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MALAYSIAN HERITAGE FOOD (MHF): A REVIEW ON ITS UNIQUE FOOD CULTURE, TRADITION AND PRESENT LIFESTYLE

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Abstract: *This paper is attempted to appraise the historical view and the role of MHF plays for depicting the faces of Malaysia through its unique food culture. Malaysia is a blessed country with multiracial people consisting of Malay, Indian, Chinese, Nyonya and other indigenous sub ethnics groups. Malaysian food culture inherited from the past are being passed through generations rooted from their beliefs and traditions have made MHF becoming a remarkable and familiar cuisines in the eyes of the world. The similarities of Malaysian food with its neighbourhood countries should be bordered with the most idealistic and distinguishable food culture identity. Due to urbanization and globalization, MHF are facing serious problems and challenges in maximizing the potential of food culture to be practiced by the Malaysian. Gazetting and documenting it as valuable intangible heritage is an easy task. But, to ensure the continuity of the practical applications within the society is merely difficult. It requires research, monitoring and ongoing effort by the authorities. With regards to the assimilation of the past and present, safeguarding the food culture is an utmost greatest challenge in ensuring the authenticity of MHF that could represent Malaysia and the reminiscence of its people for future generations.*

Keywords: *Food Culture, Malay, Indian, Chinese, MHF, Revolution.*

Introduction

As a multiracial country, Malaysia's colourful cultures and history are demonstrated through its food. Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF) exhibits three major unique food cultures and cooking practices which are deep-rooted in the assimilation of culture and cooking practices of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia; Malays (50.1%), Chinese (22.6%), Indians 6.7% and others (11.8%), making up a total population of 31.7 million people (Unit, 2016).

Historically, Malaysian food and its distinctive tastes and cultures originate from foreign settlers of diverse backgrounds such as the Arabs, Chinese, Indian, Thais, Indonesians and the Portuguese (Pearce, 2015; Raghavan, 2010; Hooker, 2003). The cosmopolitan communities have existed as early as the 5th century, where traders from India, China, Java, and Sumatra landed in the Malay Archipelago spreading the Hindu-Buddha influences (Malaysia Kita, 2007). As contented by Hooker (2003), the Malay people and the Bumiputera (indigenous subethnic groups) originated from Indonesia, while Indian settlers came from India (Sri Lanka and Punjab) and majority of the Chinese originated from China's mainland, Thailand, and Hong Kong. Later, Islam was introduced to the settlers of the Malay Peninsula by the Arab traders during the era of Melaka Sultanate in the 14th century (1400-1511). After the Portuguese subjugation in Melaka in 1511, the Dutch conquest in 1611, and British colonization in 1785, the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants is introduced as part of Malaysian community during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and they continue to become one of Malaysia's majority groups (Hyman & Gwenda, 1993). The colourful arrays of food in Malaysia has fabricated the image of a nation, reflecting the country's multiracial society sharing diverse food cultures. This is described by Suhaimi, Salehuddin, and Zahari (2014) as a form of silent story-telling told by the locals to international societies.

In general, Malaysians start their day by consuming rice to fulfil their satisfaction and energy supply. Rice is the staple food in almost all Asian countries including Malaysia. Its geographical area and climate make it conducive for the growth of paddy field. According to Francisco (2012), the Malaysian traditional cuisines are generally multicultural in nature. They are renowned for their heritage dishes of rice-based, agro-food, seafood, leave-wrapping, and the tastes of hot, spicy, sour, creamy, and sweet all at the same time. The cooking techniques and preparations of the rice vary for every plate being served for breakfast, lunch, and evening treat (Hyman and Gwenda, 1993). The cooking technique, ingredients, flavours, and tastes have gradually evolved from somewhat a "sharing of traditions" to a "harmonious assimilation of cultures" among various ethnic groups. As a result, Malaysia's diverse cuisines are infused with a colourful and symphony of savoury sensations, making the food rich in flavour and unique in taste.

