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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Culture, Media & Film***From branding to authority: UNESCO heritage and the institutionalisation of breakfast culture in multi-ethnic Malaysia**Ziyuan Liu<sup>1</sup>, Hanafi Hussin<sup>1\*</sup> & Thirunaukarasu Subramaniam<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia\*Correspondence: [hanafih@um.edu.my](mailto:hanafih@um.edu.my)**ABSTRACT**

The paper discusses the redefining role of the political and diplomatic agency of food in international cultural governance with reference to the 2024 UNESCO inscription of “*Breakfast culture in Malaysia: dining experience in a multi-ethnic society*”. Going beyond the conventional imagination of gastronomy as soft power, the article posits that UNESCO recognition shifts routine breakfast practices into an institutionalised cultural power. By conducting a qualitative discourse analysis of UNESCO nomination files, evaluation reports, and Malaysian policy statements, the research shows how banal practices such as eating nasi lemak or drinking teh tarik are formalised, legitimised, and elevated within a global heritage regime. The results suggest that such a breakfast culture is not simply a creation of tourism branding or gastronomic appeal, but rather a form of institutional identity grounded in procedural validity. The incorporation of everyday gastronomy into an international governance system will allow Malaysia to convey a message of multicultural coexistence, grounded in credibility and recognition, rather than merely serving as a promotional spectacle. This act is a big step towards cultural diplomacy, in which ordinary social relations are elevated to a stable diplomatic value through institutional certification.

**KEYWORDS:** breakfast culture, gastronomy diplomacy, institutionalised cultural authority, intangible cultural heritage, Malaysia, soft power, UNESCO heritage governance

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## 1. Introduction

In 2024, during the 19th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO officially inscribed “Breakfast culture in Malaysia: dining experience in a multi-ethnic society” (Nomination File No. 02113; Decision 19.COM 7.B.47) onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2024). This is a paradigm shift in international cultural governance; it is a shift from a discursive conceptualisation of ethnic dishes as separate from one another to the recognition of breakfast as a socially engaged practice of living that transcends the lines of regions, religions and ethnicities. This inscription mirrors a wider shift in the UNESCO safeguarding paradigm, which now places increasing focus on the “foodways” of everyday life as complex entities of social knowledge, and away from static historical artefacts (Kravchenko, Kyzymenko, & Husieva, 2025; Adell et al., 2015). In particular, these steps reclassify and categorise routine actions, which are most often considered outside the field of international heritage, into formal, institutionalised spaces that respond to well-defined institutional statements and procedures (UNESCO, 2003; Bortolotto, 2021).

The everyday cultural practices and their institutionalisation pose a major analytical challenge: how does the international role and political weight of mundane practices transform when they enter a global heritage regime? The scholarship on soft power offers a good starting point: it is the power of states to shape preferences through attraction by symbols perceived as legitimate, such as culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2004). In this context, cultural practices are generally regarded as tools for generating “affective resonance” and positive national images to the outside world. This logic has been widely adopted in tourism and nation-branding, where experiential contact serves as a means of creating a positive image of a nation (Nye, 2011).

Gastronomy has long been a focal point of this attraction-based model. Past studies on gastrodiploacy explain how food is used to create a sensory experience, seeking to overcome cultural distance through tasting, sensing, and consuming, usually mediated by branding campaigns and culinary festivals (Rockower, 2012). This is evident in the study of Malaysian gastronomy conducted by Hussin (2018), which shows that the Malaysian food culture is diversified and used to create a “Malaysia Truly Asia” image through the visitor experience to boost the country’s international appeal. In this model, food is used as an instrument of soft power, primarily linked to tourism development and the market.

This emphasis on attraction, however, fails to account for a crucial transformation: gastronomy has shifted from a commercial brand to an international heritage within an institutional regime. Heritage is not devoid of political, social, and moral values, but is an instrumental process actively shaped by institutional structures and professional histories (Smith, 2006). An authorised heritage discourse is also a process of ‘symbolic capital’ and legitimacy creation, based on formal criteria and international consensus, as produced by UNESCO’s heritage frameworks (Bourdieu, 1986; Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013; Mesckell, 2018). Thus, inscription is more than just making visible; it is a form of power production through the creation of culture within globally recognised classificatory systems (Winter, 2015).

