

## **A CULTURAL RELATIVISM PERSPECTIVE OF VEGETARIAN DIET: NO EGG OR NO GARLIC AND NO ONION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Living beings need food to survive. As such, the gravity of edible material is paramount for our livelihood. Needless to say, our cultural distinction introduced us to the diverse palates due to the religious beliefs, ethnic composition and geographical landscape. Furthermore, the contemporary approach such as diet or health issues, environmental concern and animal cruelty had set forth various cuisines to meet these specifications. On that note, the meat-free consumers have gained popularity around the globe. However, these followers distinguished themselves according to their vegetarian perspective. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the cultural relativism concept among the vegetarian community in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Moreover, two research questions were posed in this paper: i) why eggs are not consumed? and ii) how garlic and onion are discarded from the vegetarian diet? This qualitative study recruited 10 informants that consists of 5 participants who do not eat eggs and another 5 participants that do not take garlic and onion in their food. Besides that, the interview sessions ranged from 20 to 40 minutes based on voluntary participation. The conversations were audio-recorded with their consent and was solely utilized for the academic studies. Thus, the significance of this research is essential in understanding the numerous interpretations of vegetarianism in the context of cultural relativism despite being meat-free.

**Keywords:** *cultural relativism, vegetarian, no egg, no garlic, no onion*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is a heterogenous society that is notable for its distinct race, religious background and cultural beliefs. In essence, the social fabric witnessed the emergence of food dichotomies in the nation. Moreover, the plethora of cuisines from local to international delights are overwhelming. As such, it is not surprising that one can find almost any menu in Malaysia to tantalize their taste buds according to their preferences. By its very nature, this substantial quality attracts the tourists to opt Malaysia as their travel destination spot (Darmalinggam & Kaliannan, 2020).

The present study will focus on the vegetarian diet (Leitzmann, 2005; Ruby, 2011; Tee, 2012). Likewise, there are four major types of meat-free division that includes (not in any particular order): lacto vegetarian, ovo vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian and vegan. First, lacto vegetarian that contains dairy products without eggs. Second, ovo vegetarian that comprises eggs

and no dairy products. Third, lacto-ovo vegetarian that consists of both dairy products and eggs. Fourth, vegan that refers to no dairy products and no eggs.

However, this research will highlight specifically on no eggs or no garlic and no onion consumption. On those grounds, these two categories of diet followers will provide insights towards the vegetarian conception that they practice. Primarily, the Indians who profess Hindu faith observes the no egg dietary (Fernandes, 2011; Dewan, 2017; Gan *et al.*, 2018; Milburn, 2019). The Indians migrated to Malaya (presently known as Malaysia) during the British colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were predominantly working in the plantation sector due to the shortages of labourers (Andaya & Andaya, 1982; Amrith, 2010). Furthermore, they fall into the lacto vegetarian domain as they take dairy compound. Meanwhile, the no garlic and no onion category are adopted by the Chinese community (Doggett & Halteman, 2016; Heirman, 2021; Riasat, Raees & Hina, 2023) from the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucious teachings (Tseng, 2018; Cao, 2019; Siew, 2020). It can be presumed as lacto-ovo vegetarian because they consume eggs and dairy products (Sevmiş & Tengiz, 2020) although removed the prior two vegetables from their meals. Similarly to the Indian emigrants to Malaya, the Chinese also arrived to work mostly in the tin mining industry (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). In spite of both these ethnics abstain from meat, the variation can be noticed from the food and beverages outlets where they prepare the dishes respectively (Siew, 2020; Lee, 2023).

Intrinsically, this paper will shed light on this issue by utilizing the cultural relativism perspective. Hence, this concept discusses that the cultural beliefs (Thio, 2009) must be interpreted solely on their viewpoint in order to understand the reasons behind their actions. These cultural variation meanings (Davis, 2008; Spiro, 1986) will broaden our horizon and teaches us to be appreciative towards the differences of the values around the world. Further, it prevents us from criticizing and judging other people's core principles (Johnson, 2007). In addition, this tolerance behaviour nurtures an individual to be rational and ethical in determining the social situation. In other words, the cultural relativism perspective underlines the depth of sensitivity and respect that we place on the unfamiliar customs, habits and lifestyle (Rosada, 1994).

