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Sandiwara: Sustaining the Identity of Penang Food Culture

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Abstract

Geographically Penang is positioned at the northern region of West Malaysia. It is divided into two territories namely the island and mainland that is attached to the Peninsular Malaysia. The island is referred to as Penang meanwhile the mainland is known as Seberang Perai. Nevertheless, Penang used to be acknowledged as Pearl of the Orient and Seberang Perai recognized as Province Wellesley. In the early stage, ferry is the prominent mode of transportation between the island and mainland due to the Straits of Penang. However, the Penang bridge made it possible for one to commute by land. Not one but two bridges were built to ease the mass traffic especially during the peak hours. Hence, these infrastructures facilitated the growth of the island.

Apart from that, the citizens who inhabit the island consists of numerous races due to the rich historical tapestry. As such, the opening of trading port in Penang by Francis Light around the year 1786 brought merchants from East and West to this locality. Interestingly, a large number of sojourners made Penang as their permanent residence that includes the Malays from the Archipelagos, Chinese from China and Indians from India. In addition, other minorities also existed namely Eurasians, Siamese and Baba and Nyonya community (Gin, 2015). Thus, this created the foundation of the present Penang state that inherits the unique individuality of multiculturalism, multilinguistic and multireligious. On that account, the vibrant food culture from the early settlers have become an eminent identity of the people.

Intrinsically, this research will explore a short film titled Sandiwara (Baker, 2026) that portrays the essence of Penang food culture. It showcases the usage of the iPhone gadget in its cinematography of filming the notable cuisines. Therefore, the purpose of this research will delve into two objectives that are: i) to examine the sustainability of food culture in digital transmission and ii) to analyze the representation of Penang ethnic food identity in Sandiwara.

Qualitative approach will be utilized for this study. Specifically, the textual analysis method is considered apt to examine the film genre. This form of medium is an imperative communication tool that bridges between the producer and the viewer in order to convey the intrinsic and extrinsic messages that are constructed (McKee, 2001). Along with that, the story in motion is able to transmit digitally across the audiences globally (Arya & Verma, 2024). In

addition, the narrative plays a crucial role in highlighting the specific phenomenon in the script to be presented. In other words, the cultural context is interpreted by analyzing the specific thrust of the storyline. On that note, the central notion of Sandiwara represents the eclectic Penang food in its short story. Moreover, the length of the film is less than 11 minutes and can be watched without any fee on the YouTube platform. The text in concern will analyze the themes based on the food culture sustainability and ethnic food identity that contributes to promoting and preserving the food heritages of Malaysia via virtually.

The term sandiwara originates from the Malay vocabulary that literally means charade in English language. However, the word Sandiwara in this film context is citing to the theatrical performance. The movie rights were reserved by Self-Portrait Residency Film, a fashion house owned by Han Chong, a London based Penangite. Furthermore, the motion picture was directed and written by the outstanding Oscar winner Sean Baker from the United States of America. Likewise, our very own celebrated Ipohite Michelle Yeoh Choo Kheng played the lead role who is also an Oscar winner (Kho, 2025). The distinguished double Oscar recipients proved their credibility and resilience of their direction and acting. It is because the duration of the independent cinema only runs approximately 10 minutes and 50 seconds that was uploaded to the YouTube channel. Audiences can view this captivating footage for free. It was first premiered in German for the 76th Berlin International Film Festival in February 2026 before releasing to the netizens.

Besides that, the entire short story was filmed solely for two days on the Penang island. It primarily featured the food culture of several ethnicities. What astonished the most is the filming process employed iPhone, yes you heard it right the handphone despite possessing the cutting-edge technology in the cinema industry. There were three iPhones that were operating in recording the scenes simultaneously without overlapping with each other's frame (Toh, 2026). This nitty-gritty technical aspect was an arduous and challenging task for the crew members. However, they nailed the shooting remarkably. Thus, the method of adopting mobile phones altered the trajectory of the moviemakers and the viewers themselves. In line with that, it is a sustainable approach to digitally transmit, for instance the food culture that is depicted in the Sandiwara short story via social media. By its very nature, this would expose the Penang food culture around the world by advocating our authentic cuisines that are internationally recognized. On that account, Penang state was crowned as the Food Paradise by the Michelin Guide 2026. The acknowledgement serves as an advantage to popularize food gastronomy tourism (Dermawan, 2025). This achievement was made possible because Penang state had conquered almost half of the recognized Malaysian food (Bernama, 2025). As such, Penang dominates the food capital of our nation.