Problem Statements

Hitherto, Malaysians prefer to dine at home but today's hectic and exhausted lifestyle has transformed the usual dining pattern; from eating at home to frequenting food outlets. This has set a new trend in the Malaysian food culture called the "eating out" habit, classified based on food types, eatery locations, and consumer types (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). Malaysians typically eat during breakfast, lunch, dinner, and sometimes supper as well as tea break either at home or away from home on a daily basis (Khalid, 2012). These social transformations caused by urbanisation have diminished the aesthetic values of MHF in term of the cultural preparations, traditional servings and also the authentic taste and image of the food in which people tend to sell them with poor quality and did not follow the right technique and method of preparations. Moreover, the growing number of fast, instant, and ready-to-eat (RTE) type of food has largely affected the modern lifestyle, making people forget and neglect their special heritage food.

The consumption of Malaysia's heritage food is gradually decreasing due to globalisation and has threatened the authenticity of MHF. Some food service providers have to "glocalise" the local food as a result of globalisation. In fact, Malaysian food has similarities with those of its neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore in terms of basic ingredients, tastes and flavours, cooking techniques, and preparation methods. This is an

example of acculturation of cultures that causes tourists having a wrong perception and evaluation over Malaysian food. As an evidence, Yoshino's (2010) investigation of Malaysia's gastronomy in Japan posited that Malaysian dishes are deemed similar to those Indian and Chinese dishes. In this case, it is challenging to establish Malaysian food as one unique identity and not just a hybrid of other Asian countries. Therefore, substantial measures must be taken to safeguard the Malaysian food culture from extinction. Malaysia is currently facing serious issues in preserving its cultural and authentic values. Some food service providers have to "glocalise" the local food as a result of globalisation. In a study conducted in Indonesia, Yoshino (2010) stated that Indonesia has successfully projected the authenticity of Indonesian cuisines with Balinese factor in its restaurants worldwide including Malaysia. A concrete study by (Othman et al., 2009) proved that Thai food outshines Malaysian food based on popular votes, varieties, and other appealing factors like presentation and the use of authentic and unique ingredients. Globalisation has certainly imposed a serious threat for the international tourists to understand and recognise MHF.

In the context of Malaysia, various initiatives must be taken to maintain the quality and acceptance level of the local heritage food. Although the National Heritage Act (2005) was enacted to focus on safeguarding the Malaysia's intangible and tangible heritages, which include arts, culture, persons, and foods for the purpose of knowledge preservation and image destination, the contribution of MHF is still deemed imperfect. Moreover, the significance of Malaysian food culture as the country's special symbol needs a detailed exploration as the food is yet to be globally recognised. Even though Malaysia is an eminent food paradise for serving miscellaneous ranges of local and global cuisines, heritage foods of each region or ethnic in Malaysia should sustain their uniqueness in order to preserve the food quality over generations.

Objectives

In view of that, Malaysia must grab this chance by sustaining the authenticity and the identity of MHF in the eyes of the world. The Malaysian food culture can be successfully branded to maximise the country's potential in tourism industry. In addition, local food seizes its role to safeguard the tourism industry by maintaining the authenticity of a particular destination, amplifying the national economies, and has a pleasant, natural impact on infrastructure (DuRand, Heath & Alberts, 2003). The key areas of perspectives to be studied are food culture involvement, lifestyle as components that could be contained within the concept of preserving the authenticity of heritage food. Hence, the specific objectives of this review paper are outlined as follows:

1. To identify the underlying dimensions of food culture involvement and lifestyle.
2. To scrutinise the significant effects of predictors (food culture involvement and lifestyle) on the authenticity of MHF.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 demonstrated the proposed conceptual framework linking the relationship between the constructs being investigated. Both Food Culture and Lifestyle are the two proposed crucial elements in safeguarding the authenticity of MHF. The assumptions could be predicted by the positive association with Food Culture (Hypothesis 1); while Lifestyle could have a negative effect on preserving the authenticity of heritage food (Hypothesis 2).

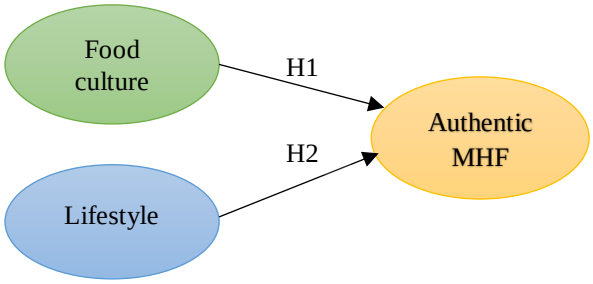

Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

Definition of Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF)

Heritage is defined as the heredity or continuation of folklore elements to maintain the continuity of the system or process. As stated by Prentice (1994, p. 311),

> "…heritage is an inheritance or a legacy; things of value which have been passed from one generation to the next."