The UNESCO inscription process institutionalises everyday gastronomy, thereby making it a practice of cultural authority (Sending et al., 2015), as this article argues. Attraction-based soft power rests on the contingent responses of an audience, while institutionalised soft power rests on official certification and recognition within global governance (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007). Integrated within the UNESCO regime, breakfast practices become legitimate and a stable referent for diplomacy and cultural dialogue, no longer dependent on market trends or tourist popularity.

This study has been conducted through a qualitative analysis of UNESCO nomination files, evaluation reports and policy statements and responds to three interrelated questions:

1. How can the everyday customs of the Malaysian breakfast be translated as cultural heritage?
2. How do the institutional processes of UNESCO generate a distinct form of cultural authority?
3. How is this authority transformed into soft power beyond mere attraction, but on the basis of legitimacy?

The study shows how international cultural institutions, in responding to these questions, transform ordinary cultural capital into a significant political and diplomatic asset (Bourdieu, 1986).



Figure1: Everyday shared breakfast environment in a Malaysian eatery.  
(Source: authors)

## 2. Literature review and analytical framework

The article discusses three interconnected fields of scholarship: soft power and cultural diplomacy, the political meaning of gastronomy, and the management of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) under the UNESCO regime. Amid the growth in these areas, there is a research gap in theorising how everyday cultural practices become authoritative through institutional certification, at the expense of sensual attraction.

### 2.1 Re-conceptualising Soft Power: From Attraction to Legitimacy

The logic underlying soft power, as articulated by Nye, is that of influencing tastes by appealing to them — through culture, values, and policies that may be seen by external audiences as legitimate (Nye, 2004). Recent advancements emphasise communication, persuasion and credibility as fundamental building blocks of this influence (Nye, 2011). Nevertheless, the idea that soft power operates solely through a benign attraction has been criticised by critical scholarship. Other scholars, such as Mattern (2005), argue that soft power is becoming institutionalised through systems of authority and normative control. In a fragmented global order, heritage has increasingly become a diplomatic resource through which states project cultural narratives and enhance soft power internationally (Winter, 2015; Nakano & Zhu, 2020)

### 2.2 Gastronomy as a Diplomatic Resource: Beyond Branding

Food has always been a paradigm of attraction, and gastrodiploacy is a sensory experience that minimises cultural distance between two parties through taste, creating a sense of familiarity (Rockower, 2012). Nevertheless, this model tends to focus on demonstrating and consuming rather than more deeply considering the underlying problems of ownership, representation, and institutional power.

Hussin (2018) identifies food as a key factor in national branding and tourism development in Malaysia. Starting with its culinary diversity, Malaysia has traditionally emphasised its Truly Asia narrative to become more popular with the rest of the world. Although this framework works in the branding and tourism circuits, it is based on market exposure and visitor experience. With the growing involvement of gastronomic heritage

in the development of UNESCO-based creative economy plans and programs, the mechanism for shaping food values will need to be reconsidered.

### 2.3 UNESCO Heritage Governance and the Production of Authority

Heritage is not an expression of lived culture in a neutral form, but a highly selective and normative process influenced by institutional power and expert discourse (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). The UNESCO regime operates as a regulatory machine that organises, categorises and assesses culture at a universal level (Labadi, 2013). This process results in what Smith (2006) refers to as the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), which accords symbolic capital and validity to certain cultural practices.

The everyday life is institutionalised, especially in the protection of intangible heritage. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) refers to this as meta-cultural production, in which ordinary actions are re-contextualised as representative components subjected to bureaucratic rationality. Hafstein (2009) also shows how listing practices turn living culture into institutionalised representations. After a practice is listed, it creates symbolic capital that stabilises the cultural discourse at the national and international level. This applies to food practices, ensuring that long-term legitimacy and representational power take precedence over immediate economic or tourism value.

### 2.4 Analytical Framework: Institutionalised Cultural Authority

Building on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of institutionalised cultural capital, this article proposes a framework of Institutionalised Cultural Authority. This authority is evident in the possibility of cultural practices being recognised as legitimate and representative within an internationally approved system (Bortolotto, 2021).