In other respects, Michelle Yeoh immersed herself in five different characters in Sandiwara. This incredible heroin made justice to each role that she acted with effortlessly. It requires mental strength to metamorphosis her attitude according to the personality that she was assigned to within the two days of production. As such, this personification includes the waitress, food critic, songstress, hawker and food influencer (Hazizi, 2026). All these characters in the film were vital in interconnecting the plot. First, the waitress. She is a carefree soul and works on the food court serving food and drinks to the customers. Her friendly and happy-go-lucky manners impress the audience. Second, the food critic. She is a stern woman that is highly committed to her profession. Her nature of sampling the char kuey teow itself reflects her meticulous persona. Third, the songstress named Lady Orchid. She is a beautiful woman

but lacks the confidence to sing in public at the food court stage. However, she managed to perform stunningly with the encouragement of another male singer.

However, there were two other personalities that championed the representation of ethnic food identity in Sandiwara story. They were the hawker and the food influencer. The role of hawker. She is a diligent cook and a perfectionist in preparing her char kuey teow dish. Further, the hawker buys fresh ingredients from the nearby grocery shop as she runs a stall that is in the food court. The char kuey teow belongs to the Chinese origin. It is a staple dish that awakens our aroma and can be consumed almost every day. In addition, it is a noodle product. Next, the role of food influencer that significantly contributes to introducing the exclusive ethnic foods. This character leads her to visit various places of eateries in Penang. The first location she dropped by was the Baba and Nyonya outlet. She introduced the acar, lor bak, petai and sambal that were the classic delicacies of this community. Even though this society is a tiny minority and is on the verge of extinction, its rich culinary captures everyone's attention. The influencer's next stop was at the Hainan chicken rice shop. This is an authentic Chinese ethnic rice dish where the fragrance mesmerizes the diners. It highlights the boiled chicken unlike the typical roasted ones. Intrinsically, the influencer's next visit is the nasi kandar eatery. This food derived from the Indian Muslim race. The varied flavours of the curries that are generously poured on the rice tantalizes one's taste bud. The influencer's final destination is the food court. This is where she touched on the Penang Nasi Lemak but did not exhibit the food. It is a scrumptious Malay community rice dish that can be obtained anytime of the day. In spite of that, there was abundance of food in the food court. The cameraman filmed swiftly at the menus and the plates or bowls which the influencer was holding. These video clips are intended to be uploaded into her channel, Shishi Eats. Her reviews of these foods can be considered paramount in persuading her followers to visit Penang. Moreover, she had dual attitudes: front stage and backstage. Infront of the camera, she pretends to be a sweet and polite person. Nonetheless, when the camera stops rolling, she becomes irritated and annoyed with her cameraman. Her behaviour transformed at the end of the script when she invited the cameraman to dance with her in the food court. All the multiple roles were united at the Red Garden Food Paradise that is a well-known food court in Penang and the story concluded there (Mok, 2026). Hence, the representation of the Chinese, Baba and Nyonya, Indian and Malay origin illustrates the vibrant ethnic food identity in Penang (Cheng, 2017). Menu items such as char kuey teow, Hainan chicken rice, Nyonya delicacies, nasi kandar and nasi lemak imprinted their cultural heritages via food. Nevertheless, the roots of these foods are from foreign land, but the adoption of the local ingredients and cooking techniques has made it phenomenal. In other words, the present culinary had shaped our distinct Malaysian food identity landscape due to its resilience.

In conclusion, the identity concept is salient to bind and seal this research paper. Identity is the cultural marker that differentiates our history, tradition and values. As such, food is an element that creates the boundaries between the ethnicities (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). However, this parameter should be looked upon optimistically. The diversity that we inherited from our ancestors is a boon that must be appreciated and respected. It creates and shapes our social fabric and makes our existence to be unique in our own way. In the context of food, almost every race had incorporated other races culinary method into their cuisines. This is because we live in the same boundary that pushes us to interact with other customs (Patra, 2012). Therefore, it constructs our food culture to the present Malaysian palate. Hence, the identity of Penang is primarily capitalized on the infused food culture as it received

multiple global accolades. It is an honour that prestigious institutions have recognized our local menus which met international standards and expectations. Besides that, the Sandiwara short film directed by Baker (2026) in Penang island further accelerated the ethnic food identity gourmet to the wider population via YouTube. This creative approach is able to sustain the unparalleled gastronomy experience by transmitting information digitally across the continents. A point to note, the feasible innovative iPhone device demonstrated the resilience in filming a brief movie despite the supremacy of artificial intelligence (AI). Apart from that, this research encountered limitations. By its very nature, the textual analysis could be expanded in future by conducting interviews with the Penangites themselves. It will furnish a clearer picture in comprehending the key distinctive ethnic foods that were depicted in the Sandiwara narrative.

Keywords:
Sandiwara; Sustaining; Identity; Penang; Food culture

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