlements on the islands of Malay Archipelago were believed to exist from as early as the 13th century. In 1436, the secretary of Chinese eunuch Cheng Ho named Fein Sin testified the presence of some people of Chinese descent living in that area [16]. Therefore, it is rather appropriate to date the history of Chinese settlements in Malaysia after the founding of Malacca sultanate (approximately 1400) [16]. Malacca, a pivotal hub of commerce and maritime powerhouse that linked Europe to Asia and gave its name to the world's busiest shipping routes, the Straits of Malacca [20], was the home to the first and largest Chinese settlement in peninsular Malay [8]. Despite the scant written sources available and some oral history, Tan Chee Beng, a scholar with unrivalled knowledge on Peranakan, managed to obtain records that indicate that the Peranakan communities became distinct from their forebears as early as the 15th century. During this period, the people also settled in coastal areas of Java and Sumatra [17]. In the 19th century, the Peranakans from Malacca settled in Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street, the first Peranakans enclaves in the bustling major trading ports of Singapore after the East India Company leased out the land there for sale. Besides Singapore, some also moved to Penang during the British colonial expansion [10].

“Baba” is a general ethnic term for the Chinese males and females who were born in the Straits Settlements in contrast to the China-born immigrants in the 19th century [21]. According to Tan [21], the concept of Baba is quite complicated as the label has dissimilar meanings over time and each individual interprets them differently. It is a Malay honorific title, possibly derived from Sanskrit or Persian, which means grandfather or father to show respect and affection for a gentleman of advanced years [14,19]. The Peranakans also addressed themselves as *Straits-born*, an English word, which indicates their local-born status. This practice continues even today to a small extent [21]. “King’s Chinese” was another term used by the Peranakans communities, which were among the earliest Anglicized Chinese when they became prominent in Malacca and Singapore due to their allegiance to the British Crown [14,22]. By contrast, the popular address for the womenfolk, that is, *Nyonya*, is a Javanese loan honorific word from the Dutch word *nona* (grandma) and it means *foreign married madam*. The term might also come from Portuguese *nona* or *nonha*. The latter was known throughout the colonies of the ancient Portuguese world like Goa and Macau, whereby it was used to address a native girl married to a European. Besides, it may be connected to the Portuguese term *dona* meaning *woman* [19]. There are also claims that *Nyonya* is derived from the term *nonya*, a word of endearment for Malay women that is similar to *auntie* [6].

The intermarriages between the immigrants and indigenous women were pivotal during the early expansion of the unique culture [23]. Therefore, the social phenomenon is not a biological fact of *mixed blood* [23]. It is important to note that the Peranakans today are identified by virtue of their culture and self-identification

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