

LAUGHING AT OURSELVES: REFLECTING MALAYSIAN ETHNIC DISPARITIES*

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Abstract: Malaysia's various ethnic groups make interesting study both sociologically and culturally. With such a heady mix of cultural elements to explore, it is often natural that the many groups stumble upon 'rare gems' that reflect their 'Malaysianess'. Have Malaysians really ever appreciated the many and varied aspects of culture that they are seemingly suddenly thrown into? Do we embrace these happily or are we constantly rejecting them? Fortunately, through the medium of film, we are, from time to time, allowed to reflect on our obvious similarities and even more apparent disparities. In this paper, we explore the culture and perceptions of people from the major ethnic groups that are the human base of this very country. When was it we have last laughed at ourselves ... heartily? *Nasi Lemak 2.0* provides an interesting, if not disturbing insight into the workings of the Malaysian 'mind'. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* was released on 8th September 2011 and impacted a whole generation of Malaysians. The characters have been well chosen and have done a wonderful job of being representations of the various communities in this nation. Ethnocentrism is a reality and often rears its head, 'ugly' or otherwise in several situations. Are we able to grapple with the levels of ethnocentrism that we encounter? These are some of the issues that will trigger much debate and discussion among ourselves and perhaps also reflect our cores.

Keywords: *nasi lemak 2.0*, ethnocentrism, ethnic identity, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a country formed in 1963 comprises a pluralistic society with a Malay majority, followed by Chinese, Indians and other indigenous groups. The new millennium has seen an influx of migrant workers, foreign traders and 'silver hair' residents that have changed

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the landscape of ethnic composition in the country. This paper attempts to explore the various ethnic disparities present in the fabric of Malaysian society through the medium of film, namely *Nasi Lemak 2.0* where ethnocentrism plays a central role.

Given the scenario of such multiple communities, a few of the many issues that are raised pertain to ethnocentric attitudes such as stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. The film discussed here is Namewee's (Wee Meng Chee) controversial 'Nasi Lemak 2.0' which was made in the spirit of 1Malaysia, a concept introduced by the present Prime Minister of Malaysia. The title of the film is at once familiar, funny and fabulous food for thought. Namewee believes in showing Malaysians their undeniably unique national heritage coupled with their diverse socio cultural backgrounds. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* makes the Malaysian audience laugh without offending, think without prejudice and 'become' without changing.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism is basically an attitude, at the core of which lie "judgments about what is right, moral, and rational...[pervading] every aspect of a culture's existence" (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007, 331). Ethnocentrism has been explained by Nanda and Warms (as cited in Samovar, Porter & McDaniel 2007, 331) as a "notion that one's own culture is superior to any other...we are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture....".

Such attitudes are learnt early in life from significant others and are reinforced through socialization in later years. How often have we heard the elders in the family saying (unaware of prying ears) that the Chinese are a cunning mean lot, not to be trusted... the Indians, well forget it *lah*, they are fence sitters, too afraid to say anything so we cannot hope much from them and the Malays, well what can we say *mah*... they move like the *kura-kura* (tortoise) and think everything will fall on their laps without them having to work for anything.

NASI LEMAK 2.0

Malaysian Heritage Food

Nasi lemak is a traditional Malay dish, usually consumed as breakfast but due to its popularity, it can be eaten at any time of the day. This dish gained popularity among the non Malays and today it is served in various ways. The basic ingredients are rice and coconut milk served

with anchovy's *sambal*, cucumber slices, fried peanuts and half boiled egg.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 – the Plot

In the film, a young chef named Huang Da Xia tries hard to get his restaurant up and running but he faces competition from Nor, the hawker stall lady who sells *nasi lemak*. Her *nasi lemak* has the people queuing in rows and the food sells out in a short time. After initial grouses against Nor, chef Huang grudgingly tastes her *nasi lemak*, offered to him by his elderly neighbour which to his surprise, is a delight to his palate. He then seeks to know the ingredients for the taste enhancing 'sambal' which she refuses to reveal to him at first. However, chef Huang persists and is finally given a roadmap by Nor for him to undertake a journey to get the right ingredients for preparing the perfect *sambal*. Nor has managed to balance the 'yin' and 'yang' of her perception towards other ethnic groups despite her Malay cultural identity. She prepares and sells *nasi lemak* for financial sustenance and teaches *Taichi* (Chinese martial art) as an interest. She is the right person to hand the roadmap to Huang as she has found her own true Malaysian identity.

