



## The food consumption and eating behaviour of Malaysian urbanites: Issues and concerns

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### Abstract

Food and the culture of eating of the Malaysian urban society has undergone some form of transformation. This paper takes a closer look at the pattern of the Malaysian urbanites' food consumption and eating behaviour, which was no longer anchored in the household. Instead, eating-out was practiced at the many food premises (including those operating 24 hours a day), available in the urban setting. Based on secondary data from several case studies in Bandar Baru Bangi (Selangor), Jitra (Kedah) and Segamat (Johor) it was found that the practice of eating-out had become a trend among urban workers, students and even families because they could not go home to eat or because there was no food at home. Factors such as working away from home, working mothers, and food varieties (both local and international) served at many premises encouraged the practice of eating-out. Restaurants, food courts and food stalls were servicing not only those who wanted to eat at meal times, but also those who wanted to enjoy food with friends/family members in a festive and relax manner. Food caterers were also available to serve at formal functions (meetings, seminars) in offices and at home during religious and family occasions. However, lack of consideration of nutrient contents, irregular eating time, poor food quality and premises' cleanliness might expose the practitioner to health, social, familial and even safety risks.

**Keywords:** eating-out, food security, food premises, life style, local authority, urban society

### Introduction

Current trends of urbanisation in Malaysia involve increasing proportion of urban population through rural-urban migration, immigration, formation of new townships and expansion of urban boundaries or counter-urbanisation. Urbanisation has generated changing urban environment, especially in big cities and new townships, to cater the increasing demand by urban population for employment, transportation, social services, residential units, etc. Local authority as the governing body faces many challenges to cope with population increase and the ever changing pattern of lifestyle of the urban communities to achieve sustainability and quality of living.

In the same context, food (and eating) as the basic need for human survival is also affected likewise. Increasing demand for food is not only parallel with the increasing urban population but also involve changing eating behaviour and the urban landscape. Nationally, Malaysia is also holding national fiest during celebrations for Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christians which invole a big crowd of hundred thousand. The avenue is at open space and the place changes between states every year. Hence, eating-out has become a culture and cooked food industries are profitting on the new development.

This paper takes a closer look at the pattern of eating-out among the urban populations and related perspectives: i.e the eateries, food businesses, local authorities and finally the implications of the eating phenomenon on the well-being of the urbanites. If food is not cook at home, then the alternative is food from the shops.

Hence, issues of food quantity and quality may pose risk to food security whereby eating behaviour lead to over eating, irregular eating, imbalanced diet and taking unclean or contaminated food. Discussion in this paper is based on several studies carried out in several Malaysian cities as examples, specifically pertaining to the Malay ethnic.

## **Discussion and results**

The discussion is based on secondary data from several case studies carried out previously in Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor, Jitra, Kedah and Segamat, Johor.

### *Urbanisation patterns in Malaysia*

Table 1 shows population and urban population distribution by states in Malaysia. Selangor has the highest population size, follow by Johor and Perak. All states experience an increased in urban population, except Kelantan in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia through natural growth and in-migration.

Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory, Selangor, Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Johor and Perak are the most urbanized. All these states are located in the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia which are the most developed region in Malaysia, especially those in and around the Klang Valley. Cities like Georgetown in Pulau Pinang, Ipoh in Perak, Shah Alam in Selangor and Johor Baharu in Johor, which are also states capital, are destinations of in-migrations and centers of socio-economic growth. Besides, many new townships, which are formed partly to counter-urbanized established cities are new destination of in-migration.

Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory, Melaka and Penang Island in Pulau Pinang are experiencing urban conurbation as boundaries between neighboring towns expand and merge. Klang Valley is the biggest cosmopolitan as it situates Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, and other towns around Kuala Lumpur.

The trend of urbanization has not only increases urban population, but has also brought changes in lifestyles. High cost of living in the cities has driven families to seek more sources of income and more wives work, irrespective of educational attainment, either full time or part time. Hence, domestic arrangements have also changed with more families rely on foreign maids who stay in or on daily visits. Many families without domestic maids have to rely on services available in their neighborhood, such as nurseries, laundries and cooked food services.

The structural and functional development in the urban areas reflects the changing lifestyles of the urban population. The local authorities in their local plan is subjected to build not only more residential units but also more shopping units or shopping complexes, open courts for food services and periodical markets (retailing). With regards to food premises, it is observed that cafe / cafeteria services are available at government offices, school and manufacturing industries, while restaurants and stall are operating in neighborhood and at the city centers, where variety of food premises and cooked food services are available.

