

BETWEEN CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL OF NYONYA FOOD IN MELAKA

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Abstract

This article explores the commodification of Nyonya food in Malacca. Nyonya cuisine gained recognition and became a commercialised cuisine over the past decades. A case study approach was used for this research to look into the emergence of these restaurants and their interaction with the heritage of the Baba Nyonya. Data regarding usage of food in the Baba Nyonya context was collected from secondary data, observations, informal interviews, and by eating at twenty Baba Nyonya restaurants. This information was used to provide a current overview of Baba Nyonya restaurants. From there, the analysis aims to identify examples and patterns of commodification resulting from the emergence of Nyonya restaurants. The effects of commodification are evaluated in terms of its influence on the forms and functions of Nyonya food. Forms of the food such as ingredients, menu items and preparation techniques show a wide range from remaining authentic to being highly commodified. In regard to function, the transition into the commercial sector as a means of earning wealth marks a deviation from the previous function of food as a key cultural aspect of celebrations and as an indication of wealth. Nonetheless, this transition of Nyonya food into the commercial sector marks a continuation of an even prior Baba Nyonya characteristic of business ingenuity and economic creativity.

Keywords: Baba Nyonya, Malacca, Commodification, Forms and Functions, Authenticity

The Baba Nyonya

The Baba Nyonya has been referred to as Peranakan, Straits Chinese, or Kings Chinese, but this article will use Baba Nyonya. The Baba Nyonya are descendants of Chinese traders who migrated and intermarried with the local population in Melaka. The exact timing of their arrival is unclear as Rudolph (1998) states that many of the earliest origin stories of the Baba Nyonya are “myths” and he estimates that their arrival dates