In line with the present topic of the vegetarian consumption it puts forth two research questions: i) why eggs are not consumed? and ii) how garlic and onion are discarded from the vegetarian diet? Therefore, in the context of cultural relativism it emphasizes the beliefs of the classifications of vegetarianism. Besides, it needs to be understood in terms of the food preferences of these followers based on their self-perspective towards diet selections of no egg or no garlic and no onion.

Consequently, the next segment will be on the review of literature that showcases the past scholarly written work. It enabled to identify the relevant research questions pertaining to this domain.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Numerous significant materials for this study were collected, analyzed and interpreted to determine the void in the current topic. As such, the literature review is divided into two sub-segments as follows: -

### **Vegetarian among the Indians**

The Indian diaspora in Malaysia who adheres to the vegetarian faction do not consume meat, fish and seafood. However, the dairy by-products such as butter, *ghee*, *paneer* that derives from the milk (Dewan, 2017) is included as a part of their meals. Moreover, the lacto vegetarian group fundamentally consists of the Hindu devotees due to the *ahimsa* principle (Fernandes, 2011; Fischer, 2016; Devapriya, 2019). The *ahimsa* is a non-violence approach that shuns of harming any living beings whether psychologically or physically. It points out that all living creatures must be respected equally without inflicting pain to each other. In addition, killing of animals for food is perceived as sin (Vinod, 1999). As such, this form of purity or sacredness will bring the balance in our spiritualism. Along these lines, the vegetarian practice is entwined with the path of *ahimsa* (Subramaniam, 2011). Besides that, those who abstain from meat due to health issues may not be able to sustain for a long period. As a consequence, the overindulgence in the respect of the amount of quantity and specific vegetable items would only further deteriorate one's health. Thus, they need a moral conscience to exclude the meat substance from their daily provision (Sen, 2020). Nevertheless, the rationality of refraining food that undermines the health is the key element in partaking the vegetarian diet. On that account, the food mannerism speaks itself of the journey of one's social life. It will not only bring impact towards the body and mind instead the social interactions with the significant others (Nath, 2019).

Indeed, religion plays a vital role in drawing a person to undertake a particular form of diet. Furthermore, this scenario could not be avoided in any religious denomination. By and of itself, an ardent Hindu believer needs to observe the vegetarian mode. Therefore, they generally refrain from meat and eggs (Fischer, 2019; Milburn, 2019). The no egg rule existed centuries ago and as such the orthodox Hindus will not consume them in any form: visible or invisible and fertilized or nonfertilized. Visible (seen) is referring to the 'direct' eggs that are boiled or fried as a dish. Meanwhile, the invisible (unseen) eggs are implying to its mixture in the products such as cakes, biscuits, bread and etcetera that contains this ingredient. Apart from that, the issue of fertilized and nonfertilized eggs is another debatable matter. However, a staunch Hindu will note that eggs are the germ of a life. Moreover, the fertilized embryo will soon turn out to be a fetus within the eggshell of the animals (e.g. chicken). These fertilized eggs will then hatch and become a new living being (Theisan, 2020). In contrast to the nonfertilized eggs that are produced from the factory farmed hens. It is genetically chosen to lay eggs more than the usual number (Docherty & Jasper, 2023; Dhont & Ioannidou, 2024a; 2024b). On that note, these eggs do not go through the natural fertilization cycle. In other words, no embryo or no fetus involved in producing a new life. Nonetheless, the nonfertilized ideology only existed due to the cutting-edge technology in the food science discipline. Thus, it raised the doubts and uncertainty of the nonfertilized eggs in the case of it being a part of the vegetarian component.

### **Vegetarian among the Chinese**

The overseas Chinese in Malaysia who observes the meat-free notion are from the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucious beliefs (Cao, 2019). Buddhism highlights that all living creatures must be treated compassionately with kindness by not taking the life of any sentient beings for that matter (Kembel, 2003; Siew, 2020). However, in Buddhism there are three major dogmas: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Intrinsically, the Malaysian Chinese follows the Mahayana ideology. This principle propagates several meatless ideas for the devotees (Riasat, Raees & Hina, 2023). First and foremost, the meat indulgence will destroy one's sense of humanity. Next, the reincarnation or the rebirth cycles may stand a chance of these animals to be our significant others

