

# Tom Yam Restaurants: An Ethnic Interplay in a Malaysian Context

Suttiporn Bunmak

## ABSTRACT

The existence of Tom Yam restaurants as Thai *halal* food restaurants in Peninsula Malaysian society was examined. Tom Yam restaurants have operated in Malaysia since the early 1970s to serve mostly Malaysian Muslim consumers. These businesses are run by Malay-Thai Muslims from the southern border region of Thailand and sell to Thai national identities in Malaysian society. Tom Yam restaurants are a part of Malaysian society and have become a representative Thai food eaten in restaurants by Malaysian society as a Muslim society. Malaysian Muslims can easily access Thai dishes which represent ethnic food that is both exotic and cheap in Malaysian society. The expansion of the Tom Yam restaurant business is a part of the process of globalization in the border crossing of Thai food culture.

**Keywords:** Thai food, Thai restaurant, ethnic food, Tom Yam, Malaysia

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออธิบายความหมายของร้านอาหารต้มยำซึ่งเป็นร้านอาหารไทยฮาลาลในประเทศมาเลเซีย ร้านอาหารต้มยำในประเทศมาเลเซียเริ่มเปิดกิจการเมื่อประมาณราวทศวรรษที่ 1970 ให้กับผู้บริโภคชาวมลายูมุสลิม ธุรกิจร้านอาหารต้มยำนั้นดำเนินกิจการโดยคนไทยเชื้อสายมลายูจากจังหวัดชายแดนใต้ของประเทศไทย ร้านอาหารต้มยำในประเทศมาเลเซียเป็นการนำเสนออัตลักษณ์ความเป็นไทยในสังคมประเทศมาเลเซียที่เป็นประเทศมุสลิม ในปัจจุบันร้านอาหารต้มยำและอาหารต้มยำกลายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวัฒนธรรมการบริโภคอาหารนอกบ้านของชนมาเลเซียมุสลิมในประเทศมาเลเซีย ชาวมลายูมุสลิมสามารถเข้าถึงอาหารไทยฮาลาลที่นำเสนอความเป็นอาหาร

ชาติพันธุ์ที่แปลกและราคาประหยัดในประเทศมาเลเซีย ทั้งนี้อาจกล่าวได้ว่าการขยายตัวของร้านอาหารต้มยำในประเทศมาเลเซียเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของกระบวนการโลกาภิวัตน์ในการข้ามแดนของวัฒนธรรมอาหารไทย

**คำสำคัญ:** อาหารไทย ร้านอาหารไทย อาหารชาติพันธุ์ ต้มยำ มาเลเซีย

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, eating out (that is, dining in a public restaurant rather than at home) has become important in many countries for a variety of reasons (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Roseman, 2006; Cassolato et al., 2010). This can be related to an increase in the number of ethnic restaurants outside of their home countries. Thai food has become a global food over the past three

decades. There are Thai restaurants outside of Thailand selling Thai food in every corner of the earth, particularly in western countries. There is a body of literature that discusses the expansion of ethnic restaurant entrepreneurship outside of the home country from which the food that is served originated which emphasizes the role of immigrants who move to live abroad and use their culinary cultural skills to run a restaurant business where they find potential customers (Boissevain et al., 1990; Lu & Fine, 1995; Lee, Cameron, Schaeffer and Schmidt, 1997; Warde, 2000; Phillips, 2006).

The expansion of Thai restaurant businesses in Malaysia is related to migration from Thailand among Malay-Thai Muslims to Malaysia following the popularity of Thai food with Malaysian tourists returning from Thailand and also the demand to eat out in Malaysia. However, the case of Thai *halal* restaurants in Malaysia is somewhat different. Thai dishes are cooked by Malay-Thai Muslims who are ethnically non-Thai in Thailand and these dishes are sold to Malaysian Muslims, who are non-Thai customers. Thai dishes are common international food and are well known by Malaysian Muslims in everyday life. Customers can easily access Thai dishes which represent Thai ethnic food in the towns and small cities of Peninsular Malaysia. The expansion of Tom Yam restaurant businesses is of interest as part of the Thai *halal* food cooked and sold by Muslims in Malaysia. In this paper, I examine the existence of Tom Yam restaurants as a Thai *halal* food source in Malaysian society. I explore the history of Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia and also examine how Tom Yam restaurants are related to Malay-Thai Muslims in the southern border region of Thailand.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Eating out has become an important part of many Malaysian's lives (Tan, 2010). The change in eating-out habitats has been caused by the growth of the Malaysian economy. New consumption patterns

involving eating out are mainly considered as favorite patterns. Expenditure on food cooked in the home has declined steadily from 33.7 percent to 20.4 percent between 1973 and 2005, while at the same time, expenditure on eating out has risen from 4.6 percent to 10.8 percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2005). The consumption pattern of eating out in Malaysia is becoming more important as a result of the changes in lifestyle in Malaysian society.