As opposed to attraction-based soft power, which rests on audience reception, institutionalised power rests on classification, certification and recognition. The formalisation of the Malaysian breakfast culture in line with the UNESCO ICH regime will accord it a structural legitimacy. This paradigm enables us to view the 2024 inscription not as a marketing campaign but as the institutionalisation of an otherwise daily social practice into an institutionally supported diplomatic resource.

#### ATTRACTION-BASED GASTRODIPLOMACY (The "Branding" Paradigm / Traditional Gastrodiplomacy)

- Core Driver: MARKET LOGIC (Economic & Tourism-led)
- Primary Object: THE "SPECTACLE" (The Dish/The Taste)
- Key Actor: THE CONSUMER/TOURIST (Decentralized Validation)
- Power Mechanism: ATTRACTION (Creating a desire to visit/consume)
- Outcome: TEMPORARY "BRAND RECOGNITION" (Subject to trends and tastes)

#### THE INSTITUTIONAL PIVOT



UNESCO 2024 INSCRIPTION

THE TRANSFORMATIVE BRIDGE:  
Codification, Evaluation, and Listing.  
Moving from sensory appeal to procedural validity.

#### INSTITUTIONALIZED CULTURAL AUTHORITY (The "Authority" Paradigm / Institutionalised Soft Power)

- Core Driver: BUREAUCRATIC LOGIC (International Governance-led)
- Primary Object: THE "PRACTICE" (Social Rituals/Multi-ethnic Coexistence)
- Key Actor: UNESCO/ INTERGOVERNMENTAL BODIES (Centralized Certification)
- Power Mechanism: RECOGNITION (Establishing an official, legal status)
- Outcome: PERMANENT "INSTITUTIONALIZED CULTURAL AUTHORITY" (Structural and resilient)

Figure 2: The transition from culinary branding to inscription and institutionalized authority

(Source: Developed by the authors)

### 3. Methodology

The research design in this study is qualitative and draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the institutionalisation of Malaysian breakfast culture. The methodology aims to reveal how ordinary social practices are transformed into official cultural power by focusing on the linguistic and procedural processes of the UNESCO heritage regime.

#### 3.1 Research Design and Approach

The study takes a social constructivist approach, in which heritage is not intrinsic to food but a status created as part of an institutional mechanism. The paper employs discourse analysis to explore the Authorised Heritage

Discourse (AHD) evident in the nomination and assessment of Malaysian breakfast culture (Smith, 2006). This method can be used to explore the negotiations between the Malaysian state and UNESCO over the value of everyday gastronomy and to shift the market-based brand narrative toward an institutionally authoritative one (Fairclough, 1995; Bourdieu, 1986).

### **3.2 Data Sources and Corpus Selection**

The primary data for this study consists of official documents related to the 2024 UNESCO inscription of “Breakfast culture in Malaysia: dining experience in a multi-ethnic society.” The corpus includes:

- UNESCO Nomination Files (Form ICH-02): The technical files filled in by the Malaysian National Commission to UNESCO, which provide details of cultural significance and protection of the element.
- Evaluation Body Reports: formal reports and recommendations by the international experts of UNESCO about the technical and conceptual quality of the nomination.
- National Policy Statements: Documents from the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) and the National Heritage Department (Jabatan Warisan Negara) that contextualise the breakfast culture in the national identity and diplomatic purposes.
- UNESCO Inscription Decisions (Decision 19.COM 7.B.47): Final texts of the summary and decision of the Intergovernmental Committee on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

These documents are not seen as descriptions; they are institutional documents that actively build heritage through codification, criteria-based evaluation and approved language (Bowen, 2009). Through document analysis, we can gain insight into how daily practices are transformed into globally identifiable heritage features.

### **3.3 Data Analysis Procedure**

The analysis was carried out in three different stages in order to guarantee a thorough insight into the process of institutionalisation:

#### **Phase 1: Thematic Coding**

The documents were initially coded to identify recurring themes related to “multi-ethnicity,” “social cohesion,” “traditional knowledge,” and “daily routine.” This phase mapped the raw content used to justify breakfast’s cultural value (Gee, 2011).

