

Hawker culture need not be exclusive

No country can call hawker culture exclusively its own but each can confidently claim its own version, tested and tasted over time

Lai Ah Eng

For The Straits Times

So what I thought might happen has happened. This was my reaction after reading The Straits Times article, "Hawker culture move starts food fight" (Aug 23).

There are some objections from some of our neighbours to Singapore nominating hawker culture for Unesco's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

I happen to have been invited, along with many others working in the broad field of culture, to discuss and make suggestions as to what might be the best item to nominate. Clothing? Complicated. Song and dance? Maybe. Food? Everyone got rather excited. But food can be ethnicised, nationalised,

globalised, hybridised, gendered, et cetera. And some dishes (plus songs and dances) have caused one country to be upset with another in the past. (I am well aware of this as I teach a module on multiculturalism and its contested meanings.)

I agreed with the others to suggest hawker culture for the Unesco List.

According to the National Environment Agency (NEA), a survey in 2016 showed that close to 85 per cent of respondents felt that hawker centres play an important role in community bonding. The same survey revealed that nine in 10 respondents strongly agreed or agreed that hawker centres are an integral part of Singapore's identity.

But at the recent focus group discussions, I also shared that one way to resolve any possible objection is to see it (and various other cultural items) as broadly shared heritage, with hybridised and localised versions and placing each in historical, social and cultural contexts.

Singapore's hawker culture has seen its own evolution and development, from street food by peddlers and stalls in the 18th and 19th centuries (probably earlier) to today's hawker centres and foodcourts.

It is by now distinctive in character, encompassing the economics of business and consumption, everyday life, culture and practices, and multicultural in terms of dishes, traditions and clientele.



Singapore's hawker culture has seen its own historical evolution and development, from street food by peddlers and stalls in the 18th and 19th centuries (probably earlier) to today's hawker centres and foodcourts. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

It is true that other places also have hawker cultures, such as Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong, each with its own history, distinctiveness and contributions to the cultural heritage of humanity, even as there are some common origins and heritages.

We also need to understand in broader terms how different types of food (and many cultural items) have travelled in various eras of globalisation, and been absorbed into cultures, some to become local culinary delights. This is so true for South-east Asia, where food has travelled and developed alongside huge migrations and movements of people historically and still do.

Of course, this sometimes raises issues of cultural authenticity and appropriation. But given the historical and cultural contexts of different places, it seems more positive and enriching to think of shared heritage, yet with distinctive versions – some of which keep evolving – and as new ones keep emerging. It is increasingly hard to imagine some place or country claiming some noodle or curry dish or bread as exclusively its own.

So Singapore's nomination of hawker culture for the Unesco list is not to claim exclusive ownership or contribution or start a fight, as implied by celebrity chef Redzuawan Ismail (better known as Chef Wan).

The list is meant to raise awareness of intangible heritage and provide recognition to communities' traditions and know-how that reflect their cultural diversity; it does not attribute or recognise any exclusivity or standard of excellence.

Another celebrity chef, Datuk Ismail Ahmad, reportedly said Singapore's hawker centres are beautiful but the food is tasteless.

It seems it is the cooks who want to start a food fight (or cook up a storm in a teacup). They should keep calm and continue to wok their wonders. Most of us eaters just want to be able to eat, and eat peacefully and happily wherever we go.

And all chefs should know that many eaters and foodies know how to sniff out the best dishes and places because we have grown up crazy over food and cannot be fooled by rhetoric. The proof of the pudding (or porridge) is in the eating.

Frankly, I don't care if it is a celebrity (chef or foodie) who thinks this or that about which dish or which eating place is better here or there. It is so subjective at the personal level.

I mean, I have yet to find a polite expression for Japanese curry or durian chilli crab. And I still prefer eating durians out of their husks at the stall instead of from take-home styrofoam boxes. But there you are. I wouldn't want to pick a fight over someone's meat even though it may look like poison to me.

Some 20 years ago, I took a colleague to eat popiah in Joo Chiat. She took one bite and promptly announced: "Our popiah is far better!" I didn't want to start a fight, so I just smiled and finished my piece.

Looking back, I wish we had discussed provincial arrogance (we are both cultural anthropologists from different parts of a neighbouring country).

Hopefully, we have all tasted enough of life than to make quick judgments and comparisons of food and hawker culture, and are able to understand and appreciate cultural diversity and hybridity in food and things.

There is room for cultural pride

over food and food culture but not for arrogance or superiority and conflict. There can be only gratitude when we have food to share, and appreciation that we can taste and partake of each other's cultural dishes and even embrace them as our own.

So much of culture these days has become shared heritage which is at the same time hybridised in each localised context. No country can call hawker culture exclusively its own but each can confidently claim its own version, tested and tasted over time.

If I were to be a member of the deciding Unesco team, I would make sure I understood South-east Asia's hybridised food history and heritage and list the item as Hawker Culture (Singapore).

I would also encourage Chef Wan and other cooks to nominate the next item – Hawker Culture (Malaysia). I hope to soon add Hawker Culture (Thailand) and Hawker Culture (Hong Kong). Show humanity that seems to be always fighting that we can genuinely have peace and happiness through appreciation of the diversity of food and hawker cultures. It can only be a win-win, die-die-must-try Unesco list from our part of the world.

If there is one reservation I have about adding Hawker Culture (Singapore) to the list, it is a domestic one: The table manners of some customers – they leave their mess after their meal for others to clean up. They have no place in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Dr Lai Ah Eng is adjunct senior fellow in the University Scholars Programme at the National University of Singapore.