

# THREAT TO NYONYA CUISINE HERITAGE SUSTAINABILITY IN MALAYSIA: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *With rich gastronomic culture, Malaysia offers a wide variety of cuisines with unique heritage background and identity. Nyonya cuisines for instance emerged from acculturation process of two distinctive culture hence creating unique cuisines that only can be found in certain location in Malaysia. This systematic review article focuses on the current state of literature related to the development of Nyonya cuisine in Malaysia and aims of this review is to identify the gap in the literature. This research follows Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and MetaAnalysis 2020 (PRISMA - 2020) methodology. This systematic literature review relies heavily on two major journal databases, Science Direct and Scopus. Indirectly, a total of 14 articles have met the standards to be reviewed systematically. Finally, the review successfully summarized six threats to Nyonya Cuisine Heritage sustainability in Malaysia: weak roles of society, modernization, globalization, tough competition from larger mainstream ethnic restaurants, halal status, and cost of living.*

**Keywords:** *Nyonya heritage cuisine, threat, sustainability, acculturation*

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## Introduction

Baba and Nyonya is indeed a famous community in Melaka. Literally, the 'Baba' is referred as male while 'Nyonya' as women. They also had known as Peranakan which means child in Malay language. The Baba and Nyonya resulted from assimilation between two races with different cultures (Moorthy, 2021). Generally, they existed when the merchants from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian that sailed to the archipelago of Malaya for trading purposes (West, 2008). During 15th to 17th century, many merchants from China mainland came to settle down in Tanah Melayu that range from Penang, Melaka to Singapore. Baba and Nyonya existed due to acculturation that occurs when the cultural dispute between two races because of the intermarriage of Chinese men and local Malay women (Luebe & Hussin, 2019) Food heritage plays big roles in culture's identity. This community is also famous for its traditional food handed down from their ancestors. Nyonya cuisine is an invention that arises from the borrowing of culture and innovation through contact with people's ingredients and food preparation principles which surprisingly not initially from China. The study made by the author summarizes Peranakan cuisine as a combination Chinese cooking techniques and ingredients with Malaysian and Indonesian flavors. Not only that, Nyonya cuisine is influenced by several regional countries such as Thailand, India, as well as colonial countries such as the Netherlands and Portugal (Albattat et al., 2017). The Nyonya cuisine started to develop from the early immigrants from China who found that the local food did not suit their tastes. Hence, they use the local ingredients in their cooking to adjust accordingly to their likings due to the unavailability to cook their homeland foods since lack of the ingredients (Oh et al., 2019).

Nyonya cuisine represent more than just food as its also represent the importance of preservation of family ties and tradition. Interestingly, a Peranakan's women or commonly known as Nyonya are significant in their cooking skills, hoping that they will be passed down to other generations. Back then in the development of this community, marriages were arranged by their parents to preserve the lineage (Ng & Karim, 2016). It is their responsibility to marry within the same lineage to continue the legacy. Nyonya(s) are expected to be obedient to their husbands, by becoming a good wives and good mothers to be role models to the upcoming generations. This conservative thinking made them did not receive a good education as they had to sacrifice their young age to get married because the parents assume they would seek for freedom rather than being a devoted woman towards their family.

However, due to the influence of colonization, the changes can be seen in the way of this community view their tradition and obligation towards their family and start to seek knowledge by not sacrificing their teen years being an obedient wife. This situation causes them to stray further from their roots because of the influence from the colonials (Oh et al., 2019). Nowadays, the existence of this Baba and Nyonya community is becoming more tenuous, and its descendants now do not surpass three generations and cause the culture seems to be neglected by younger generations (New Straits Time, 2016). As a result, the cooking skills that are synonymous with Nyonya (the women) are diminishing as they lose touch with their cultural heritage and cannot preserve it. Moreover, some of them already lacked the knowledge to cook their traditional food and could not pass it on to the upcoming generations. Consequently, the existence of Nyonya cuisine seems to be forgotten from time to time and become much more challenging to be known by locals (Ng & Ab. Karim, 2016).

Therefore, many people had forgotten the uniqueness of traditional foods inherited by their ancestors in this era of globalization (Raji et al., 2017). Furthermore, younger generations nowadays had neglected their traditional food preparation (Nor et al., 2012). In addition, they

had ignored their traditional food preparation. Thus, the food consumption trend is biased to few neighboring Asian countries such as Japanese, South Korea, Chinese, Thailand, and Indonesia. Studies affirmed that Malaysian loves Korean food and prefers Korean food over other ethnic food choices in Malaysia due to the existence of Korean wave or known as K-Pop (Chee & Yazdanifard, 2021). As a result, it shows that the global spreads of culinary variations significantly affect the identity of Malaysian cuisine.

