

The Position and Meaning of Tom Yam Restaurants in Malaysia¹

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Abstract

This article examines the position and meaning of Tom Yam restaurants as a Thai *Halal* food in peninsula Malaysian society. Tom Yam restaurants have operated in Malaysia since the early 1970s to serve mostly Malaysian Muslim consumers. These businesses, run by *Oghae Nayu*, Malay speaking Muslims from lower southern Thailand, sell Thai national identities in Malaysian society. Nowadays, Tom Yam restaurants are a part of Malaysian society and have become a representative food for eating out for Malaysian society. Malaysian Muslims can easily access Thai dishes which represent ethnic food as exotic and cheap food in Malaysia. The expansion of the Tom Yam restaurant business is a part of the process of globalization in the border crossing of Thai food culture.

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Introduction

Eating out has become important in many countries for a variety of reasons over the past three decades.³ This can be related to an increase in ethnic restaurants outside of their home countries. Thai food has become a global food over the past three decades, with 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 their home country which emphasizes immigrants who move to live abroad and take their cuisine culture skill to run a restaurant business when they have potential customers.⁴

The expansion of the Thai restaurant business is related to migration and tourism of Thailand. However, the case of Thai restaurants in Malaysia is somewhat different. Thai dishes are cooked by *Oghae Nayu*, who are ethnically non-Thai, and sold to Malaysian Muslims, who are non-Thai customers. Thai dishes are common international food and well known by Malaysian Muslims in everyday life. Customers can easily access Thai dishes which represent Thai ethnic food in towns and small cities of peninsular Malaysia. The expansion of Tom Yam restaurant business is interesting as a Thai *Halal* food, cooked and sold by Muslims in Malaysia.

In this article, I aim to examine the position and meaning of Tom Yam restaurants as a Thai *Halal* food in Malaysian society. I will discuss the increasing trend of eating out among the new patterns of everyday life of Malaysian society. I will explore the social history of Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysian society and how Tom Yam restaurants expanded from Thai Muslims to *Oghae Nayu* and then by Malaysian Muslims. I will also examine how Yom Yam restaurants relate to lower southern Thailand and why Thai dishes are represented by *Oghae Nayu*.

³ Mintz, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating"; Roseman, "Changing Time: Consumers choice of Ethnic Foods When Eating at restaurants"; Cassolato, "Meaning and Experience of "Eating Out" for Families Living with Dementia".

⁴ Boissevain, "Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Ethnic Strategies"; Lee Y., "Ethnic Minority Small Business"; Phillips, "Food and Globalization"; Warde, "Eating Globally"; Lu, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity".

Who are *Oghae Nayu*⁵

Oghae Nayu constitute only 2.2 percent of the population of Thailand, but form the majority in the lower southern provinces. They make up 80.4 percent of the population in Narathiwat, 76.6 percent in Pattani and 66.1 percent in Yala, but just 4.6 percent in Songkhla and 9.9 percent in Satun (see Table 1). However, this area also contains Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese and Thai Buddhists who are distinctly separate groups with their own ethnic identities.

Table 1: Religion and Language in the Study Area, 2000

	Pattani	Yala	Narathiwat	Songkhla	Satun	Thailand
Thai Muslims who speak Thai (<i>Thai Islae</i>)	4.1	2.8	1.6	18.6	57.9	2.4
Malay Muslims who speak Malay (<i>Oghae Nayu</i>)	76.6	66.1	80.4	4.6	9.9	2.2
<i>Total Muslims</i>	<i>80.7</i>	<i>68.9</i>	<i>82.0</i>	<i>23.2</i>	<i>67.8</i>	<i>4.6</i>
Buddhists (<i>Siye</i>)	19.2	31.0	17.9	76.6	31.9	94.2
Other	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	1.2
Total Population	595,985	415,537	662,350	1,255,662	247,875	60,916,400

Source: National Statistical Office, Population and Housing Census 2000 for Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla and Satun Provinces.