In fact, heritage is subjective and not just limited to historic spots, monuments, and remnant objects. It also includes intangible elements such as music, food, and arts (Park, 2010). Thus, heritage food is regarded as a preserved, traditional local food in term of its ingredients, culture, and eating norms inherited from the past. The authentic heritage food in Malaysia is synonymous with the fusion of multiple flavours: salty, hot, spicy, sweet, creamy, and sour, with rice as the main staple food, as well as the utilisation of local meat, poultry, seafood, spices, herbs, and vegetables (Francisco, 2012; Jalis et al., 2009). As mentioned by the Heritage Commissioner, Zuraina Majid in Elis (2009, p. 24),

> "Heritage food is our common foods which are part of our lives".

Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF) has been redefined as the typical local cuisines that are embedded with cultural values representing the community's lifestyle (Elis, 2009). From the given definition, it can be said that MHF is the Malaysia's common food symbolises the lives, culture, and heritage value of the country's multiracial community. Hence, it is crystal clear that MHF can be comprehensively understood as a local cultural gastronomy reminisced from the folklores, and passed down to the younger generations. Table 1 displays the list of multicultural MHF listed by the National Heritage Department. Continuous efforts must be taken as there are some heritage food that are overlooked although they have great potentials to be commercialised in the tourism industry.

Table 1: Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF)

Malaysian Heritage Food							
1	Nasi Lemak	26	Serunding	51	Hinava/Umai	76	Pisang Goreng
2	Nasi Ayam	27	Ayam Percik	52	Pekasam	77	Keropok
3	Pulut Kuning	28	Manok Pansoh	53	Tempoyak	78	Opok-opok
4	NasiTumpang	29	Asam Pedas	54	Otak-Otak	79	Karipap
5	Nasi Kerabu	30	Gulai Tempoyak Ikan Patin	55	Sambal Belacan	80	Ondeh-Ondeh
6	Nasi Dagang	31	Ikan Bakar	56	Cencaluk	81	Lempeng
7	Nasi Himpit	32	Ikan Panggang Tanah Liat	57	Sambal Gesek Ikan Bilis	82	Bahulu
8	Nasi Goreng Kampung	33	Gulai Lemak Umbut	58	Satay	83	Dodol
9	Nasi Ulam	34	Gulai Lemak Cili Padi	59	Yee Sang	84	Lempok Durian
10	Ketupat	35	Gulai Asam Rom	60	Sata	85	Wajik
11	Lemang	36	Kari Kepala Ikan	61	Telur Pindang	86	Seri Kaya
12	Pulut Kukus Periuk Kera	37	Kurma Daging/ Ayam	62	Kerabu Mangga Muda	87	Halwa
13	Mee Mamak	38	Pajeri	63	Acar	88	Agar-Agar
14	Laksa	39	Masak Ikan and Pisang Dalam Buluh	64	Kuih Keria	89	Pulut Panggang
15	Mee Kari	40	Yong Tau Foo	65	Kuih Koci	90	Tapai
16	Char Kuey Teow	41	Daging Dendeng	66	Akok	91	Masalodeh
17	Laksa Johor	42	Ayam Panggang	67	KuihSeri Muka	92	PutuMayam
18	Mee Siam	43	Botok-Botok ikan	68	Kuih Cara	93	Maruku
19	Bubur Pedas Sarawak	44	Sambal Tumis	69	Kuih Bingka	94	Roti Jala
20	Bubur As-Sura	45	Chili Crab	70	Kuih Bakul	95	Roti Canai
21	Bubur Sum-Sum	46	Teh Tarik	71	Kuih Bulan	96	Tosai
22	Bubur Kacang Hijau	47	Cendol	72	Kuih Cincin	97	Penderam
23	Sagu Gula Melaka	48	Air Batu Campur	73	Kuih Bakar	98	Kuih Lopis
24	Bingka Ubi	49	Air Kelapa	74	Kuih Sepit	99	Laddu
25	Rendang	50	Air Selasih	75	Apam Balik	100	Ubi Kayu

(Source: National Heritage Department [Elis, 2009])

Food Culture and Tradition in Malaysia

Culture is generally described as the typical behaviour, customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of certain racial, religious, and social groups. In addition, the culture of certain groups of people is rooted from their thoughts, beliefs, and lifestyles which determine their behavioural reactions (Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012; Goodenough, 1971). Previously, Linton