The increase in dining out in Malaysia, particularly in urban areas, has been a phenomenon of the post-1970s New Economic Plan for Economic Growth, with many factors affecting this including an increasing number of single households (Yeong-Sheng, 2008), more families having double income providers rising income for many urban residents (Lee & Tan, 2007; Tan, 2010), a growing proportion of women in employment (Lee & Tan, 2007; Yasmeen, 2008), and other related socio-economic changes.

The increase in eating out has been associated with the growth of a wide variety of types of places in which to dine, including fast-food outlets, ethnic restaurants, and hotels and pubs in Malaysian towns and cities. Eating out is also linked to the rise of ethnic restaurants where customers can experience something different from their everyday life, have a break from cooking, and enjoy socializing, celebrating, and relaxing (Warde & Martens, 2000). Eating out in ethnic restaurants has cultural experience significance as it offers exposure to outsider cultural relationships between food and cultural identity which can facilitate an understanding of the spatial and temporal processes that have become more complex interrelated, and fragmented. Reasons for eating out are linked to the growth in the number of the many ethnic restaurants and the relatively cheap food available in comparable restaurants where many consumers can eat out.

The expansion of Thai food restaurants is as much a result of the globalization of culture to serve

people of different ethnicity outside Thailand as it is of the rise of eating out to meet the demand of consumers in urban residences. Today, Thai dishes have become international favorites and are well accepted by Malaysian customers. The popularity of Thai dishes has led to an increase in the number of Tom Yam restaurants selling Thai dishes in the large cities and small towns as ethnic restaurants where Malaysian Muslims can eat out (Klanarong, 2005; Bunmak, 2012). Today, Thai dishes are a part of the mainstream Malay diet. Many Malaysian consumers have become far more accepting of Thai food with different strong-taste dishes compared to the local food. Thai dishes have become deeply rooted in the Malaysian food culture of eating out in everyday life.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used an ethnographic approach to understand social reality on its own terms, based on the understanding of people themselves and on observations of their interactions in natural settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Ethnographic methods allow access to the inner reality of human experience because they emphasize the importance of examining social phenomena from the point of view of participants; however, Berg (2004) recommends using a variety of methods to gather data because it encourages rigor. Research methodologies each have their limitations, but by using a variety of methods, the negative effects of each can be minimized. Accordingly, this study obtained primary data via in-depth interviews but also studied documents and used direct observation. Finally, this study conducted interviews with ten Tom Yam business owner and their workers based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Tom Yam spicy soup is one of the most popular Thai dishes. It has become well known

among foreigners throughout the world, including people in Malaysia. Tom Yam soup is a popular Thai dish loved by many Malaysians, in particular by Malay Malaysians. Although there are some Malay and Indonesian chefs who were previously co-workers with Malay-Thai migrant workers in Tom Yam restaurants, the food they prepare is believed to have a taste different to the food cooked by Malay-Thai Muslims chefs. As a result, this task is usually reserved only for Malay-Thai Muslim workers and a few migrant workers from other parts of Thailand because Tom Yam is considered a Thai cuisine, and both customers and Malay-Thai workers firmly believe that a non-Thai chef cannot create the delicious taste of Thai dishes and that Thai people can do it better, so the chefs have to be Thai. Several Malay-Thai workers employed in these restaurants considered that the food prepared in these restaurants embodies the concept of 'Thai-ness'.

Surprisingly, most Malay-Thai workers have never eaten or cooked this spicy soup in their homes. However, the term "Tom Yam people," which refers to the Malay-Thai workers employed in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia, is well known, widespread, and accepted by the Malay-Thai workers themselves. Normally, young Malay-Thai workers become the foreign migrant workforce in the Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia.

In addition, Tom Yam food in Malaysia is *halal* (cooked according to Muslim food law) and is supplied to Malaysian Muslims in an Islamic society, so the chefs should be Muslims. Thus, the cuisine of Tom Yam in Malaysia is considered a unique speciality of Muslims from Thailand. Many Muslims from Thailand, both Thai-speaking Muslims from Songkhla and Phatthalung provinces, and Malay-Thai Muslims from Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces, are able to find work in Malaysia in Tom Yam restaurants due to the popular belief that only Thais can prepare Tom Yam dishes, and only Muslims can cook *halal* food.

### Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia

Kuala Lumpur has many Tom Yam restaurants. To explain why, it is necessary to briefly plot the history of the this form of business. The first Tom Yam restaurant was established in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s by Armad (pseudonym), who was a Thai-speaking Muslim originally from Hat Yai in Songkhla province, Thailand. He came to Malaysia to escape his financial problems and to improve his family's fortunes. He decided to open a small family restaurant in Malaysia which sold Thai dishes, including Tom Yam soup made by his wife. Armad's restaurant was located near the UMNO building in Kuala Lumpur. It was quite small with only ten tables and opened for dinner between 5:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m.

Although he had higher education qualifications, Armad decided to run a restaurant in Malaysia because he thought that running a food business required only a small investment, involved little risk and not much technical skill. At that time, there were no restaurants which sold Thai food in Kuala Lumpur; Malaysian Muslims themselves did not know Thai food, including Tom Yam soup. Thai food is quite different to Malay food which is often cooked and served cold, while Thai food is cooked and served immediately. Tom Yam is popular with Malaysian Muslims, and Tom Yam soup was the main Thai dish served, so Armad's restaurant was well patronised.

This led to the restaurant being called a "Tom Yam" restaurant, rather than a Thai restaurant, to attract Muslim customers for whom the word "Thai" means "Buddhist". They are now known as "Tom Yam restaurants" also because they are operated by Malay-Thai Muslims from the southern border region of Thailand who are not called "Thai" by Buddhist Thais but *khaek*, a derogatory term meaning "alien". Malay-Thai Muslims from these areas does not usually call themselves "Thai" either.

There are no Tom Yam restaurants similar to those in Malaysia in the southern border region of Thailand. Almost all Malay-Thai Muslims from

these areas do not know how to prepare traditional Thai dishes. The restaurants for Muslim people in the southern border areas of Thailand are called *ran ahan islam* (Islamic restaurants) or *ran ahan khaek* (alien restaurants), which denotes restaurants that serve *halal* food. These are quite different from Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia, as Muslim restaurants in Thailand sell only Muslim dishes, which differ from Thai dishes.

In Malaysia, Tom Yam restaurants serve not only traditional Thai cuisine but also some dishes from the southern border region of Thailand and some Malaysian dishes. This makes them different from the other Malay restaurants, which sell only Malay food which is prepared in advance, such as *Nasi Ayam*, *Nasi Campur* and *Nasi Lemak*. Malaysian restaurants are quite popular with Malaysian Muslim customers in the morning and at noon. On the other hand, Tom Yam restaurants serve fresh, hot dishes cooked at the time the customer orders the food, so they are very popular for dinner, but less popular at lunch time.

Armad's business became increasingly successful. Within a year, he brought his young brother and two relatives from his home town to work in his restaurant. After a year, all of them followed his lead and set up their own Tom Yam restaurants. They also were Thai-speaking Muslims from Songkhla province, Thailand. After a few years, two of Armad's friends in Malaysia (Malaysian nationals with Malay-Thai Muslim mothers and Malaysian Muslim fathers) followed his lead and set up Tom Yam restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. However, unlike Armad and his relatives, these friends were Malay-Thai Muslims from Pattani province, Thailand. Thus, although the first Tom Yam restaurant was developed in Kuala Lumpur by Thai-speaking Muslims, the business then spread through Armad's social ties into two types of Tom Yam restaurants, those run by Thai-speaking Muslims from Songkhla province, Thailand and those run by Malay-Thai Muslims who were Malay-speaking Muslims from Pattani, Yala,

and Narathiwat provinces, Thailand. Although both types of restaurant are run by Muslims from Thailand, the owners have different ethnic backgrounds and speak different languages.

Today, there are many Tom Yam restaurants owned by Malay-Thai Muslims in Malaysia (Rahimmula, 2008). Almost all Tom Yam restaurant owners used to be employed in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia before starting their own businesses. Each had worked in Tom Yam businesses in Malaysia for such a long time that they had enough funds and experience to start their own restaurant. Tom Yam restaurant owners from Thailand come from various backgrounds. They include: Thai Muslims speaking a Southern Thai dialect; Malay-Thai Muslims who hold a Malaysian identity card but were born in the southern border region of Thailand; Malaysian Muslims of mixed descent from Malaysian and Malay-Thai Muslim parents; Malay-Thai Muslim women from Thailand who married Malaysian Muslim men in Malaysia; and Malay-Thai Muslims speaking a Malay dialect who are irregular migrants running their businesses without Malaysian identity cards. Most of the owners are Malay-Thai Muslims who are ex-workers and speak a Malay dialect from Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces in Thailand. However, some owners are Thai Muslims who speak a southern Thai dialect from Songkhla and Phatthalung provinces, Thailand. There are also some Malaysian Muslim owners in the later generation who started businesses after Tom Yam dishes became popular in Malaysia.