Malay people constitute an ethnic group who speak Malay and who have Malay identity. Malays inhabit the Malaysia peninsula, East Sumatra and Borneo, comprising Malaysia and Brunei, and parts of Thailand and Indonesia. The cultural identity of the *Oghae Nayu* in lower southern Thailand is based on Malay culture and on Islam. In

⁵ *Oghae Nayu* is the word that Malay speaking Muslims in lower southern Thailand use to refer to themselves. Accordingly, it is the word that I will use in this article.

particular, *Oghae Nayu* in Thailand speak a language very similar to the main language of the northern Malaysian States.

Oghae Nayu in Thailand attempt to differentiate their own identity from that of both Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists in Thai society. However, they have faced many obstacles in achieving this. During World War II, the Phibun Government (1938-1945) implemented a one nation-state policy which attempted to merge all ethnicities into the Thai culture.⁶ Thai national integration was to be achieved through education and by a process of nation-building whereby Thai-ness would be developed through language, religion and the monarchy. This construction of Thai-ness included *Oghae Nayu* and, when Siam became Thailand, the word for ‘Malay Muslim’ was replaced by ‘Thai Muslim’ within the Thai polity to promote national culture. However, *Oghae Nayu* still do not call themselves *Oghae Siye* (Siamese people) or *Oghae Thai* (Thai people) since for them Thai identity is by definition Buddhist. *Oghae Nayu* view their ethnic and religious identity as different from Thai Buddhists. *Oghae Nayu* continue to call themselves *Oghae Nayu* (Malay people) and to call Thai people *Oghae Siye* or *Oghae Thai*.

Moreover, when *Oghae Nayu* go to Malaysia, they do not call themselves *Oghae Siye* or *Oghae Thai*. They call themselves *Orang Melayu Tani* (Patani Malay people) in standard Malay. *Oghae Nayu* from Thailand do not call Malaysians *Oghea Nayu* (*Orang Melayu* in standard Malay). They call Malaysians *Oghae Malaysian* (*Orang Malaysian*). Thus, they also delineate their own identity from Malaysians in Malaysia. In addition, Malaysians also call them *Orang Melayu Tani* or *Orang Melayu Siam* (Siamese Malay people). From the *Oghae Nayu* viewpoint, the word ‘Thai’ is used to refer to Thai Buddhists. The word *Nayu* in Malay dialect, or *Melayu* in standard Malay, means both Muslim-ness and Malay-ness, as all *Oghae Nayu* are Muslims.

⁶ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*; Laungaramsri, “Ethnicity and the Politics of Ethnic Classification in Thailand”; Yusuf, “The Southern Thailand Conflict and the Muslim World”.

On the other hand, Thai Buddhists, in particular in the south of Thailand, call *Oghae Nayu* people *Khaek* or *Khaek Malay*. *Khaek* is an adjective and pronoun referring to Indian people, but most often to Muslim people in general. *Oghae Nayu* view *Khaek* as a derogatory term, but Thai Buddhist people use this word to indicate that an individual is not Thai. According to Thongchai Winichakul:

Khaek also denotes Muslim, but by no means exclusively so. That is to say, a reference is sometimes made regardless of whether or not a certain characteristic really belongs to any particular nation or ethnic group, because the aim of discourse is to identify the un-Thainess rather than to define the characteristic of any particular people.⁷

Table 2 below summarise the various terms which Malay-speaking Muslims, Thai-speaking Muslims, Thai Buddhists and Malaysians use to refer to themselves and to each other. In this article, which concerns *Oghae Nayu*, I have used their own terminology and their linguistic form of reference.