#### **Phase 2: Procedural Analysis**

The researcher analysed how the nomination addressed UNESCO’s five core criteria for the Representative List. This move concerned the so-called procedural validity of the thesis- how the Malaysian state has adjusted local practices to the global bureaucratic needs to be recognised internationally (Hafstein, 2009; Bortolotto, 2012).

#### **Phase 3: Discourse Synthesis**

In the final phase, the analysis focused on the shift in language from “attraction and tourism” to “protection and legitimacy.” This involved identifying “keywords of authority”—terms that signal official status, universal value, and institutional recognition—to demonstrate the transition from branding to cultural authority. The logic of metacultural production is reflected in this process, heritage-making (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

Particular attention was paid to recurring institutional expressions such as “social cohesion,” “shared daily practice,” “community participation,” “interethnic interaction,” and “safeguarding measures,” which recurred throughout the nomination and evaluation documents. These terms were regarded as “keywords of authority”, which framed breakfast culture as a legitimate and representative element within UNESCO’s heritage governance framework.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations and Validity**

Since this research is based on publicly available institutional documents, it follows the ethical norms for qualitative document analysis. To guarantee internal validity, the research uses data triangulation by comparing national reports (Malaysian policy) with international reports (UNESCO reports). This will ensure that decisions

on institutional authority are grounded in consensus across the various tiers of cultural management (Bowen, 2009).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Codifying the Everyday: From Mundane Routine to Authorised Heritage

The 2024 UNESCO inscription of Malaysian breakfast culture is a key re-conceptualisation of everyday gastronomic practices within an institutional framework. In contrast to heritage narratives that have traditionally emphasised exceptionalism or elite lineages, this nomination concerns the banality of social life.

The results show that the habits of eating *nasi lemak* at roadside stalls, sharing a cup of *teh tarik* before work, or dining at neighbourhood *roti canai* restaurants are presented as routine, casual, and inexpensive (UNESCO, 2024). By redescribing these common activities in the language of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Malaysian state engages in codifying them. Proposing that this is, in fact, a metacultural process (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004), this means that practices are removed from their daily contexts and re-presented as part of a system of authorised classification. Therefore, breakfast culture does not exist as a given heritage that the state has uncovered, but rather as a so-called created heritage constructed through discursive selection and institutional discourse to place emphasis on the flavour of the food within the structured relations of the social bodies that consume it.



Figure 3: Shared breakfast routines in a multi-ethnic urban breakfast setting in Kuala Lumpur.

(Source: authors)

In the nomination file, the theme of integrating breakfast practices into everyday time rhythms, rather than into special cultural events, is repeated (UNESCO, 2024). Breakfast is described not as a ritual performed during festivals or official events, but as an activity during the pre-work period, on school mornings, and in routine activities in the city and countryside. These descriptions are important as they rebrand value not as a rarity but as continuity. Within this context, the cultural meaning of breakfast is not built on exclusivity but through repetition and collectivity. The roadside stall, local *kopitiam*, and *mamak* restaurant are thus not presented as mere food restaurants but as daily social spaces in which coexistence is reproduced through the same practices of eating and interactivity.

Significantly, the nomination does not single out certain dishes as unique heritage items. It instead

prefigures the social context of breakfast consumption. *Nasi lemak, roti canai, dim sum, or teh tarik* are not delivered as such, but as a part of a larger framework of social engagement and interethnic acquaintance (UNESCO, 2024). This framing enables the nomination to shape the culture of breakfast as a socially shared space, rather than as a set of individual ethnic food cultures. By doing so, the heritage talk becomes relational rather than focused on culinary authenticity. What is of value is not merely what Malaysians eat, but the institutional story that establishes routine moments of interaction across ethnic and religious lines as a result of breakfast.

Simplification and stabilisation of meaning is also important in this process of codification. The variety and imbalance of Malaysian breakfast culture, regional and class differences, and shifting consumption patterns are arranged into a coherent context of a common daily cultural routine. Mundane eating routines are discernible through institutional language, reflecting social cohesion and coexistence as a multicultural practice. The daily is thus, became an official cultural category that could operate within the logic of classification in international heritage governance.