(1945, p. 21) defined culture as, *"the configuration of learned behaviour and results of behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society"*. Bonarou (2011, p. 9) affirmed that culture is an emerging process that keeps growing from time to time as a result of expanded knowledge, practices, and behavioural characteristics of certain social groups which are also affected by their personal beliefs. Culture and heritage can reflect past times and strengthen the social relationship between family members and friends. "The extensive range of our local dishes are very much a reflection of the cultural melting pot creating a unique Malaysian identity (Suhaimi, Zahari, Othman, & Hemdi, 2014, p. 353

Being a multicultural nation, Malaysian food resembles the country's rich culture, history, and the unique lifestyle of its people. The food culture is inherited from the ancestors whether directly or indirectly from one generation to another by embracing the classic methods of cooking preparation and presentation. The Malaysian food culture and its traditional preparations are practiced according to the culture, beliefs, and values of its people as summarized in Table 2. At present, Malaysian culinary palates are recognised as consisting of the balance between all sorts of tastes and flavours: spicy, mild, sweet, sour, and creamy from all the different racial communities.

Table 2: Food Culture Practices of Malay, Chinese, and Indian in Malaysia

Criteria	Malay	Chinese	Indian
Basic principles of food intake	Influenced by the Al-Quran, the concept of halal and haram, cold and wind (eat only when hungry), and lesser food consumption (for a harmonious element in the body).	Influenced by the concept of yin-shih (food and beverages), fan and tsai (cereal grains), vegetables and meat, and the concept of five elements.	Influenced by ayurveda, ushna (hot food), tampu (cold food), sama (neutral food), eat twice per day, tridosha-pitta, kappa, vayu, the concept of five elements, taboo, and vegetarian.
Food ingredients	Depend on the food resources available in the environment. For example, seafood from fishermen and agricultural products produced by the peasants.	North side has more oily dishes, south side like Szechwan and Hunan use a lot of chilli powder, Kiangsu and Chekiang areas emphasize on freshness, and Cantonese has sweeter dishes.	North side consumes a lot of milk, south side is known for rice-based dishes, west side has sweeter dishes, east side is known for its grain-based dishes and the cooking style differs by caste.
Meals	Meals during cultural festivities like wedding, birth, baby shaving, piercing, circumcision, and funeral.	New Year's celebration, lantern, dragon boat festival, longevity celebration, wedding, birth, funeral, and the commemoration of spirit.	Religious rituals and ceremonies, celebration, birth, piercing, and funeral.

Cooking techniques	Use pot, pan, and natural materials like bamboo, wood, shell, and palas leaf, and banana leaf.	Use wok, pot, and natural materials like bamboo, leaf, and wood.	Using the pot soil, pan, banana leaf.
Foods and culture	Glutinous rice to express gratitude, betel leaf to entertain guests, and raw ingredients are associated with men- or women-based foods i.e. traditional herbs.	Cake basket (increasing status), shark fin (high income), cake roll (prosperous life), and fruit orange-gold ball in soup (consolidation in the family.	Milk or ghee (sources of light) and candy (goodness in life).

(Source: Radzi et al., 2010)

Malay Food Culture and Tradition

Fundamentally, the Malay society's set of beliefs, food, principles, and cultures are strongly influenced by the Islamic perspective because all Malays in Malaysia are born Muslim with reference to the Article 160(2) in the Constitution of Malaysia (Constitution, 2006). Muslims are prohibited to consume pork, alcohol, or any meat and animal derivatives which are not slaughtered according to *Shari'ah* as outlined by the *Shari'ah* law[1]. Simoons (1994) found that meat consumption is a matter concerning religion since each followers of every religion have their own views, rules, and regulations (Bon & Hussain, 2010). Meanwhile, Khalid (2012) discovered that the Malays eat a lot of chicken, beef, seafood, and mutton. Therefore, Malays will ensure that all permissible animals should be slaughtered, and all the raw ingredients are guaranteed *halal*[2], as guided by the *Shari'ah* law prior to consume their food. Besides, according to Malay dining etiquette, cold food cannot be eaten together with hot food due to side effects in human health (Meyer-Rochow, 2009).