Table 2: Who Call Who What

<i>The Subject Person</i>	<i>The Object Person</i>			
	Malay Muslims who speak Malay	Thai Muslims who speak Thai	Thai Buddhists	Malaysians
Malay Muslims who speak Malay	<i>Nayu</i> ¹	<i>Islae</i> ¹ / <i>Thai Islae</i> / <i>Siye Islae</i>	<i>Siye/Thai</i>	<i>Malaysian</i>
Thai Muslims who speak Thai	<i>Khaek</i> ²	<i>Thai Islam</i> / <i>Islam</i>	<i>Thai</i>	<i>Malay</i>
Thai Buddhists	<i>Khaek</i>	<i>Khaek</i>	<i>Thai</i>	<i>Malay</i>
Malaysians	<i>Melayu</i> ³ <i>Tani</i> / <i>Melayu Siam</i>	<i>Thai Islam</i> / <i>Siam Islam</i>	<i>Thai/Siam</i>	<i>Melayu</i>

¹ In Patani Malay dialect.

² In standard Thai language.

³ In standard Malay language.

⁷ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 5.

Religion, language and ethnic traditions create attitudes and behaviours that differ between *Oghae Nayu*, *Siye* and *Islae*.⁸ The Malay culture shapes the identity of *Oghae Nayu* as their ethnicity relates to the Malay way of life, beliefs and behaviour. *Oghae Nayu* have lifestyles and beliefs different from *Oghae Siye* and *Oghae Islae*, which they maintain through their practice of traditional culture. They visit relatives and friends in Malaysia, and maintain fewer social contacts with *Oghae Siye* in Thailand.

Oghae Nayu live a culture similar to that found in the Kelantan State and Terengganu State of northern Malaysia. There are close relationships between *Oghae Nayu* in Thailand and *Oghae Malaysian* in these northern Malay States. In Malaysia, Islam is the official religion. Muslim Malay, and some indigenous Bumiputras, are about 60 percent of the population and follow Islamic law according to the Koran.⁹ They follow the same customs and religion as the *Oghae Nayu* of lower southern Thailand. However, *Islae*, who are Thai Muslims speaking Thai, have attitudes and behaviours similar to *Siye*, and despite their religious differences, they have always maintained close social relations with each other.

Eating Out

Eating out has become an important part of many Malaysian's lives.¹⁰ The change of eating out has been caused primarily by the growth of the Malaysian economy. Food expenditure at home has declined steadily from 33.7 per cent to 20.4 per cent between 1973 and 2005. Similarly, expenditure on eating out has risen from 4.6 per cent to 10.8 per cent.¹¹ The consumption pattern of eating out in Malaysia is becoming more important as related to changes in the lifestyle of the Malaysian society.

⁸ Knodel, "Religion and Reproduction: Muslims in Buddhist Thailand".

⁹ Liew, "Ethnicity and Class in Malaysia".

¹⁰ Tan, "Demand for Food-away-from-Home in Malaysia".

¹¹ Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Malaysian Household Expenditure Survey 2004/2005*.

The increase in dining out in Malaysia, particularly in urban areas, has been a phenomenon of the post 1970s New Economic plan which promoted economic growth, with many factors affecting this including: an increasing amount of single households;¹² more families having double incomes; rising income for many urban residents;¹³ a growing proportion of women in employment;¹⁴ and other related socio-economic changes.

The increasing demand for eating out has been associated with the growth of a wide variety of places to eat, 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 and the desire to experience something different from the everyday life, getting a break from cooking, socializing, celebrating and relaxing.¹⁵ Eating out in ethnic restaurants as a cultural experience shows the significance of the outsider culture relationships between food and cultural identity, enabling an understanding of spatial and temporal processes that have become more complex, interrelated and fragmented.¹⁶ The reasons for eating out are linked to the growth in the number of ethnic restaurants and relatively cheap food.

Food is a form of culture capital bound up in societies, culture, geography and history. Hence, food is the cultural heritage of ethnic groups. The cooking and behavior of consumption in each society creates different forms of the culinary experience. In the era of globalization, food is not limited to certain places, but ethnic food has expanded to distant lands through commerce, tourism, and migration. This is implicitly linked to migration and tourism. Firstly, many Thai migrations have gone abroad. When they arrived in other countries,

¹² Elmont, "Tourism and Food Services"; Yeong-Sheng, *Household Expenditure on Food at Home in Malaysia*.