in our previous lives. Hence, by consuming them it is equivalent of eating our parents, siblings and relatives or even our friends (Broy, 2013; Siew, 2020). Further, meat is considered unhygienic and has a discomfort scent. As such, it may cause the lack of self-control that leads to the inefficiency of chanting the religious verses (Kieschnick, 2005). Apart from that, the Taoist philosophy relates the co-existence between the living beings and the natural environment that rejects the materialistic pleasure in terms of the luxurious food. Thus, having simple meals such as grains, beans, vegetables and fruits are essential for the sustenance of our livelihood. These dietaries also contribute to the necessary nutrition for the development of health. In addition, it will be able to safeguard the survival of the animals. Besides that, the perception of eating the animal meat may also cause impurity towards the mind and body. By reducing the meat intake, it will possibly decrease the danger of the animals from being sacrificed for human needs. In essence, this ecological equilibrium promotes humans to live in peace and harmony with the mother nature (Cao, 2019; Theisan, 2020; Siew, 2020). Along with that, the Confucianism practice is another trajectory of meat-free action (Riasat, Raees & Hina, 2023). The teaching stresses on ethical wellbeing of the individual towards the family and society. By its very nature, we need to be appreciative of people who lived with us including the animals that worked for our economic benefits (Cao, 2019). Hence, the animals must not be slaughtered for rituals or consumed for human pleasure (Siew, 2020).

Naturally, the ethical and moral philosophy took its course to champion the meat-free purpose. Nonetheless, the Chinese society excluded the garlic and onion vegetables from their cooking (Cao, 2019). These two types of plants were scraped from their culinary practice due to the 'strict' vegetarian followers. The garlic and onion are 'root' vegetables. Thus, these species will be pulled up from the ground that causes 'death' to it (Theisan, 2020). As such, the variety of allium family includes the garlic, onion, leeks, chives and scallions are forbidden to consume. Moreover, the five piquant vegetables if eaten raw will provoke anger and cooked will stimulate passion for the humans (Kembel, 2003; Broy, 2013; Devapriya, 2019). Further, these strong flavours generate the unpleasant scent that is not favoured by others around us (Kieschnick, 2005). In addition, it is also noted as impure, unhygienic and incites the nondisciplined attitude or character of a person (Doggett & Halteman, 2016; Siew, 2020; Heirman, 2021). Likewise, it is believed that the pungent plant roots will fend off the divine beings and invite the ravenous ghosts as well as the malignant spirits (Broy, 2013; Devapriya, 2019).

Subsequently, the following segment illustrates the methods that were adopted in executing the data collection process during the fieldwork. Moreover, these procedures are explained in detail.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007) was adopted to conduct this research. Hence, a triangulation method was presumed relevant. It consists of documentation analysis, participant observation and interviews. As such, it is to ensure that the compiled data is credible and trustworthy.

The documents (Yin, 2009) comprise journals, books, book chapters, proceedings and newspapers write-ups. All these literatures were collected via internet in the form of softcopy and screened carefully in order to grasp the meat-free subject. As a matter of fact, the analysis evoked the curiosity to further delve in understanding the complexity of the distinctive vegetarian point in view of the no egg or no garlic and no onion.

Next, the participant observation (Creswell, 2007) technique empowered in engaging directly with the vegetarian consumers. It comprehended the individuals' food choices that are deemed appropriate by them. Based on the casual or informal discussions, the feedback was mind-blowing. Numerous stances were pitched in on the rationality of abstaining from the eggs, garlic and onion. It broadened the spectrum of this unique topic towards their eating habits. Hence, the interview questions were crafted accordingly based on the literature review documents and the involvement in the participant observation. It generated essential questions pertaining to the research objectives.