Huang embarks on this journey for the quest of the perfect *sambal* with a young woman, Xiao K who is the adopted daughter of the hawker stall lady, Nor. The people he meets during his adventurous road trip impacts the chef's *weltanschauung* of the diverse culinary arts of his country. Chef Huang's journey is more of a symbolic journey where he learns to appreciate other culinary cultures and eventually learns to incorporate the cultural variants into his cooking creating a hybrid culinary dish.

It starts with the restaurant being taken away from him due to non-payment of rental for 6 months. The restaurant space is bought over by the female shareholder, Gong Xi Ning of Qing Restaurant who is competing with her brother for the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the restaurant business. The mother, on teleconferencing from abroad suggests a rice cooking competition where they can choose their own cooks to participate.

This is when Xiao attempts to persuade Huang to represent her father in the cooking duel after having tasted his fried rice. He is not easily persuaded until he faces several stumbling blocks which lead him to his journey of 'discovery'. The other contestant is Lan Qiao, a migrant Chinese worker, who acts as Gong Xi Ning's young male

escort. The violin plucking Lan Qiao has a family back home but has no qualms about playing fiddle to the rich and powerful businesswoman to secure his position in a foreign land. Both Huang and Lan had studied at the China Institute of Cuisine and in all competitions, Huang lost to Lan. Lan considers himself a true authentic Chinese as he is from China itself whereas Huang believes in authentic Chinese cooking as he has a Chinese core despite being born and raised outside China.

Huang's faithful travel companion, Xiao presents a contrast to his typically 'Chinese' 'quite happy to live within his own cultural boundaries' personality. Xiao is always ready to adapt to people and environments, usually accepting people as they are. Namewee had the perfect sense to make Xiao's character and personality a contrast to Huang's which in the end actually complements his.

During the journey and prior to it, there are flashbacks to Huang's life experiences – those that have disappointed and saddened him and those he can learn from. Huang has always looked up to his idol 'cook' who due to lack of adequate income in his later years performs as a drag queen in one of the cheap entertainment centres. This makes Huang all the more certain of wanting to do the right things without having to end up the way of his 'idol'.

THE JOURNEY

The 'Peranakan' Mansion

Huang's and Xiao's first stop is in Melaka on a stormy night at a Baba Nyonya residence, typical of the *Peranakan* architecture built with large rooms that serve as inner halls, dining spaces, private chambers, a courtyard and so on. A kind of eeriness seemed to loom over this mansion which Huang and Xiao do not understand till later. Namewee must be telling the audience that most Baba Nyonya houses are now no longer occupied or are turned into museums as most the young generation Babas have migrated to English speaking countries such as Australia and England.

The elderly couple residing in the mansion was more than happy to share the ingredients that go into Nyonya cooking. Huang's wish to know the 'precise' amounts of spices, etc that go into making of a dish is dismissed by the Nyonya saying that he has to 'agak-agak' or estimate.

This shows that to make a tasty dish you must literally 'instinctively know' what amount of a certain spice or herb must go into it.

Walking through the corridors of the mansion, the sudden gusts of cold wind make the pair suspect that something is not quite right. Xiao experiences strange things like a hanging corpse which Huang dismisses as being a figment of her imagination. Eventually, they realize that the elderly couple are not living beings but ‘spirits’ that live in the mansion, they make a speedy exit from the residence.

The Baba Nyonya is one of the unique ethnic groups that has shaped Malaysia’s economy as they developed business intellect, endeavour and industry. They are an interesting mix of basically Chinese cores, adopting Malay culture and blending Malay and Chinese cuisine, leading to delectably tasting unique dishes. The language is a creolized dialect of Malay peppered with ‘Hokkien’ words. The elderly couple tells Huang that the Babas came to Malaysia a long time ago and assimilated with the local population and learnt to make an interesting variant of the ‘sambal’. The portrayal of the Baba Nyonya is refreshing, especially the language used. This segment of the film made Malaysians smile at the typical behaviour and speaking styles of the Baba Nyonya.

Indian Curry

The next stop for Huang and Xiao is a Malaysian Indian residence where the man of the house, portrayed as the Curry Master is rather ‘no-nonsensical’. He is especially protective of his ‘beautiful’ daughter (Huang cannot seem to lay his eyes off) who has aspirations to be a Miss Malaysia. Here, the daughter comes to help her father instead of pursuing her own dreams as she realizes that her father needs her help in continuing his ‘curry’ business. She says that this is her future as this is her father’s legacy, also highlighting the Indian sense of pride in their family heritage. Huang also learns a thing or two about spices, the right blend of which can create aromas and tastes unimaginable.