**Table 1. Population and urbanisation distribution in Malaysia, 2000, 2005 & 2010**

States	Population (mil)			% Urban population		
	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010
<b>North:</b>						
Kedah	1.67	1.85	2.04	39.1	39.8	40.3
Perlis	0.21	0.23	0.25	34.0	35.1	35.9
Pulau Pinang	1.33	1.5	1.60	79.7	79.8	80.0
Perak	2.09	2.28	3.44	59.1	59.3	59.3
<b>Central States:</b>						
Melaka	0.65	0.79	0.79	67.5	70.6	73.4
N. Sembilan	0.87	1.03	1.03	54.9	56.3	57.4
Selangor	4.19	4.87	5.31	87.7	88.4	89.1
Kuala Lumpur	1.42	1.62	1.7	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Southern State:</b>						
Johor	2.76	3.17	3.46	64.8	66.5	67.7
<b>East coast:</b>						
Kelantan	1.36	1.51	1.67	33.5	33.4	33.3
Pahang	1.3	1.45	1.57	42.0	43.5	44.6
Terengganu	0.9	1.02	3.33	49.4	49.8	50.3
<b>East Malaysia:</b>						
Labuan	0.08	0.09	0.09	76.3	77.6	78.6
Sabah	2.60	3.13	3.33	48.1	49.8	51.6
Sarawak	2.07	2.34	2.56	48.1	49.5	50.6

Source: Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006 – 2010).

Hence, the discussion on food quality and eating behavior among the urban population takes three related parties. Firstly, the local authority who plan and developed shop units; secondly, the enterprises who conduct food services; and thirdly, the consumer or customers of the food services.

#### *The role of local authorities*

Local authorities roles can be divided into three categories. Firstly, to plan and develop infrastructures and amenities at urban centers, which include shop units for food services. Local authorities allocate spaces for food services to cater for new food enterprises. The objectives are to create economic opportunities and simultaneously cater for greater demand for food services from the public.

Secondly, to produce licences to food operators through formal applications in accordance to shop units available and also handling courses for food operators (owner and workers) to ensure they comply to regulations (local act) before they are allowed to operate their food business.

Thirdly, to ensure quality food services rendered to the public by setting rules and regulation for food operators and continued enforcement to protect the public from food contamination. Enforcement unit of local authority work closely with local Health Department in this task. Eating area is strictly within the premise but many food operators use road outside their premise at night as open eating area.

The latest option taken is to grade food premises as A (good), B (moderate with caution) and C (poor with closure order) as in Table 2. The grade is not only to ensure and permit clean food operators to operate, but also as an indicator to eateries of the quality of the premises and the food served.

In practice, the local authority is facing several issues. These include the far greater increase of licences applications as compared to shop units available, to handle increasing number of illegal food premises, shortage of enforcement officers to enforce the grading system and to protect the public from food contamination. To what extent the public is aware of the grade, which is pasted on the wall of the restaurants where they eat, is difficult to generalise as no unclean premises close due to customers assertion.

**Table 2. Grading system of food premises by local authorities**

Grade and Marks in %	Action
Grade A: 76-100 %	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean. The inspection exercise is once a year</li> <li>• if the grade declines, the inspection regime will change</li> </ul>
Grade B: 50-75 %	Moderately clean and inspection exercise is once in every 6 months <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the second inspection will determine the new grade</li> <li>• if the grade is still B, the inspection regime is once in every 6 months</li> </ul>
Grade C: 49 % and below	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not clean and ordered to close for 2 weeks</li> </ul> After 2 weeks, new grade is determined by a repeat inspection if improve then the premise is allowed to operate business. Otherwise the closure order continues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspection regime is once in every 6 months</li> </ul>

*Source:* MPKajang 2003, MPSeremban 2003.

*The role of food businesses / services*

Food businesses or services, organized either formally or informally, in the urban center is paramount to urban communities. Their presence in busy streets or crowded city centres make them highly accessible to eateries during meal time.

Formal food premises operated as franchised cafe and restaurants, either owned by local or foreign entrepreneur. Formal food services operated in either shophouses developed by local authorities, in foodcourts developed by shopping complexes or in private buildings owned by individual food operators.