Other than that, the Malays have a polite eating style and normally use bare fingers while eating (Francisco, 2012). Also, they are advised to eat when they feel hungry and stop when they reach satiety. These are among the Islamic teachings that have shaped the Malay Muslims' dining style in Malaysia up until today. Conventionally, almost all authentic Malay food are prepared using local ingredients, as well as herbs and spices such as turmeric, lemongrass, black pepper, star anise, cinnamon, shallot, garlic, ginger, coconut and chili which impart the spicy, salty, sweet, and savoury tastes in the traditional Malay food. Furthermore, the utilisation of natural ingredients (Muhammad, Zahari, Othman, Jamaluddin, & Rashdi, 2009) from stalks and leaves like banana, palas, pandan, coriander, lime, tamarind, bamboo, and wood in the cooking preparation of Malay dishes can enhance the aroma, fragrant, and taste of the cuisine. When it comes to cooking utensils, the Malays traditionally grind their own condiments using one of the most popular so-called "compulsory equipment" in every Malay kitchen namely mortar and pastel.

Traditionally, Malay food are cooked in an old-fashioned, conventional stove in the soil pot with wooden spatula (Khalid, 2012) as part of the villagers' social activities known as *gotong-royong* (the communal spirit of helping one another for mutual benefits) due to the space available around *kampung* (village) houses area (Zainun, Hamid, & Rahman, 2013).

[1] *Shari'ah* law is the Islamic rules and regulations according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW for Muslims (Mahmood Zuhdi, 1999; Islamic Religious Department, 1992).

[2] *'Halal'* is an Arabic term which means justified, or allowed by Islamic law and reward for anyone who does it (Omar and Ab. Karim, 2013).

Conversely, this traditional style of cooking is rarely being practiced nowadays especially in big cities where living in high luxurious building with limited or no land space is more common. Food is synonymous with ceremonies, festivals, and events. The most popular annual celebration for the Malay Muslims in Malaysia is Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Sharif, Zahari, Nor, & Muhammad, 2015). Assortments of traditional meals and cakes are prepared and served during this festive season. Ketupat (square-shaped rice cube), Rendang (curry-like beef cooked in a thick gravy made of coconut milk, onion, lemongrass, chili, and coconut paste), Satay (marinated chicken or beef cooked on a charcoal-covered grill and eaten with special Kuah Kacang (peanut sauce), raw cucumber and onion, and Ketupat), Serunding (chicken or beef floss), and Kuah Kacang (peanut sauce) are among the common Malay heritage dishes that are served to the guests. Besides that, family occasions like wedding, birth, and new-born's first haircut or shaving ceremony are also associated with the Malay culture where the hosts will be preparing Pulut Kuning (yellow glutinous rice) to be eaten with Sambal or Rendang for the guests as a symbol of appreciation (Noor, Zakaria, Shahril, Hadi, & Zahari, 2013). Today, these Malay heritage dishes are still being prepared and the recipes are transmitted from the older generation to the younger generation in order to preserve the cultural traditions.

Despite the abovementioned major celebrations, the Malay heritage dishes are offered almost everywhere in Malaysia during the mealtime of social events. The Malays cannot be separated from the rice eating culture as it is the Malaysian staple food (Hill, 2012). For instance, Musa and Spracklen (2011) agreed that Nasi Lemak (rice dish cooked in coconut milk and pandan leaf, served with fried anchovies, peanut, boiled eggs, slices of cucumber, and Sambal) is one of the most popular MHF consumed by Malaysian during breakfast. Also, it is acknowledged by the National Heritage Department of Malaysia as one of the most popular MHF. In short, the vibrancy of Malay cuisines is the hub for other cultures' culinary variations and can resemble the entire Malaysian population.

Chinese Food Culture and Tradition

The influx of Chinese immigrants mainly of the Hainan, Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew descendants brought by the British to Malaya before the independence has kick-started the establishment of Chinese settlements in large cities especially around the Penang island (David & Chee-Beng, 2001). The variation of Malaysian-Chinese' cooking styles are generally influenced by those of China's southern region since the majority of Chinese in Malaysia originated from the Hakka and Hainan districts in China (Francisco, 2012). The common Hakka food that could be easily found in Malaysia is Yong Tau Foo (stuffed seafood bean curd) with soup or thick dark gravy, and fried noodle. These Hainanese people first landed in the 19th century as kitchen helpers and helped turn their cuisines to be versatile (Wang & Chong, 2011). The most famous Malaysian Hainanese cuisine are the Hainanese chicken rice and steamboats.