Nyonya cuisine received little attention compared to cuisine from other Asian countries, making it a challenge to shine not in the global eyes, but towards the local community as well. First, the lack of distinctive identity can evidence the previous statement; as perceived by foreigners, it has strong hybridization as a few ethnics influence it. The second one is that locals consider Malaysian cuisine as home cuisine, and surprisingly, Nyonya cuisine is a part of this (Yoshino, 2014). Third, the advancement of technology is one of the challenges in sustaining traditional foods (Raji et al., 2017). Last but not least, it is found that most of the food promotion in Malaysia has been segregated into different races and cultures (Ismail et al., 2013).

Hence, this systematic literature review paper aims to identify the threats towards Nyonya cuisine heritage in Malaysia. At the same time, in supporting the objective and flow of this study, the research question is what are the threats towards Nyonya cuisine heritage in Malaysia?

### **The Need of Systematic Literature Review**

In this context, there is not much study has been done about Nyonya cuisine under the scope of food heritage studies. This current study will systematically review all the relevant literature to fulfill the gap by examining the extent to which studies on Nyonya cuisine have been conducted over the past few years. Each past study will be reviewed and also analyzed to prevent future researchers from making inconsistent studies and at the same time avoid the same study being executed repeatedly. Furthermore, this study is crucial because it will provide information to future researchers in producing studies related to Nyonya cuisine.

In this section, the researcher will state the need to conduct a systematic review of Nyonya cuisine. In contrast, the next section will dissect the approach used to find answers to questions created in the current research. The third part is the part that will explain the flow of systematic review and literature review will synthesize to differentiate, select, and evaluate studies related to the Nyonya cuisine and identify the threats towards Nyonya cuisine heritage in Malaysia. Last but not least, the final area will discuss the findings alongside with some suggestions in the conclusion.

## **Literature Review**

### **Acculturation**

Acculturation is when a person or group from one culture appears to practice the customs and values of another culture while maintaining the cultural identity (Berry, 2008). This habit is commonly found in minority cultures that adopt elements of the majority culture, as is usual with immigrant groups that are culturally or ethnically diverse from the majority in the community they have emigrated to (Padilla & Perez, 2003). However, acculturation is a two-way process. People in majority cultures often adopt no minority culture with which they come into contact. The process plays out between groups that are not necessarily majority or minority (Lakey, 2003). It can befall both the group and personal levels due to people-to-people contact

or relationships within art, literature, or the media (Berry, 2005). In the context of this study, the Baba and Nyonya community resulted from acculturation among Chinese men from mainland China and the Malay women in the 'Malaya' in the 1400s (Abdullah, 2013).

### **Baba & Nyonya**

The Baba and Nyonya are also known as Peranakan, originating from Malacca. Malacca was a world trade center a hundred years ago because of its strategic location in the middle of the west and east since the 15th century. The Peranakans have a fascinating history. The community evolved more than 700 years ago, where-back in the 14th century (Abdullah, 2013). Before going further, the 'Baba' is known as male while 'Nyonya' refers to women. They also had known as Peranakan, which means child in the Malay language, which implies to local born. The Baba and Nyonya resulted from assimilation between two races with diverse cultures (Lee, 2008). They existed when the merchants from the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian sailed to the archipelago of Malaya for trading purposes (West, 2008). During the 15th to 17th century, many merchants from China's mainland came to settle down in Tanah Malaya, ranging from Penang to Melaka to Singapore. Baba & Nyonya existed due to acculturation that occurs when the cultural dispute between two races because of the intermarriage of Chinese men and local Malay women (Luebe & Hussin, 2019).

### **Food Heritage**

Many countries, cultures, and communities have used food heritage as a symbolic border in the confluence of taste. Thus, it can be seen as one of its ideal identity, identification, and nation-building tools (Tibere & Aloysius, 2013). Food heritage is considered as intangible parts of heritage that can be recognized as a shared legacy or general goods. Food heritage involves agricultural goods, ingredients, dishes, techniques, recipes, and food customs (Matta, 2016). Food heritage is commonly correlated with traditional foods of a specific culture that continuously alter the original flavors. In addition, food heritage can reflect the environment, history, beliefs, ideology, and food technology in a period (Wahid, 2015). In this decade, we know that cultural heritage is challenging to preserve and measure rather than a physical object as it associates with values, beliefs, behaviors, and rules of the society (Raji et al., 2017). Hence, the necessity to sustain and preserve the food heritage is viewed as a similar advantage in maintaining a local food culture in the face of homogenizing stresses and globalization.