Informal food services operated at smaller food premises, developed by the local authorities for small and native operators, who run food businesses informally for those who choose local dishes and at cheaper costs. The premises complexes is known as ‘medan selera’ (appetite court). The variety of foods give the eateries choices which include local dishes and foreign food from Asian countries (Thai, Indian, Japanese cuisines) and western fast food. The food business is usually a family business, run by family members with the assistance of a few workers (Noraziah et al. 2008).

There are also mobile units and illegal stalls operating at unauthorised spots as they could not obtain licenses and hence food stalls. Food operating licences are limited and to those without jobs, they boldly build food stalls by the roadside to serve passers-by. Enterprising housewives also took advantage of their neighbors by selling local dishes and sweets near their homes. In a few hours daily, they earn extra income for their families.

The operation patterns of food premises as shown in Table 3 vary from single meal session of roughly 4 hours to multiple meal sessions of more than 10 hours operation. The longest is 24 hours restaurants, mostly owned by Muslim Indians ethnic, locally called ‘mamak’. Most of such restaurants attract customers by setting giant screen for sport screening (LCD/ASTRO) and they also make use of the road outside their restaurant with chairs and table as open eating areas. However, this is not complying to local regulation. The customers are mostly male teenagers, who are enjoying food, television show as well as the company of friends.

Besides food services for individual customers at various food premises, there are food caterers who operate for organised meet at offices and homes. Some restaurant are also caterers, while others concentrate on catering only. Such caterers are organized formally and informally to cater for occasions as requested by the host of the occasion. In this case, food types are predetermined to suit the time and nature of the meet. The host or the organizer of the meet pays the bill, which ranges from RM5.00 per pax for teabreaks to RM25.00 per pax for two teabreak and lunch. The service also include table arrangements before meal and table clearing after meal. In bigger catering, the caterer also provide workers for site services but the minimum pax is RM50 and above.

The ordered food is cooked at a centralized place and send/distributed to a predetermined avenues before the time specified. Family caterers operating at a much smaller scale do the cooking at their houses and then similarly send the cooked food to various destinations as ordered. Some of the caterers are office workers, who functions as caterer on the weekend and they take leave on working day catering.

**Table 3. Patterns of daily operation of food operators**

Operation patterns	Meal types	Description of food
Single session (3 – 5 hours):		
1. Morning only	Breakfast	Nasi lemak, roti canai, noodles and local sweets /cakes
2. Afternoon only	Lunch	Rice & varieties of dishes
3. Late afternoon	Tea	Local cakes /sweets
4. Night only	Dinner / supper	Rice and accompanied dishes & ala carte
Multiple session:		
1. Morning & afternoon	Breakfast & lunch	Local dishes
2. Morning till night (10 hours)	Breakfast, lunch & dinner	Local, thais, Indians and Western*
3. Morning till the next early morning (15 hours)	Breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner & supper	Local, thais, Indians and Western
4. Afternoon till midnight (10 hours)	Lunch, dinner & supper	Local, thais, Indians and Western
5. Late afternoon till early morning (10 hours)	Tea, dinner & supper	Local, thais, Indians and Western
23 or 24 hours a day	All meals	All kinds

\* Franchise restaurants Pizza Huts, KFC, MacDonald – western only  
 Source: \*Maznah(2003), \*\*Noraziah et al. (2008), \*\*\*Zainuddin (2004).

Sessions of office meetings and seminars are always accompanied by meals prepared and served by caterers. As those involve are committee members or seminar participants, the food ordered is determined by the number of persons attending the sessions.

Caterers also cater for ‘open house’ during eid, safe journey prayers for haj (pilgrimage to Mecca), while others ‘kenduri’ for marriage celebrations. The task of food preparation for such occasions are no longer anchored in the family but taken over by caterers who also arranged for tents, table and chairs for the family guest, and followed by cleaning task after the occassion. Limited home spaces and lack of familial help in the city has encouraged families to engaged food caterer for familial occasions.

**Table 4. Monthly income patterns of food business operators**

Income in RM	Jitra*	B. B. Bangi**	Segamat***
Below 1000.00	20.0	13.8	24.0
1001 –2500	36.6	23.8	30.0
2501- 5000	29.9	53.8	32.0
Above 5001	3.3	8.8	14.0

*Source:* Adapted from \*Maznah(2003), \*\*Noraziah et al. (2008) and \*\*\*Zainuddin (2004).