Therefore, the interviews were carried out on the purposive samples (Patton, 2002) as it represents the particular standard that meets the requirement for this investigation. Thus, 10 informants from the Klang Valley district participated voluntarily for this fieldwork. It involved five Indian (Hindu faith) informants that do not consume eggs but accept the garlic and onion in their cuisines. In contrast, the five Chinese (Buddhist and Taoist devotees) informants rejected the garlic and onion but welcomed the eggs as a part of their meals. These 10 participants had embraced the vegetarian lifestyle for more than 10 years. The samples were selected with a minimum of a decade being meatless. As such, their familiarity and wisdom of vegetarianism would elucidate the authentic responses. Moreover, it illustrates the pledge that was made years ago and honouring it all these years. The interviews were carried out in a blended method upon request as the interviewees could not attend physically due to the professional and personal obligation. It comprises of four informants in virtual modes via smartphone conversation and six informants that were encountered in person. Besides that, these dialogue sessions were audio recorded. Prior consents were obtained and agreed by the informants. Further, their identity was kept anonymous and the materials were only utilized for the research project. The open-ended questions shared the insights of these interviewees' opinions and arguments in observing the vegetarianism. Besides that, nine questions were posed during the interview process. The initial stage extracted the testimonies of going meatless, no egg or no garlic and no onion. It is followed by expressing forthrightly of their thoughts and feelings of the challenges they had encountered in committing towards this restriction. The final stage deliberated their current dietary affairs. In addition, each meeting was approximately 20 to 40 minutes of length. Meanwhile, the recorded transcriptions were generated for the narrative analysis of the outcomes.

Thereafter, the sources that were gathered from the informants were examined for narrative experiences of the 'stories' or findings. Along with this, the discussion element was also incorporated in this segment.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The details that were acquired from the 10 interviewees, enlightened the issue concerning this research topic. In consequence, the results and discussion are presented into two sub-segments as follows: -

### **No Egg**

The five Indian informants who practices the Hindu teaching highlighted various perceptions on the vegetarian diet. However, all of them firmly believed the notion that the eggs are classified as a non-vegetarian category. Typically, a laymen would visualize any form of life to begin with an

egg. As such, it was not surprising to hear these opinions cited by the informants. Moreover, eating the egg will cause an innocent life to be deprived of its existence before coming into this world. Interestingly, the controversial argument that surrounds the nonfertilized eggs is a million-dollar question. Scientifically the nonfertilized animal eggs do not have embryo in it as the natural process did not occur (Dhont & Ioannidou, 2024b). Fundamentally, the purpose of these factories farmed hens were to produce as many eggs as possible to gain profit by the industrialist (Docherty & Jasper, 2023). Hence, the genuine fertilization action did not take place. Nevertheless, these informants refused to acknowledge the explanation of the modern science despite they are well educated and hold a professional job in their sphere. The strong objection is due to the traditional values and customs that had been practiced for ages. Thus, the ‘clash’ of ideology between modern and traditional viewpoint of the eggs is debatable. Apart from that, another intense subject that revolves the egg matter is the ‘invisible’ (unseen) context. It features the egg ingredient that is blended in the food such as pastries. Since the eggs are not visibly seen in these products, so it can be consumed. The informants felt all these man-made terms are to justify their cravings towards these specific food listing. The eggs are one of the key components in the food recipes or it could not be produced. In other words, it would be impossible to offer such products in vegetarian version as the taste will not be able to replicate the original flavour.

Apart from that, the five informants who participated for this study infused garlic and onion in their meals. They narrated that these two vegetables are meat-free. As such, they did not detect any fault in adding the root plant in their cooking. They justified that the intake of these two items is prevalent among the general public that follows the vegetarian diet footsteps. Nonetheless, three informants are aware that the garlic and onion can provoke one’s desire and rage. Intrinsically, the ‘pure vegetarian’ Hindu devotees will abstain from meat, egg, garlic and onion. It is because they may have taken a vow and had to adhere to the ‘strict’ vegetarian consumption. Furthermore, those who immerse in the deep spiritual practices or even engage in *yoga* (meditation) activity will definitely avoid those vegetables in order to reach the tranquil state of mind. In addition, the informants were under the impression that refraining from garlic and onion is something common among the Chinese vegetarian followers. Among other things, the Chinese vegetarian outlet in Malaysia rules out the usage of these two vegetables in their kitchen. Besides, it is not a common sight to come across in the Indian vegetarian restaurants (no garlic and no onion) that offers such menu. Thus, these vegetarian shops only provide services that only excludes meat and eggs in their premises. On that note, the Hindu devotees do not acknowledge eggs whether fertilized or nonfertilized in their vegetarian component. However, the garlic and onion vegetables are included in this diet.