## **4.2 Institutional Recognition and the Production of Cultural Authority**

Whereas the element is defined by codification, the aspect of power is introduced by institutional recognition. The UNESCO inscription operates under institutionalised procedures of evaluation, listing, and monitoring that isolate institutional legitimacy from other forms of validation, such as popularity or commercial success.

The results show that the authority created by the inscription is procedural rather than sensory. Breakfast culture is incorporated into a transnational classification structure that attests to Malaysian identity based on international agreement rather than viewership. After being inscribed, the practice is no longer a national narrative; it is a certified reference worldwide. As Bortolotto (2012) explains, the meaning becomes stabilised with time using this regulatory apparatus. In contrast to branding exercises, which require constant marketing effort and investment to keep the brand visible, UNESCO recognition offers structural permanence. This “Institutionalised Cultural Authority” enables Malaysia to mobilise breakfast culture as a recognised example of multicultural harmony in diplomacy and policy, without necessarily further legitimising its validity.

This authority-production process is closely connected to the institutional processes of the UNESCO heritage regime itself. Prior to inscription, cultural practices have to be translated into a familiar administrative language that meets internationally standardised criteria. In the case of Malaysian breakfast culture, the nomination was required to show the social roles of the tradition, how it has been practised across generations, the involvement of communities, and the protective measures that can guarantee the sustainability of the practice. The power that breakfast culture accrues is thus not an accidental by-product of popular adoration or market success, but rather the effective coordination of local cultural stories and the bureaucratic demands of an international system of governance. The legitimacy in this context is procedural and is attained through assessment and approval, rather than emotional, through attraction and consumption.

It is also this institutional framework that modifies the symbolic scale of breakfast culture’s functioning. Breakfast before inscription served more as a national or domestic marker of multiculturalism and was disseminated through tourism campaigns, food promotion, and state accounts on diversity. The culture of breakfast only obtains a form of transnational recognisability after inscription. UNESCO’s recognition of everyday gastronomy enables its spread across national borders as an internationally authenticated discourse of cultural coexistence. The meaning of breakfast culture can thus no longer be anchored solely to what Malaysia portrays itself as, but must be supported by a globally recognised heritage regime. In this regard, institutional authority is not based on visibility but on credibility, grounded in intergovernmental recognition and procedural consensus.

The authority created through inscription is more institutional than symbolic. UNESCO recognition operates through classification and certification, unlike branding exercises that rely on visibility and repetition (Bourdieu, 1986). This stabilises the meaning of culture in an international governance structure. This recognition is especially significant in terms of its durability, as it will entrench breakfast culture in a continuing framework of monitoring, protection and periodic reporting. Consequently, the culture of breakfast becomes more than a marketing story; it is institutionalised as a formally recognised cultural reference point with long-term diplomatic and institutional value.

### 4.3 From Attraction to Recognition: Reconfiguring Gastronomy as Soft Power

The institutional power generated through UNESCO is the basis that changes the functionality of gastronomy as a soft power resource. Conventional theories of gastrodiploacy are based on attraction: the capacity of culinary diversity to produce positive affect and attractiveness (Nye, 2004; Rockower, 2012). However, the findings show that Malaysian breakfast culture now operates through recognition.

After the inscription, breakfast is not advertised as a primary product, appealing to visitors or consumers. Rather, it is a certified statement of a social fact: the daily co-existence of a multi-ethnic society. This is not based on the wish but on credibility. Whereas tourism-based diplomacy is prone to changes in market trends and consumer preferences, recognition-based soft power is sustainable and effective.

Such a shift is indicative of a more general shift in the logic of soft power towards attraction towards an institutionalised power (Mattern, 2005). It is transferring gastronomy the market-facing sector, to the position of an institutionally approved cultural asset.

## 5. Discussion: institutionalised cultural authority and Malaysian soft power

The inscription of “Breakfast culture in Malaysia: dining experience in a multi-ethnic society” by UNESCO is a reconfigurative turning point of the political and diplomatic agency of everyday gastronomy. This study shows that the 2024 inscription is not simply branding Malaysian food; it is reconstituting its value by transforming it from an object of tourism-based interest to an officially recognised cultural reference point.