### **Nyonya Cuisine**

Nyonya cuisine is the creation of culture from cultural borrowing and discovery through contact with local ingredients and non-Chinese principles of food preparation. It is named after Nyonya cuisine due to the association with the women (Nyonya) who are significant towards cooking activity (Tan, 2018). Nyonya cuisine is frequently stereotyped as a mixed Malay and Chinese cuisine. However, it is a new cuisine that the community has invented out of their knowledge of Chinese and local Malaysian cuisines by innovatively using regional ingredients.

The existence of the cuisine started when they made some adjustments to traditional Chinese food because the availability of the main ingredients is limited, and it is to cater towards the local tastes and preferences (Ng & Karim, 2016). The use of local ingredients or those not typically used in Chinese cuisine makes a Nyonya dish distinct from a Chinese dish. It can thus be described as creolized but has its own identity. It is because Nyonya food comprises modified Chinese and Malay-style dishes as well as innovatory dishes (Tan, 2018). Nyonya cuisine is a pleasant blend of cultures from their ancestors' two different customs and traditions. The food is a beautiful combination of Malay and Chinese cuisine with few neighbouring countries such

as Thailand, Indonesia, Holland, Portugal, and England (Lee, 2008). The origin and identity may be exposed and seen in the food and ways of its preparation. Nyonya cuisine reflects the cultural distinctiveness of the Peranakans. The unique blend of Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking principles results in a wide selection of Nyonya dishes with a unique and distinctive taste and structure (Lee, 2017). Although the influence is mainly from Chinese culture, there are a few main ingredients used in the cuisine, which are commonly similar to Malay cuisine: galangal, lemongrass, chilies, turmeric, ginger, tamarind, belacan, buah keras, Gula Melaka (Tumin, 2017). One of the uniqueness of Nyonya cuisine is that the food being prepared is not only for daily consumption but also for a special place in this community. According to the Peranakan context, food has three main functions: offerings to the deities and ancestors, sealing vows, celebrating marriages, and any other special occasions or festivals (Ng & Ab. Karim, 2016).

### **Methodology**

This section will generally explain the five main sub-sections: PRISMA 2020, resources used to gain the data, the inclusion and exclusion procedure, and finally, data abstraction and analysis that are involved in the current research.

#### **The Review Protocol – PRISMA 2020**

The researcher chose PRISMA 2020 as a guided review protocol in the current study. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) statement, published in 2009, was designed to help systematic reviewers transparently describe why the review was undergone, what the researcher did, and what the researcher found (Boccia, 2009).

#### **Resources**

The systematic review methods used for this study are conducted using two primary databases: Science Direct and Scopus. However, this current paper also relies on other reliable databases such as Mendeley, Research Gate, and Google Scholar if the article from the primary databases could not be retrieved.

#### **The Systematic Review Process in the Selecting the Articles**

##### **1) Identification**

Thesaurus and dictionaries were used to find synonymous or similar terms. The researcher considers using a few terms suggested in the databases and finding relevant keywords in the past studies. Manual searching method also was used for literature searching by directly searching the keywords identified before in the databases. Moreover, snowballing method also implemented in this process is done by referring to the reference list or the citations of the paper. Later, researcher managed to develop search strings by using two primary databases mentioned previously through advanced searching features. In total, 73 articles were retrieved in the first stage of the systematic review process; 22 articles from ScienceDirect and 38 articles from Scopus and 13 through snowballing method.

##### **2) Screening**

A total of eight articles were discarded during this first phase because they were duplicates. The other articles found were evaluated based on several inclusion and exclusion criteria set by the researcher. The first criterion was the type of literature where the researcher only focused on the journal (research articles) because it acts as a primary source that offers the data needed.

Hence, any publications besides books series, magazines, tabloids, meta-analyses, meta-synthesis, and reviews were excluded in the current research. Furthermore, due to immaturity of Nyonya cuisine academic writing, researcher chose 15 year period (2008 - 2021) as the timeline instead of 5 year.