As the Tom Yam restaurants extended their coverage, restaurant owners continued to employ workers from their home towns who spoke the same language as them. In turn, several migrant workers who were employed in these restaurants set up their own restaurants with both Thai-speaking and Malay-speaking Muslims when they had more experience and enough funding. Although Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia started with Thai-speaking Muslims, ownership increased among

Malay-Thai Muslims, as they were ex-employees who had the advantage of speaking the Malay dialect, which is quite similar to the official standard Malay. Nowadays, there are many Tom Yam restaurants scattered around Malaysia. Currently, Muslims from the southern border region of Thailand and several Malaysian Muslims run Tom Yam restaurants and employ Malay-Thai Muslim workers.

#### **Reasons for establishing Tom Yam restaurants**

To understand why there are so many Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia, it is necessary to explain the reasons why migrants establish these businesses. Many Malay-Thai Muslims owners decide to run a restaurant selling Thai dishes in Malaysia because they have few educational qualifications, from either Thailand or Malaysia. They are not able to be employed as skilled workers in Malaysia. They have few career options but to be employed as a low paid laborer because they have less education than Malaysian workers and this restricts their ability to be employed in higher paid jobs in Malaysia, so the best alternative for them is to establish a small business. Migrants also operate small food business in many countries including Australia, Canada, the USA, and the United Kingdom (Desbarats, 1979). Running an ethnic food business requires few skills, deals less with officials and requires only a small investment with lower risks and a higher chance of success compared to other types of business because food can easily be sold to everyone. Everywhere humans need to eat, not to mention the desirability and uniqueness of ethnic food.

In addition, some Malaysian Muslims saw the success of the many Malay-Thai Muslim owners and the popularity of Tom Yam restaurants among Malaysian Muslim customers, so they decided to run this type of restaurant themselves. However, Malaysian Muslims who run a Tom Yam restaurant do not know how to cook Thai dishes; they always have to employ Malay-Thai Muslim workers. After

ex-workers became restaurant owners, they also employ Malay-Thai Muslims from their villages in Thailand. The growth of the Tom Yam restaurant business in Malaysia among ex-migrant workers has led to increasing numbers of migrant workers, mostly from their employers' villages in Thailand, as the restaurant owners need cheap labor to work for them in Malaysia. Subsequently, migrant networks in both Malaysia and Thailand keep expanding in response to the growing labor demand.

Another factor contributing to the increase in Malay-Thai Muslims from Thailand includes the stories of successful migrant workers passed down to other generations. The majority of those who had been employed for some time in Tom Yam restaurants, especially at the top rank of chef, dream of running their own Tom Yam restaurants if they have the chance. These workers have seen many examples of successful Tom Yam restaurant owners who make a lot more money selling Thai food than they could earn working for someone else. The profits of these restaurant owners are an important motivating factor and workers often start operating their own business as soon as they can accumulate enough money and can acquire the necessary Malaysian ties to deal with Malaysian officials.

The large number of Tom Yam restaurants spread all over Malaysia creates job opportunities for numerous Malay-Thai Muslims from Thailand. Despite their small size, the ever-increasing number of Tom Yam restaurants makes them reliable sources of employment for migrant workers as these restaurants always seek to employ Malay-Thai Muslims from Thailand to cook delicious Thai cuisine for Malaysian Muslim customers in Malaysia. These enterprises rely on migrant workers flowing across the border through their networks in Malaysia and Thailand to provide the labor needed to produce *halal* Thai dishes in Tom Yam restaurants.

Working in Tom Yam restaurants allows some migrant workers to learn many skills in the business from the entry level jobs to the highest rank,

including how to manage the business because, eventually, they take almost full charge of the restaurant for their employers. Their employers usually provide them with business-relevant skills, which allow them to run their own restaurants. They can change their lives from being workers who only receive daily wages to become entrepreneurs who receive all the profits from their own business. According to Boissevain et al. (1990) learning business-relevant cultural skills in a small ethnic firm allows immigrant employees to open their own business: "The careers in the ethnic enclave range from entry-level jobs as dishwashers or cashiers, to some higher-level jobs as headwaiter or manager, and finally to ownership of one's own firm." The employers' achievements also serve to motivate the migrant workers to run their own restaurant successfully and to work hard to acquire experience.