¹³ Lee and Tan, "Examining Malaysian Household Expenditure Patterns on Food-Away-From-Home"; Tan, "Demand for Food-away-from-Home in Malaysia".

¹⁴ Elmont, "Tourism and Food Services"; Yasmeen, " 'Plastic-Bag Housewives' and Postmodern Restaurants"; Lee, "Examining Malaysian Household Expenditure Patterns on Food-Away-From-Home".

¹⁵ Warde, *Eating Out*.

¹⁶ Cook, "The World on a Plate: Culinary Culture, Displacement and Geographical Knowledges".

they brought along their own ethnic food and many of them opened Thai restaurants. However, most of the Thai people who migrated into Malaysia were not ethnic Thai, but ethnic Malay. In the 1970s, the Malaysian government allowed Muslim people from lower southern Thailand to become citizens in order to increase the Muslim population relative to the non-Malay Chinese and Indian people.¹⁷ The establishment of Tom Yam restaurants selling Thai dishes was, therefore, not closely related to their food culture.

Secondly, many foreign tourists visit Thailand and experience Thai food in Thailand. These experiences have created demand for Thai food and restaurants in their own country and, thus, the influx of foreign tourists to Thailand has contributed to the popularity of Thai food in the international arena. There are 6,875 Thai restaurants in the international arena.¹⁸ The majority of them are in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Malaysian tourists are the second most numbers of tourists to visit Thailand, and Malaysian consumers travel and experience eating Thai food. In Malaysia, the responses to demands for Thai food have been realized in several ways, such as running Tom Yam restaurants and incorporation of Thai dishes into the menu of local restaurants.

The expansion of Thai food restaurants is a result of a globalization of culture to serve people of different ethnicities outside Thailand, along with the rise of eating out to meet demand by consumers in urban environments. Today, Thai dishes have become international favorites and have been well accepted by Malaysian customers. The popularity of Thai dishes has led to many Tom Yam restaurants selling Thai dishes in the large cities and small towns as ethnic restaurants for eating out among Malaysian Muslims. Moreover, many Malay and India restaurants incorporate some popular Thai dishes into their menu to suit the demand in Malaysia. 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 tasting dishes. Thai dishes have become deeply rooted

¹⁷ Pillai, *People on the Move*; Asis, "The Filipino in Sabah".

¹⁸ Department of Export Promotion, *Thai Food Restaurant*.

in the Malaysian food culture of eating out in everyday life. Also, Tom Yam restaurants have become a symbol of Thai cuisine since the 1970s and Tom Yam restaurants have maintained a dominate position as a place for dinning out.

Social History of 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 business. The first Tom Yam restaurant was established in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s by Armad,¹⁹ who was a Thai-speaking Muslim originally from Hat Yai, Songkhla, Thailand. He came to Malaysia to escape financial problems and to improve his family's fortunes. He decided to open a small restaurant in Malaysia which sold Thai dishes, including Tom Yam soup (Thai sour and spicy soup) made by his wife. Armad's restaurant was located near the UMNO building in Kuala Lumpur. It was quite small with only 10 tables and was opened for dinner between 5.00 pm and 2.00 am.

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, 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 from 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" meant "Buddhist". Thai restaurants are now known as "Tom Yam restaurants" because they are operated by Muslims from the lower southern provinces of Thailand who are not called "Thai" by Thai Buddhists, but by the perceived derogatory term "*Khaek*". Muslim people from these areas do not usually call themselves "Thai" either (see Table 2).

¹⁹ This name is a pseudonym. A relation of Armad related to me this social history of Tom Yam restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. Many first generation Thai Muslim restaurant owners told me the same story.