Based on the demand for food by all sectors in the urban population, food business is lucrative and generating good income depending on the scale of their operation. Table 4. illustrates the income pattern of food operators in some urban centres in Malaysia. The income ranges reflect the business scale. A housewife selling food in a session earns RM50 a day (RM1500 a month), but a 24 hour restaurant earns about RM4000 a day (RM120,000 a month). Caterer's income depend on the frequency of catering and the size of the order.

#### *Patterns of eating-out*

Eating behaviour is basically related to needs and determine the patterns of meal time, i.e breakfast, lunch and dinner. In traditional practices, women cook for the household and eating at homes is common after working during the days and at weekends. But the patterns of eating has changes with social transformation vis-a vis urbanization. Eating-out is one of the manifestation of the changes. As observed by Noraziah & Norihan (2003), Maznah (2003) and Zainuddin (2004), the new practices of eating can be indentified and catogarised in terms of place of eating, time of eating, food types, and the eateries themselves.

The place of eating is related to food businesses available in the urban environment. The many and accesible food premises supported the phenomenon. For breakfast, food premises operating in the morning are places for workers and shoppers to take their breakfast, but others just buy the food to take away for family members at home. At lunch, eating places are crowded by workers, shoppers and even school children. At weekends the numbers multifold as families do their shopping, either during the day or at night, and enjoy food of their choice at nearby restaurant or food court. The crowd is biggest at the end of the month after pay days. Families also celebrate birthdays and other success stories of family members at selected eating place to enjoy eating and to foster familial relations (See Fox 2005).

Besides the normal meal hours, the time of eating to some is no longer restricted to meal time as food services is always available. As a result, some simply can eat at any time anywhere. The presence of 24 hours restaurants has encourage teenagers, late sleepers or night workers to take their meal at late night or early mornings.

Different food premises offer varieties of food that eateries can choose. At food courts or 'medan selera', eateries can enjoy food of their choises which ranges from local to international types. The availability of many types of food offered at food premises has also encouraged some of the urban population to frequently patronising cafe, restaurants or stalls which offer good food.

The trend of eating-out is too obvious as observed at food premises and feast held either at houses or at offices. Eating-out at individual level can categorised into working days and at family level at weekends. To many of those either on jobs, studies and urban undertakings during the day need to patron food premises for tea breaks and lunch. As a result, food premises are always full house as eatries come and go in streams during peak time either as individual, couples or groups.

Some continue to patron food premises with family members for dinner as food is not prepared at home, either voluntarily or involuntarily, especially families with both working parents and without domestic maids.

Families spend their weekend at shopping complexes for various shopping purposes and they also take the opportunity to dine at the food court or nearby restaurants. Working parents necessitate them to spend some time together with their children. Families also entertain relatives and friends at food premises over meals.

Besides the normal meal time during the day or at night, eating out among teenagers or adolescent is a also current phenomenon as they patronise either 24 hours restaurants or late hour restaurants till early mornings. A group of 5 to 8 sit a table to chat while watching sports display on big screens and they also order food to eat. They may sit at a table for hours depending on the LCD show. As a result, these teenagers arrived home around 2 to 4 o'clock in the next morning. They comprise of either students or workers, irrespective of sex.

It is also a trend for some muslims to break fast at restaurants, cafe and hotels. Food served is the attraction as many varieties are served. Big rastaurants offer between 60 to 80 types of dishes to patrons. The price per pax in 2007 ranges from RM20 at normal restaurants to RM 85 at 5-star hotel.

The urban community also occasionally attend feast gathering and celebration of eid, haj, marriage and others. Traditionally, food is cooked at the house of the host and served by family members and neighbours. The practices have declined as more and more families make use of caterer's services for food. The venue of eid and haj gatherings are normally held at the house owner but marriage gatherings is increasingly held at private halls.

Eid feast is organised for a number of hours, starting from noon till night to allow guest to come at phases, while marriage feast is normally held from noon to late afternoon (12 – 4 o'clock). Tents are built as shades where chairs and tables are arranged. The meal varies from rice and accompanied dishes for marriage gatherings, to other varieties for other occasions. The presence of catering services enable the host to avoid hassle of mass cooking at each house, serving and also cleaning.