The dash of humour Namewee adds into this segment is the way the father keeps talking in loud tones and hits Huang’s head (with no intention of hurting him) to make him understand the importance of knowing the right ingredients. There is a spread of more than 20 spices on the table, which Huang mixes and matches till he gets the right blend for the 3 kilos of mutton that he has to cook. The Indian man tells him not to forget his own unique formula as it belongs entirely to him. Huang is told that nobody can recreate it but himself and that he should use this wisely (Chong, Lim & Wee 2011). The audience is

treated to a visual treat of Indian spices, coconuts and even the pestle and the mortar for grinding the spices.

Oftentimes, the Tamils in this country are portrayed as loud, speaking in high octaves even when the person speaking to them is barely a foot or two away. There is plenty to laugh at here. Stereotypically there is a touch of 'Bollywood', the segment in which dancers burst into song and dance and colourful attire prior to the visit to the Indian residence. Huang mentions that one is likely to find the Indians hiding behind a tree or sitting in the bushes. All Malaysians can truly appreciate the way the Indian has been portrayed without feeling offended.

This Tamil man is also seen mouthing a few sentences in Hainanese, Hokkien and Malay during the course of the conversation with Huang and Xiao which gives it an interesting dimension as Huang has no idea what the man says to him in Tamil.

At this point, Huang's character is already undergoing change. His level of ethnocentrism starts reducing as he is directly exposed to people of other cultures living on the same soil, under the same sky, practicing different cultures and cooking different foods.

Fisherman at the Malay Kampung

On the way to Tanjung Sepat, Huang and Xiao are saved by the fisherman, whose home is the last stop in the journey where he will "discover something" he "never thought" he "had till now" (Chong, Lim & Wee 2011). Huang hallucinates that the fisherman is trying to use his 'silat' magic against Huang's Chinese martial arts. That causes Huang to react with animosity when he actually comes to and sees the fisherman. The fisherman lives in perfect harmony with his four wives and his children. Huang is rather astonished at how this can happen given the different personalities of the wives. In Islam, a man is allowed to have four wives at a time as long as he is able to provide for each wife equally, both materially and emotionally.

One of the wives has even been educated at a Chinese school and to Huang's embarrassment, can recite Chinese poetry beautifully leading the other wives to follow her cue. He feels a little ashamed of his own lack of knowledge of Chinese lyrical verse. The wives are quite content to serve their husband in their own way and they even make it a point to sit at dinner together with Fisherman sitting at the head and everyone else around the imaginary rectangular borders on the floor. Here we see how the rural population, usually Malays, live and eat.

When asked why the fisherman has chosen to stay in a rural area he says that in urban places like Kuala Lumpur there is such a rat race, filled with competition and stress. In this village, he has everything he wants and needs. Namewee has cleverly shown how some Malays just want a peaceful coexistence and are quite happy to be away from the hustle and bustle of cosmopolitan areas.

The cooking duel

On being transported to Kuala Lumpur in a daze, the people on his street welcome Huang and ask if he is ready for the cooking duel. Nor asks if he has understood and if he was ready (*Dah faham? Dah sedia?*) and Huang replies in the affirmative that he is ready and he is instantly handed a ladle. It is at the duel that the audience sees how both the participants prepare the dish according to what they believe in. The panel of three judges is impressed with Lan who uses extraordinary, exquisite ingredients for his dish, emphasizing that it is food fit for royals.

This dish conveys the ‘true spirit and hardship’ faced by his ancestors. As Huang prepares his dish with “basic stuff that you can easily obtain in Malaysia” and “a taste that everyone can associate with” (Chong, Lim & Wee 2011) he speaks of how the recent journey he has undertaken has helped him appreciate and understand other cultures which inspired him to create this delicacy.

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, with all the dramatic episodes, Namewee ends the film on a happy note, with Lan returning to his family in China as he wants to retain his ‘self-respect’ and Huang winning the competition and becoming the new chef at Qing restaurant. Huang by the end of the film has realized that different people living in a country is

like different ingredients in a pack of *nasi lemak*. Even though each ingredient has its different taste when you mix them up together it magically transforms into a food everyone can enjoy (Chong, Lim & Wee 2011).

Malaysians can appreciate Huang’s decreasing degree of ethnocentrism as he approaches the end of his eye-opening journey. He is earlier labelled as ‘racist’ by the Nepali guard who Huang constantly refers to as “Bangala” hardly bothering about the difference between a Bangladeshi and a Nepali. He also learns the need to ‘localize’ Chinese

cuisine to cater to the needs of customers as opposed to his earlier ideology that Chinese people need to support authentic Chinese food. Many Malaysians are beginning to laugh at themselves in particular scenarios and more importantly, we are realizing that it is a boon that we are so diverse and yet so similar.

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