There are no Tom Yam restaurants similar to those in Malaysia in the lower southern provinces of Thailand. Almost all *Oghae Nayu* from these areas do not know how to prepare traditional Thai dishes. The restaurants for Muslim people in the lower southern provinces of Thailand are called *Ran Ahan Islam* (Islamic restaurants) or *Ran Ahan Khaek* (*Khaek* 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.

In Malaysia, Tom Yam restaurants serve not only traditional Thai cuisine, but also some dishes from the southern Thai provinces and some Malay 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*. Malay restaurants are quite popular with Malaysian Muslim customers in the morning and at lunch. 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, who were also Thai-speaking Muslims from Songkhla, Thailand, 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.

After a few years, two of Armad's friends in Malaysia, Malaysian nationals with *Nayu* 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 *Nayu* from Pattani province in 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 and those run by *Oghae Nayu* who were Malay-speaking Muslims from Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat. Although both 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 *Oghae Nayu* in Malaysia.²⁰ Almost all Tom Yam restaurant owners were previously employed in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia before starting their own businesses. They 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; *Oghae Nayu* people who hold a Malaysian Identity Card, but who were born in the deep south provinces of Thailand; Malaysian Muslims of mixed descent from Malaysian and *Oghae Nayu* parents; *Oghae Nayu* women from Thailand who married Malaysian Muslim men in Malaysia; and *Oghae Nayu* speaking a Malay dialect who are irregular migrants running their businesses without Malaysian Identity Cards. Most of the owners are ex-workers, *Oghae Nayu*, speaking a Malay dialect from Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. But some owners are Thai Muslims speaking a southern Thai dialect from Songkhla and Phatthalung. There are also some Malaysian Muslim owners in the later generation who started businesses after Tom Yam dishes became popular in Malaysia.

As the number of Tom Yam restaurants expanded, restaurant owners continued to employ workers from their home towns who spoke the same language. 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 *Oghae Nayu*, as they were ex-employees who had the advantage of speaking the Malay dialect, which is quite similar to the official standard Malay. Currently, Muslims from southern Thailand and several Malaysian Muslims run Tom Yam restaurants and employ *Oghae Nayu* workers.

²⁰ Rahimmula, “Trends in Welfare Management” (in Thai).

Tom Yam Soup

Tom Yam spicy soup is one of the most popular Thai dishes. It is unique with its complex combination of hot, bitter, salty, sour and sweet taste. It is made from galangal, lemongrass, kaffir-lime leaves, red chilli paste, lime juice, salt, fish sauce and coriander leaves. 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 *Nayu* migrant workers in Tom Yam restaurants, the food they prepare is believed to have a taste different to the food cooked by *Oghae Nayu* chefs. As a result, this position is usually reserved only for *Oghae Nayu* workers and a few migrant workers from the other parts of Thailand because Tom Yam is considered Thai cuisine, and both customers and *Oghae Nayu* workers firmly believe that a non-Thai chef can never produce the taste of Thai dishes which only Thai people can cook, so the chefs have to be Thais. Several *Oghae Nayu* workers employed in these restaurants consider that the food prepared in these restaurants embodies the concept of Thai-ness.

Surprisingly, most *Oghae Nayu* workers have never eaten or cooked this spicy soup in their homes. However, the term “Tom Yam people,” which refers to the *Oghae Nayu* workers employed in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia, is well-known, wide-spread and accepted by *Oghae Nayu* workers themselves. Normally, young *Oghae Nayu* 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, and *Oghae Nayu* from Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, are able to find work in Malaysia in

Tom Yam restaurants because of the idea that only Thais can prepare Tom Yam dishes, and only Muslims can cook *Halal* food.

The 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 *Oghae Nayu* 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 options but to be employed as low paid labour because they are less educated 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 operate small food businesses in many countries including Australia, Canada, U.S.A., and the United Kingdom.²¹ According to Clark and Drinkwater,²² the lack of fluency in the *lingua franca* restricts the employment opportunities of migrants, and is the cause for their higher rates of self-employment. Ethnic food businesses require few skills, deal less with officialdom, and require only a small investment with lower risks and a higher chance of success compared with other types of business because food can easily be sold to everyone. Everywhere human beings need to eat, not to mention the desirability and uniqueness of ethnic food.