On the other hand, the Cantonese influence has introduced a strong sweet taste to the Malaysian Chinese dishes (David & Chee-Beng, 2001). Chinese food in the northern part of Malaysia are largely influenced by the Cantonese and Hokkien style dishes (Karim, Wen, Othman, Ghazali, & Halim, 2012). Cantonese people originated from Guangzhou, China. They favour crisp, stir-fried and fresh sea-based food as they dwell by the seashore (Civitello, 2011). One of the most popular Cantonese dishes in Malaysia is Dim Sum (to-touch the heart), which is a balanced meal consisting of varieties of dumplings filled with various kinds of savoury meats like pork, chicken, seafood, and vegetables occupied in a small bowl which is normally consumed during breakfast.

Meanwhile, the Hokkien cooking style was introduced by the Hokkien people from the Fujian province, which has some assimilation with the Thai's influence (Nasution, 2009). Among the most common ingredients in Hokkien cooking are the soy sauce and noodle. As a consequence, Hokkien dishes like Hokkien Popiah (spring rolls), Hokkien fried Mee (eggs noodle with soy sauce) and Hokkien Mee (prawn noodle with soup) have been well adapted and received by all Malaysians including the Malays and Indians.

Another Chinese signature dish inherited since generations is Char Kway Teow (fried rice flat noodles). Char Kway Teow was introduced by the Teochew community from the district of Shantou, China (Chang, 1977). The noodles are normally cooked with chopped onions, prawns, cockles, chives, eggs, and beansprout. The basic seasonings are dark soy sauce, fish sauce, as well as onion and chili paste. Even though there are many styles of cooking according to different regions, Penang-style Char Kway Teow is the most famous variant in Malaysia and has become one of the main attractions of Penang.

Pertaining to the Chinese cooking culture in Malaysia, the foods are prepared with less oil, cooked using fresh local ingredients, and often incorporated pork in their cooking. The food preparation is deep-rooted from their culture back in China, as well as taboo related to Buddhism. According to the Chinese Buddhists belief, the Chinese meals' basic principles are largely influenced by the following elements: yinshih (food and beverages), fan and tsai (cereal grains), as well as vegetables and meat with the integration of five-element concept consisting of water, earth, metal, fire, and wood (Lee, 2012). In this sense, the Malaysian Chinese cuisines still strongly mimic the Mainland China's traditional style. For instance, Hunan and South Szechwan emphasise on the "Chekiang and Kiangsu" which are the freshness of food and the usage of chili powder as the basic ingredients (Radzi, Murad, & Bakar, 2010). In the meantime, there is a strong Cantonese influence that has introduced a sweet taste to the Malaysian Chinese dishes (David & Chee-Beng, 2001). Among the common basic ingredients in Chinese cooking are the soy sauce and noodle. These have been well adapted and received by the Malaysians including the Malays and Indians.

Generally, the Chinese prepare their meals in a large portion for their Makan Besar (big feast) during the celebration of Chinese New Year, funeral, and other religious rituals and ceremonies. Eating using chopsticks and tuck rice or noodles in a porcelain is the most common traditional dining etiquette for the Malaysian Chinese until today (Lulu, 2015). The application of chopsticks is analogous to using spoon and fork to keep the hands clean while enjoying their meals. Nonetheless, according to Chinese taboo, the chopsticks should not be placed standing with "X" motion for it means an emblem of a death (Long & Jiao, 2005). Moreover, the food is shown served on a round dining table so everyone can easily reach the food without bothering others to pass it around. Similar to the Malay food culture, the elders will poke the dish before the youngsters. In any traditional occasions, the guests will be served with Chinese tea prior to enjoying the food and cannot leave the table unless the hosts stand up and make the first move.

Baba and Nyonya or Peranakan Chinese

The intermarriage between Malay and Chinese people in the 15th century proliferated in Melaka and Penang has formed a new culture termed as Baba and Nyonya or Peranakan Chinese (Straits Chinese) (Ying & Karim, 2016). This eclectic blending fusion from the Chinese and Malay intermarriage has introduced a hybrid heritage food named Nyonya food.