The frequency of such gatherings is seasonal. Marriage is packed during school holidays, Eid is celebrated in a month after ramadhan and haj 2 months after eid. The possibility of attending more than one feast a day is not unusual as more and more urban community opted to host celebration in such ways. As a result, a prospective guest may receive more than one invitation and consequently eating out at a few houses or halls in a day.

### *Implications of eating out*

Economic growth in the urban areas is one important factor that enables the urban populations to spend more on food. Besides, food varieties offered in the urban environment - indoor and outdoor, by accessible food premises also influence the urban populations to eat outside more often than before. The new living environment and changes of lifestyles has resulted in new arrangement in eating, which was not the case two decades ago.

Food businesses grow as the individual capacity to cook and to eat food at home in no longer expected, and it goes that traditional values expecting women to prepare food for the family is not compulsory anymore. As a result, the practice of eating-out has helped families and individuals to meet their food needs, biologically and socially. However, when there is so much and variety of foods around and the the paying capacity is not limiting the consumption of food, the Malaysian urban population may be facing implications out of the eating behavior. The issues may be seen as positive and negative, depending on the sectors involved.

The public benefits from the rampant cooked food services. Domestic task of food preparation is no longer a burden to those with daily tight schedule as food services are available nearby and at any time. Working wives need not necessarily bear the burden of food preparation.

Eating-out among family members at weekend or public holiday enable parents to have quality time with their children. They also able to enjoy food of their choices as they normally less particular with food during weekdays. The public also foster social relation by entertaining friends at food premises, as usually practiced by businessman to foster economic relation with their partner or clients.

Food industries has not only contributed in serving the public of important services (see McGee 1975, Noor Rahmah 1991, Noraziah 2007), but also economically with good returns. Increasing applications for licences indicate the prospect of such business, both to those already in the industry (new branch) and new ones. With the opening of a new restaurants or stalls, new employments are created as the business require cook, cashier, cleaner, waiter and waitress, driver etc. Upstream, grocery supplier becomes part of the industries as they supply raw materials such as chicken, beef, vegetables, etc. Besides, licences fees paid to the local authority contributed to the institution's annual income.

However, the practice of eating-out has health implications whenever it lands the practitioner to over eating, irregular eating, late eating, imbalanced diet, eating at unclean premises, etc. Important health issues in Malaysia are food related. Hipertension, heart diseases, cancer, diabeties, etc are closely related to obesity and unhealthy food consumption. The nature of the current Malaysian food served at food premises or at food fiest – sweet, oily, fatty – are of good taste but not without health implications. Eating out incline the public to unhealthy eatings whenever taste is the most important criteria in food choices. The most current development is the price hike of food. But, most likely the public will continue the culture of eating out and whether there is new response to it is yet to be seen.

The trend among teenagers spending much time at 24 hour restaurant until early morning is also alarming. Eating late and returning home at early morning hours only make them difficult to wake up for school, colleges or to work. They may also not able to perform their duty during the day out of sleepiness. Many social misconduct among teenagers prone to happen to those who are out of home at such hours.

The public is also exposed to food containmination whenever they are not particular with premises cleanliness. There are cases of food poisoning of school children after eating at school canteen as reported in newspapers (200 cases per year), while local authorities reported similar cases at illegal stalls.

Enviromentally, food preparations result in tons of solid waste and proper mangement is required to ensure clean surroundings at the place of eating and where food is prepared. Open eating area is preferred by the public because of the hot weather, but ironically they are exposed to dust and other pollutants from passing-by vehicles. In such matter, food operators and the public as well need to adhere to enviromental ethics to ensure clean environment. It is always the enforcement unit of the local authority who put to stop to such practices by confiscating chairs and tables in the open area, but only for awhile as they resume to the unhealthy practices later on.

Hence, the local authorities responsibility towards the public in ensuring healthy food at food promises have become more challenging. Their duties are not only with the food businesses but also to educate the public on healthy eating (see Moy 2001, WHO 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Eating-out is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia, but the changing life style in the urban areas has encouraged greater numbers of the urban population practicing eating-out. Both external forces in the urban environment and internal drive in homes resulted in current trend of behaviour in food taking. The increse of urban population and their changing needs have been met by the changing urban landscape but not without the risk of unhealthy eatings. Hence, educating the public of healthy eating, together with social responsibility among food enteprenours and good governance by every local authorities are important factors for quality of life in urban communities.



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