In addition, some Malaysian Muslims see the success of many *Oghae Nayu* owners and the popularity of Tom Yam restaurants among Malaysian Muslim customers, so they decide to run this type of restaurant themselves. However, Malaysian Muslims who run Tom Yam restaurant do not generally know how to cook Thai dishes; therefore, they have to employ *Oghae Nayu* workers. After ex-workers become restaurant owners, they also employ *Oghae Nayu* from their

²¹ Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles"; Waldinger, "Trends in Ethnic Business in the United States"; Yoo, *Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Warde, "Eating Globally"; Ram, "Ethnic Minority Enterprise in its Urban Context".

²² Clark, "Pushed Out or Pulled in? Self-Employment among Ethnic Minorities in England and Wales".

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 employers' villages in Thailand, as the restaurant owners need cheap labour to work for them in Malaysia. Subsequently, migrant networks in both Malaysia and Thailand keep expanding in response to the growing labour demand.

Another factor contributing to the increase in *Oghae Nayu* from Thailand includes the stories of successful migrant workers passed along. The majority of those workers who were 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 of money selling Thai food, more than they could earn working for someone else. The profits of these restaurant owners are a significant 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 *Oghae Nayu* 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 typically seek to employ *Oghae Nayu* from Thailand to cook 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 labour needed to produce *Halal* Thai dishes in Tom Yam restaurants.

Although a large number of Tom Yam restaurants are spread all over Malaysia, the restaurant owners generally choose to set up their businesses in a common location which is densely populated. There are a large number of Tom Yam restaurants in Kampong Tani, which is well-known among Malaysian Muslim customers as the place to buy Thai dishes in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Malaysian Muslim customers come from other areas to have Thai dishes in Kampong Tani. From my experience, this place has the biggest concentration of

Tom Yam restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. Interestingly, there has been an increase in the number of Tom Yam restaurants run by both *Oghae Nayu* and Malaysian Muslims, which has led to fierce competition for customers. As a result, new restaurant owners have had to set up their restaurants in other areas. Nevertheless, the significant choice of a location still depends upon the number of potential customers living near Tom Yam restaurants.

Working in Tom Yam restaurants allows some migrant workers to learn many skills in the business from 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 allows 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 businesses.

According to Boissevain, et al., 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.”²³ The employers’ achievements also serve to motivate the migrant workers to run their own restaurant successfully and to work hard to acquire experience.

Why *Oghae Nayu*?

There are several reasons why Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs employ *Oghae Nayu* in their businesses and why almost all *Oghae Nayu* work in Tom Yam restaurants. However, the major reason is the existence of migrant networks. *Oghae Nayu* are employed by co-ethnic entrepreneurs, both *Oghae Nayu* 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 a Malay dialect, follow the Islamic religion and

²³ Boissevain, “Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Ethnic Strategies”.

come from the same villages or regions. A certain degree of sharing between workers and owners is important. *Oghae Nayu* owners usually employ *Oghae Nayu*, while Thai-speaking Muslim owners prefer Thai-speaking Muslims workers in their restaurants. According to other studies,²⁴ employers rely more heavily on the employment of labour from the same ethnicity, cultural, linguistic or religious background, than on labour from different backgrounds. No Indonesian workers are employed by both Thai-speaking Muslim and *Oghae Nayu* owners.