The traditional main ingredients for Nyonya foods are the results of the assimilation of Malay and Chinese herbs and spices such as turmeric, ginger, lemongrass, galangal, pandan leaf, kaffir lime leaf, bay leaf, shallot, and chilli (Hall, 2013; Ng, & Karim, 2016) Not to be unforgotten, belacan (dried shrimp paste) is a vital food enhancer that imparts an incredible pungency taste of Nyonya cooking (David & Chee-Beng, 2001). Through the use of the herbs mentioned earlier, Nyonya cooking is also known for its unique marinating technique for seafood and meat, mix with the herbs that are grinded using mortar and pestle (Lee, 2008). Akin to Malay culture, Asam Laksa is a very common and popular Nyonya dish (Chan, 2013). Asam Laksa is the thick rice noodle dish served with a rich gravy made of mackerel broth and spices like chilli, lemongrass, shallot, galangal, and belacan. It is served with aromatic herbs, raw onion, lettuce, pineapple, cucumber, and boiled egg. Originally, Laksa hails from the Malay community living in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia and it was originally inspired from Thailand. However, Chan (2013) revealed that the Nyonya Asam Laksa differs to that of Malay Laksa due to geographical differences. Unlike the Malay Laksa, Nyonya Asam Laksa can be widely found in Penang-style hawkers' street stalls prepared by the Chinese (MalaysianFood.net, n.d). Likewise, Laksa has also been recorded as a MHF by the Malaysian government. As a result, Nyonya food is one of the best offshoots from the pure original Chinese food that has gained its popularity and acceptance in Malaysia for decades.

Indian Food Culture and Tradition

In the 19th century, the Indian immigrants were brought by the British to Malaysia as labours in the rubber estates and railway construction sites (*Malaysia Kita*, 2007). Afterwards, Indian people have become part of the Malaysian population, inhabiting large areas of the peninsular Malaysia. The Indians brought along their culture from the southern and northern parts of India. Hitherto, Indian food in Malaysia are mostly of the South Indian flavours as the Indians are descendants of the ethnic Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. (Kaur, 2001). The Tamils typically prepare their dishes using lots of coconut milk, chilli, and mustard seed, while the northern Indian style is often related to the use of meat, yoghurt, bread, and chapatti. Other than that, the Indians are similar in terms of heavy spices and ghee use in almost all their dishes. At present, the Malaysian Indian cuisines are the results of the combination of both southern and northern Indian recipes, hence recreating an exciting food culture for the Malaysian taste buds.

To date, the majority of Malaysian Indians are 80% Tamil Hindus (Yoshino, 2010) while the remaining of them are Christians, Sikhs, and Muslims. Nevertheless, as most Indians are originally Hindus, the basic food principles strongly uphold the beliefs of ushna (hot food), tampu (cold food), and sama (neutral food) (Radzi et al., 2010). According to Radzi et al. (2010), the Indians are believed to be eating at least twice a day, and the cooking techniques for Indian dishes should follow the tridosha element which is pitta (fire and water). Indian food in Malaysia can be savoured almost everywhere in Malaysia especially during their religious festivities such as Deepavali, wedding, birth, and funeral. Most importantly, the Hindus are prohibited from consuming beef because cow is deemed as a sacred animal that represents their God. Most Indian meals especially meats (mutton, chicken, and fish) are prepared using freshly grounded spices like mustard, star anise, cinnamon, clove, cardamom, turmeric, dried chilli, cumin, coriander, and fenugreek. These spices are combined with other main ingredients like coconut milk, curry leaf, garlic, shallot, potato, okra, and tomato before being transformed into various types of curries, ranging from mild to very fiery sensation. All of the spices

blending in with other local cultures has made the Malaysian Indian dishes somewhat extraordinarily fantabulous.

The Indian heritage foods are also mainly prepared using clay pot on the ground, pan, and banana leaf. The rice is served on banana leaf with side dishes like hot and spicy curry, fried chilli, *papadom* (thinly crisp vegetable crackers), sautéed or deep-fried vegetables, and fried chicken. These are all eaten using the right hand, but spoon and fork are provided in all dining places throughout Malaysia for those who do not want their hands to smell curry all day long. Hence, these basic beliefs and principles have shaped the image of Indian heritage foods in Malaysia.