#### **Ethnic interplay among Malay-Thai Muslims**

There are several reasons why Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs employ Malay-Thai Muslims in their businesses and why almost all Malay-Thai Muslims work in Tom Yam restaurants. However, the major reason is the existence of migrant networks. Malay-Thai Muslims are employed by co-ethnic entrepreneurs, both Malay-Thai Muslims and Malaysian Muslims, as they share the same ethnicity, language, and cultural and religious background. The employers and the employees, thus, are of the same Malay ethnicity, speak the Malay dialect, have Islam as their religion, and come from the same villages or regions. A certain degree of sharing between workers and owners is very important. Malay-Thai Muslim owners usually employ Malay-Thai Muslims, while Thai-speaking Muslim owners prefer Thai-speaking Muslim workers in their restaurants. According to other studies (e.g. Boissevain et al., 1990; Lee et al., 1997; Heberer, 2005; Jones, Ram & Edwards, 2006; Butter, Masurel, & Mosch, 2007) employers rely more heavily on the employment of labor from the same ethnicity, cultural, linguistic or religious

background than on labor from different backgrounds. No Indonesian workers are employed by either Thai-speaking Muslim or Malay-Thai Muslims owners.

Malay-Thai Muslims are preferred also because Thai food at Tom Yam restaurants is considered so unique that only Thais can cook such exotic dishes. Because of this notion of Thai-ness in Thai food preparation, both Malay-Thai Muslims and Malaysian Muslim restaurant entrepreneurs employ only Malay-Thai Muslims to prepare food. The skills required for Thai cuisine are highly valued by Malay-Thai Muslims in the Tom Yam restaurants as such knowledge of Thai-ness and the requisite culinary skill is considered to be specific to Thai-speaking Muslims and Malay-Thai Muslims. Thus, Thai-speaking Muslims and Malay-Thai Muslims take advantages of this, using their national identity culinary skills and knowledge of Thai dishes, to be employed in the Tom Yam restaurants. Moreover, customers in Malaysia expect that the Thai dishes they consume in Tom Yam restaurants have been prepared and cooked by Thai people. Customers expect staff to link culture and product through culturally specific skills that non-ethnic staff do not possess (Butter et al., 2007).

As well as being unique in their culinary skills, Malay-Thai Muslims are also cheap to employ. The Tom Yam restaurants provide only limited and poor working conditions. Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs cannot afford to employ local workers. Consequently, they rely heavily on Malay-Thai Muslims who are cheap so as to earn high profits and make a success of their business. Thus, it is not surprising that almost all Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs prefer recruiting Malay-Thai Muslims from Thailand. They need cheap labor and they employ Malay-Thai Muslim workers although, and perhaps because, they are irregular migrant workers.

Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs continue to employ cheap Malay-Thai Muslim workers with irregular working habits, following the successful

business model of other entrepreneurs, most of whom are their former employers. Malay-Thai Muslim workers with such irregular working habits are very important for the Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs because they only employ such low paid labor to work long hours. This labor helps them to keep their expenses low and to run successful businesses in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

Tom Yam restaurants serving popular *halal* Thai cuisine are scattered around Malaysia, but do not exist in Thailand. The first Tom Yam restaurant opened in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s and such restaurants spread, opened by Malay-Thai Muslims from Thailand. The owners of such businesses continue to employ Malay-Thai Muslim workers who speak the same language as they do. Having the same ethnicity and culture are not the only reasons why Tom Yam restaurant owners employ them—the cheap cost of their labor is another important factor.

Almost all Malay-Thai Muslims Tom Yam restaurant owners worked in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia before starting their own business. Entrepreneurs learn many skills in the restaurant business working as employees in entry level jobs and progressing to the highest ranking jobs where in some cases they manage the restaurant for their employer. Employers set up their businesses in a common, densely populated location, in particular, in Kampong Tani, Kuala Lumpur. They have few educational qualifications which mean fewer employment options, so the best alternative for them is to establish a small business.

Malay-Thai Muslim workers like to work in Tom Yam restaurants because both their Thai-ness and their Muslim identity equip them to serve *halal* Thai cuisine to Malaysian Muslim customers. Only Thais can cook authentic Thai food in Malaysia, while at the same time as they are Malay Muslim, this identity qualifies them uniquely to prepare *halal* food. Thai food at Tom Yam restaurants is

considered so unique that only Thais can cook such exotic dishes. Because of this close connection between Thai-ness and Thai food preparation, restaurants rely heavily on the employment of co-ethnics. Co-ethnic employment is advantageous for employers, but low pay is a negative factor for Malay-Thai Muslim workers. As a result, many Malay-Thai Muslim workers take steps to start their own restaurant business and like their ex-employers they want to be successful in business continuing to employ Malay-Thai Muslim workers from Thailand.

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