Oghae Nayu 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 *Oghae Nayu* and Malaysian Muslim restaurant entrepreneurs employ only *Oghae Nayu* to prepare food. The skills required for Thai cuisine are highly valued by *Oghae Nayu* 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 *Oghae Nayu*. Thus, Thai-speaking Muslims and *Oghae Nayu* take advantage 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.²⁵

It is believed that the notion of Thai-ness means that an exotic Thai dish can only be known and cooked by Thai people. This is similar to the way many Thai scholars believe that only Thai scholars can produce real, profound Thai studies because they know and understand Thai-ness better than non-Thai scholars, in particular Western scholars, who are not Thai. As Thongchai points out:

²⁴ Boissevain, "Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Ethnic Strategies"; Lee, "Ethnic Minority Small Business"; Heberer, "Ethnic Entrepreneurship and Ethnic Identity"; Jones, "Ethnic Minority Business and the Employment of Illegal Immigrants"; Butter, "The Economics of Co-Ethnic Employment".

²⁵ Butter, "The Economics of Co-Ethnic Employment".

Thai people, scholars or not, have always been warned not to *tamkon farang* (“tag along behind the Westerners”). For them Thai-ness, Thailand, Thai people, Thai studies, or everything Thai, are things that the *farang* can approach, but never reach with the utmost intimacy that Thai people can.²⁶

As well as being unique in their culinary skills, *Oghae Nayu* are also cheap to employ. The Tom Yam restaurants provide limited and poor working conditions and Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs cannot afford to employ local workers. Consequently, they rely heavily on *Oghae Nayu* who are cheap so as to earn higher profits and make a success of their business. So, it is not surprising that almost all Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs prefer recruiting *Oghae Nayu* from Thailand. They need cheap labour and they employ *Oghae Nayu* workers although, or perhaps because, they are illegal.

Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs typically continue to employ cheap illegal *Oghae Nayu* workers following the successful business model of other entrepreneurs, most of whom are their former employers. Illegal *Oghae Nayu* workers are very important for the Tom Yam restaurant entrepreneurs because they want to employ low paid labour to work long hours. This labour helps them to keep costs low and to run successful businesses in Malaysia, as the entrepreneurs themselves freely acknowledge.

According to Boissevain, et al. and Jin-Kyung Yoo, the employment of mostly co-ethnic minorities is the main strategy of ethnic entrepreneurs for survival and success.²⁷ Co-ethnic labour is characteristic of ethnic businesses because workers can be paid low wages, work long conditions and put up with uncomfortable working hours since illegal workers do not have access to labour laws that protect good standards. Similarly, research in Birmingham, UK found that illegal co-ethnic labour is advantageous for restaurant entrepreneurs because these businesses are open long hours and the

²⁶ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*.

²⁷ Boissevain, “Ethnic Entrepreneurs and Ethnic Strategies”; Yoo, “Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs”.

work is labour intensive and demanding.²⁸ The employment of low waged illegal or legal co-ethnic labour is a success strategy for ethnic minority entrepreneurs in many host countries.

Conclusion

Tom Yam restaurants serving popular *Halal* Thai cuisine are scattered across Malaysia, but do not exist in Thailand. The first Tom Yam restaurant opened in Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s and such restaurants have spread, opened by *Oghae Nayu*, Malay-speaking Muslims from Thailand. The owners of these businesses continue to employ *Oghae Nayu* workers who speak the same language. Having the same ethnicity and culture are not the only reasons why Tom Yam restaurant owners employ them. They also do so because of the cheap cost of their labour.

Almost all *Oghae Nayu* Tom Yam restaurant owners worked in Tom Yam restaurants in Malaysia before starting their own businesses. Entrepreneurs learn many skills in the restaurant business working as employees, starting in entry level jobs and moving up 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.

Oghae Nayu 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 cook authentic Thai food in Malaysia, while at the same time their Malay Muslim identity qualifies them uniquely to prepare *Halal* food. Thai food at Tom Yam restaurants is considered so unique that only Thais are employed to 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

²⁸ Jones, "Ethnic Minority Business and the Employment of Illegal Immigrants".

is advantageous for employers, but low pay is a negative for *Oghae Nayu* workers. As a result many *Oghae Nayu* workers take steps to start their own restaurant business and, similar to their ex-employers, they want to be successful in business and continue to employ *Nayu* workers from Thailand.

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