### 5.1 Redefining Soft Power: From Spectacle to Credibility

The main contribution of the present work is to criticise the conventional, attraction-objectified explanations of food as soft power. Although prior research, including Hussin (2018), has examined the role of culinary diversity in branding Malaysia as Truly Asia by leveraging experience value, the logic behind UNESCO recognition is different: namely, Institutionalised Cultural Authority.

According to the results, the power of breakfast culture is produced not through sensory appeal or the marketing stream, but through institutional recognition. Incorporating ordinary gastronomy into a global heritage regime places Malaysia in a position to shift from the spectrum of diplomacy as a spectacle-enhancing to that of credibility-enhancing. The strength of *nasi lemak* or *teh tarik*, in this model, therefore, is their procedural validity, that is, that they are evaluated, indexed, and certified by a transnational agency. According to Ahn, Nazirjonov, and Juraev (2025), heritage recognition processes reorganise cultural value, enabling countries to historicise themselves using reliable, verified sources rather than market trends.

### 5.2 The Mechanics of Institutionalised Cultural Authority

This paper coined the term “Institutionalised Cultural Authority” to elaborate on how cultural practices are made a source of power based on classification rather than on their impact on the audience. This power is based on three pillars:

1. Discursive Stabilisation: Transforming an informal routine into a formal “element” with fixed meanings of harmony and cohesion.
2. Procedural Legitimacy: Gaining power through the successful fulfilment of UNESCO’s technical criteria (Criteria R.1 to R.5).
3. Global Certification: Moving the issue of national claims of multiculturalism to internationally certified evidence of coexistence.

These three dimensions interact to make the daily practices institutionally durable cultural resources. The significance of discursive stabilisation lies in its role in solidifying meanings that would otherwise be fluid and contested in everyday life. The language of nomination files, protecting documents, and official heritage descriptions is recurrently linked to images of breakfast culture, namely shared experience, social cohesion, and multi-ethnic coexistence. These themes are repeated until they stabilise as breakfast culture, a recognisable and coherent cultural category within the institutional discourse. During the process, mundane practices cease to be understood as informal social practices and become symbolic cultural practices that carry greater national significance.

Procedural legitimacy further strengthens this authority by embedding breakfast culture within the bureaucratic structure of international heritage governance. The realisation of UNESCO criteria constitutes successful institutional validation, not linked to commercial popularity or audience preference. This procedural aspect is especially important, as it shifts the shifts in legitimacy from market visibility to adherence to internationally accepted norms of cultural assessment. The power created by such a process is thus regulatory rather than emotional, and is based on institutional approval rather than on attraction.

The third pillar, global certification, extends this authority beyond domestic cultural politics. As soon as UNESCO recognised the culture of breakfast, Malaysia's story of multicultural coexistence is no longer claimed by the nation itself but is instead recognised internationally. It is not only the visibility that is important in certification, but the transformation of local cultural claims into globally recognised references. This enables the propagation of breakfast culture in the realms of diplomacy, culture and policy as a valid expression of Malaysian social identity.

This change has far-reaching effects on states in the Global South. It suggests a Diplomacy of the Mundane, in which nations can enhance their diplomatic position by participating in international systems of governance to legitimise their everyday social realities, rather than resorting to costly, overt cultural propaganda or the culture of elite monuments. In this respect, everyday cultural practices can be turned into a strategic value not because they produce spectacle, but because they provide plausible and institutionally accepted testimony to national identity, continuity and coexistence.

### **5.3 The Paradox of Governance: Selection and Exclusion**

Nonetheless, there is no cost-free production of institutional authority. The Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), as Smith (2006) contends, is selective. To fulfil the UNESCO criteria for representativeness, the multi-ethnic image of the Malaysian breakfast must be conveyed as a smooth expression of social harmony. The process has the potential to reduce internal conflicts, class differences, or the tension that is usually a hallmark of multi-ethnic interrelations. This planned exclusion can be compared to the broader logic of managed multiculturalism in Malaysian political sociology, in which the state prioritises maintaining institutional stability over tensions within the organic society (Weiss, 2020). The empowerment the breakfast culture has is that it gives diplomatic assets stability, and the restraint it has is that it is visibly restrictive, making it difficult to practice the breakfast culture in any other way than a sanitised, state-approved version of reality.