Surprisingly, the Indian Muslim stalls and restaurants known as *mamak* are the most blooming Indian food caterers throughout Malaysia (Ramli & Ahmad, 2003). These restaurants operate almost 24 hours in Malaysia and serve a wide range of colourful and flavourful Indian-Malay dishes to suit the locals' taste buds and give pleasant new experiences for the tourists in Malaysia. Undoubtedly, Musa and Spracklen (2011) concurred that the most popular Indian heritage food in Malaysia is Roti Canai. It is a flat, thin pastry- or pancake-like bread made of wheat flour, served with lentil curry, chicken curry, and sambal on a circular metal tray called "*thali*". Roti Canai is incomplete without a glass of unique, sweet, and tasty Teh Tarik (pulled tea). Besides Roti Canai and Teh Tarik, other Indian heritage food in Malaysia include Nasi Beriyani, Chicken Tandoori, Fish Head Curry, Mutton Korma, and many more. Nowadays, there are many *mamak* restaurants in Malaysia selling all sorts of MHF including the Chinese and Malay dishes. This is a great opportunity for both locals and internationals to appreciate the colourful food culture in Malaysia. The harmonious combination of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines with their distinctive food cultures are the best way to describe Malaysians in the eyes of the world.

Contribution of Local Food for Nation

Apart from satisfying hunger, food is seen as a major conduit to express cultural practices and traditions across different regions (Wright, Nancarrow, & Kwok, 2001). Heritage cuisine is also categorised under the intangible cultural asset of a country. Turmo (2010) claimed that food is considered as a substantial heritage that must be continuously protected as it is an expression of culture that also conveys the history of one generation to another in the forms of special ingredients, preparations, and dining etiquettes. Culture and culinary heritage are indeed having a complementary effect as these two elements portray individual identities and lifestyles. A country's local cuisine can reflect the identity of a nation and resemble the various colourful local cultures. The savoury taste of food is closely related to its origin, where almost all destinations have their own promising factor that can magnetise the tourists worldwide (Au and Law, 2002). This view is supported by Frochot (2003) who contended that the upshot of food consumption will expose international tourists with the locals' special culture, unique lifestyle, and national identity.

In DuRand et al. (2003), local foods play a major role in sustaining the elements that are illustrated in Figure 2. The local food can enhance and establish the popularity of a nation either directly or indirectly by sustaining its agricultural activities, empowering the nation through the creation of job opportunities, and elevating the food authenticity which in turn give pride through tourist attractions. Lastly, it emphasises a regional brand identity based on the local food experiences.

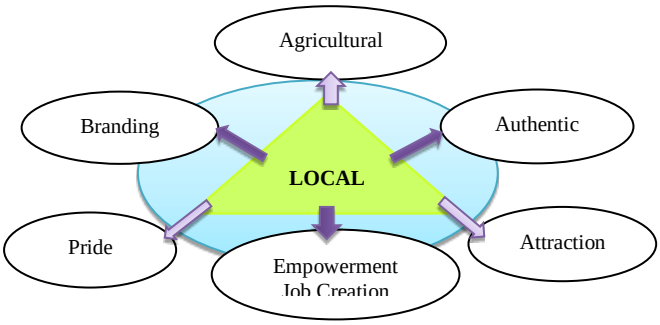

Figure 2: The Contribution of Local Food towards Sustainable Development of A Destination

(Source: DuRand et al., 2003**)**

Conclusion

Having said that, Malaysia is currently facing serious issues in preserving its cultural and authentic values. The hybrid of Malaysian cuisine makes MHF lose its distinctive heritage, cultural, and aesthetic values. This matter calls for a serious attention especially in conserving the authenticity and originality of MHF. In fact, Malaysian food has similarities with those of its neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore in terms of basic ingredients, tastes and flavours, cooking techniques, and preparation methods. This is an example of acculturation of cultures that causes people having a wrong perception and evaluation over Malaysian food. As an evidence, Yoshino's (2010) investigation of Malaysia's gastronomy in Japan posited that Malaysian dishes are deemed similar to those Indian and Chinese dishes. In this case, it is challenging to establish Malaysian food as one unique identity and not just a hybrid of other Asian countries. Standardizing MHF in terms of quality, authenticity, safety, and cultural values demand a seriously warrant. In this sense, safeguarding and refining cultural heritage food in terms of the preparation, documentation, and consumption are crucial (Alatorre, 2014) to restore the information about old traditions (Seery, 2010). Therefore, substantial measures must be taken to safeguard the Malaysian food culture from extinction.

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