### **No Garlic and No Onion**

The five Chinese informants that follows the Buddhism and Taoism teachings have a unique perspective towards the vegetarian practice. They stay away particularly from the two vegetables that are forbidden which are garlic and onion. On those grounds, the insightful information was deliberated in order to have a greater knowledge of this topic. The Chinese vegetarian cuisines generally will not contain these two elements in their cooking (Cao, 2019). In other words, food that are purchased in the Chinese based vegetarian eateries will not incorporate these allium family vegetables. Even though, the informants may not be able to identify all the five pungent plants but they are well aware that garlic and onion are not utilized in the food preparation. It is because both these vegetables are prevalent and notable in the Asian culinary. Besides that, it adds the flavour and aroma to the dishes. Moreover, it is also proven scientifically to bring various benefits to

human health. Nevertheless, the other three root plants are chives, leeks and scallions. However, in the religious context these five piquant vegetables are refrained from consuming. It is believed that it will incite lack of self-control such as profound fury that may lead to aggression and triggers towards desire. This form of temperament may guide a person to the improper path that causes destruction towards one's well-being. In addition, it is presumed that the presence of heavenly deities will be warded off and will attract the unwanted evil spirits to be around us. Likewise, the garlic and onion are also considered unclean due to the intense scent that is produced from these plants (Doggett & Halteman, 2016).

In other respects, the informants' consumed eggs because it is not barred from their vegetarian diet. However, they disclosed that it was purchased exclusively from the supermarkets. It is because these stores would sell the nonfertilized eggs. Furthermore, these large self-service outlets would have specific labels on the egg containers that ranges from its grade, content and brand. This assists the buyers to select the category of eggs that they want to purchase according to their needs and lifestyle. Hence, the interviewees believes that there is nothing wrong of eating it. Besides, these eggs do not have any lives in its shell. Fundamentally, these factories farmed chickens are meant to produce the eggs unnaturally. Strictly speaking there is neither embryo nor fetus formed in this animal shell. As such, it is absolutely safe to consume it. In essence, it is not surprising that the eggs are accepted as a part of the vegetarian component by these informants. Apart from that, the fertilized eggs are called as 'village eggs' and can be obtained at the morning or night markets in Malaysia. It is very rare to attain in the supermarkets. In addition, these fertilized eggs are very costly and contains the necessary essential nutrients that is needed for a healthy body. In this case, the informants do not shop for this type of egg classification because it is considered being a part of the non-vegetarian provision. Thus, the exclusion of non-garlic and non-onion consumption is deeply rooted in the Chinese community belief system specifically the Buddhist and Taoist followers. Nevertheless, the nonfertilized egg is recognized as a form of vegetarian diet.

Finally, the last segment will be the conclusion of this paper. It will present the primary features pertaining to the research questions and its relation to the cultural relativism perspective. In addition, the significance and the limitations of this study will be explained.

## **CONCLUSION**

The two ethnic groups that consists of the Indian and Chinese society in Malaysia have a disparate vantage point towards vegetarianism. Likewise, it is influenced due to the religious teachings: Hindu or Buddhist, Taoist and Confucious. It can be witnessed by the virtue of food selection that is recognized in the devout dietary. As such, the Indians forgo eggs whether it is fertilized or nonfertilized. However, they included the garlic and onion in their meals. Meanwhile, the Chinese excluded the garlic and onion in the dishes but consumed the nonfertilized eggs. On that account, the cultural relativism (Thio, 2009) plays a crucial role in accepting one's belief system and customs. It illustrates the variation of the practices around the globe despite observing the similar aspect. In other words, the so-called meat-free provision has a variety of classification that is noted by the devotees. Thus, there is no standard rules in determining the vegetarian concept. Instead, it teaches us to appreciate the fundamental values of other people's differences without bias.

Besides that, this research is significant in understanding the distinctness of the meatless followers. It enlightens the vegetarians and the non-vegetarians of the elements that exists within

these communities. By and of itself, it makes us to be aware of the details especially when one is residing in a multi-cultural and multi-religious milieu. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the future research in regard to the vegetarian consumption. It featured the key essence of the dietary divisions of the vegetarian ideology in the context of religious beliefs.

In addition, there are several limitations in this investigation. First, the samples. The 10 samples involve five Indian informants and five Chinese informants. Nevertheless, additional participants can be added for the interview sessions. Next, the ethnic origin. This paper delved into two ethnics that are Indians and Chinese. However, other ethnic groups can be explored as Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country. Finally, religious belief. In this study only four religious principles were examined that are Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucious. In spite of that, other religions could also be featured in terms of the vegetarianism practice.

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## **BIODATA**

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