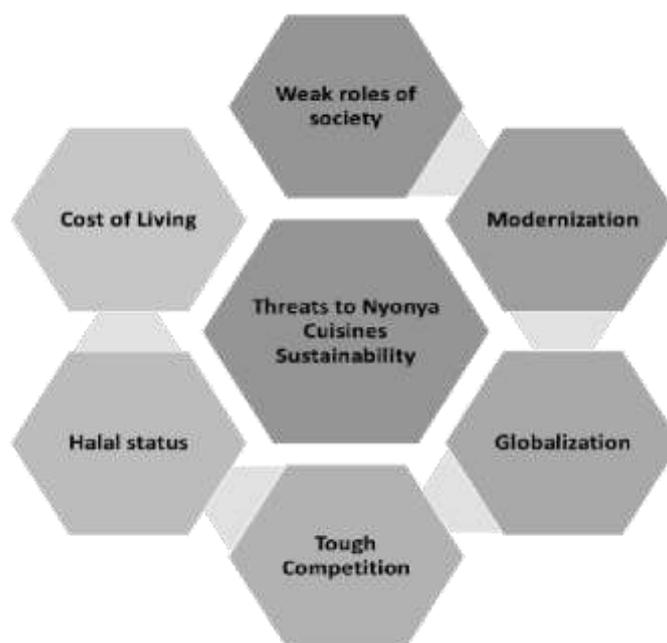
### 3) Eligibility

A sum of 53 articles was prepared for eligibility. 39 articles were excluded from this research because they were not based on empirical data and were non-related topics to Nyonya cuisine. The remaining 14 articles are set to be analysed.

### 4) Screening

In this phase, the researcher will examine one by one the 14 articles selected to extract relevant statements or data that can answer the research question. In this systematic literature review paper, researcher will identify the factors that cause Nyonya cuisine unappealing to Malaysians.

## Findings



**Figure 1: Main Themes**

Based on the final papers selected, the main themes that constantly emerged in the literature are presented in Figure 1. The threats are weak roles of society, modernization, globalization, tough competition and cost of living. *Weak roles of society* as a result, the young generation tends to ignore the uniqueness of Nyonya cuisine, which causes the loss of this vibrant heritage which is a part of Malaysia's collective identity (Ahmad et al., 2019). Not only that, the younger generations of Baba and Nyonya tend to forget their roots by thinking the culture resonates exclusively with the Chinese races (Helland, 2008). *Modernization* involvement of women in the modernization era indiscriminately will directly lead to limited time for them to prepare food at home, where the cooking process is considered inconvenient (Ng & Ab. Karim, 2016). People no longer follow irrelevant traditions and taboos such as only women are significant

with cooking activity (Oh et al., 2019). **Globalization** the people living in this era become pressured if they cannot stay relevant with the globalization trend that changes day by day, causing alteration especially towards their food consumption (Salehuddin et al., 2019). With globalization, people tend to integrate their cultures with others more, modify or outright replace old traditions and practices to make it easier or cheaper (Oh et al., 2019). **Tough competition** Nyonya cuisine faces tough competition from mainstream ethnic restaurant segments such as Malay, Chinese and Indian (Ng, 2018). In terms of food prices, most restaurants also offer food prices that are much cheaper than Nyonya restaurant, where the food is pricier and makes it difficult to get the local community's attention in our country (Ng, 2018). **Halal status** the concept of halal is not just a conventional notion but underlies many aspects of personal choice as defined by a clear set of standards for food (Lee, 2017). The main criteria for this Muslim community to choose food are to ensure that the food is prepared according to halal standards issued by JAKIM, and some of the Nyonya restaurants are unable to do so, resulting in them not eating at the restaurant (Lee, 2017). **Cost of living** when the cost of living became high, an influential group of women who last times were significant with cooking activities began working to cover their household expenses (Ng & Ab. Karim, 2016). Generally, Nyonya cuisine uses many ingredients, and its preparation is complicated. Due to time constraints and work commitments, people will choose a more accessible and cheaper alternative than providing food for their families (Ng & Ab. Karim, 2016).

## Conclusion

Culture, especially food and cuisine, is closely linked to identity because it is not mainly for daily consumption but also shapes us. Unfortunately, some ethnic groups are starting to lose their culinary heritages. It results from the older generation's incompetency in transmitting traditional food knowledge to the younger generations. In addition, the community, especially young generations, should cultivate interest in raising awareness of this invaluable Nyonya cuisine. The role of society is essential so that this culture can be protected. Moreover, it preserved from extinction in the eyes of the world, especially in this current of globalization. From the perspective of food heritage, to preserve and advocate traditional cuisine, the older generations also play roles by facilitating knowledge transmission and practice to the future generation as early as possible. The rich Peranakan culture should get more attention and be appreciated and commemorated. Unfortunately, although the importance of research on Nyonya food culture has increased over time, the number of resources available to the Peranakan people and their culture in Malaysia is quite limited. Therefore, local and state governments should work together to promote the art and uniqueness of this Nyonya cuisine to benefit national tourism and follow in the steps of other developed countries in this type of tourism. Consequently, the government must control the modernization and globalization process to ensure that traditional heritage is preserved and being taken care of. This effort would be a beneficial contribution towards a more extensive sustainable tourism growth for the country.

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