This paradox reveals a significant tension in the logic of governing intangible cultural heritage. To ensure that everyday practices can be recognised as internationally significant heritage factors, they will first need to be translated into a set of consistent, administratively manageable narratives. The complex social realities are thus reduced to a manageable form that may meet institutional norms of representativeness, permanence, and shared cultural value. The Malaysian case presents the culture of breakfast as part of the main discourse of coexistence and harmony, whereas the social distinctions that might complicate this image are less evident in the official heritage discourse. Consequently, the success of the inscription within an institution is in part related to the reduction of social complexity to a fixed and readable cultural type.

This exercise is especially relevant in a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia, where questions of identity, representation and interethnic relations have long been a political hot potato. The legacy of framing breakfast culture turns the everyday social interaction into a symbolic manifestation of national unity. However, the reality of everyday food culture is also characteristically more fragmented, regionalised, and even socially unequal than the institutional discourse suggests.

For example, the official heritage discourse is relatively silent on the growing commercialisation of the urban food ecosystem, in which rising rents and redevelopment pressures have made it more challenging for small-scale roadside vendors and neighbourhood breakfast businesses to continue traditional food consumption practices. Despite the inscription positioning the culture of breakfast as consistent and accessible, the material circumstances that underpin these social spaces are usually far more imbalanced and economically vulnerable than the heritage discourse suggests.



Figure 4: Traditional breakfast spaces under urban redevelopment pressure.

(Source: authors)

Differences in aspects such as class, geography, religious practice, and consumer experiences between urban and rural areas may influence breakfast experiences in ways that do not entirely manifest in the inscription discourse. The UNESCO model thus favours modes of representation that can emulate a sense of solidarity at the international scale, even though such representation is bound to entail selectivity and the simplification of stories.

At the same time, this selectivity should not be interpreted solely as institutional manipulation. This is because effective governance of global heritage relies on its capacity to stabilise meaning and to develop familiar cultural references across international settings. International recognition and certification without simplification would make it hard to form an operational unit. The paradox of governance is therefore structural rather than accidental: the same institutional mechanisms that confer legitimacy, visibility, and diplomatic value on cultural practices also constrain the diversity and ambiguity of lived social experience.

#### 5.4 Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of the study that should be noted. The central topic of this research is institutional speech and the top-down meaning of creating authority; it is not about how the Malaysian populace and foreign visitors accept this new heritage status. Future analyses ought to take into account the more down-to-earth impact: does UNESCO status alter how Malaysians feel about their breakfast habits, or does it actually result in the museumification of the roadside stall? Also, comparative studies of different UNESCO-inscribed food cultures (e.g., the Mediterranean diet or French Gastronomy) would help clarify whether the Institutionalised Cultural Authority is becoming the paradigm for 21st-century cultural diplomacy.

To conclude, the shift in branding towards authority represents a qualitative change Malaysia's cultural and diplomatic approach. By institutionalising a regular breakfast as an institutionally approved practice, Malaysia redefines the meaning of soft power as legalisation and institutional recognition, rather than as a source of attraction. The authority of the everyday can be a more reliable resource in diplomacy than the most advanced branding campaign, in a world that is becoming increasingly institutionalised.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

This article has discussed this radical change in the position of everyday gastronomy within international cultural governance, brought about by UNESCO's 2024 inscription of "Breakfast culture in Malaysia: dining experience in a multi-ethnic society". As the analysis shows, the meaning of this inscription is much more than its visibility or advertising of tourism. Rather, the UNESCO procedure lends formality to routine breakfast habits as a legitimate reference point within the global intangible cultural heritage regime. Codification, evaluation, and listing mobilise the ordinary act of eating as a representative cultural object, which can be effectively mobilised in contexts beyond that specific one.

The results find that the strength of Malaysian breakfast culture today lies not in sensual gratification or ad hoc advertising, but in institutional recognition grounded in procedural legitimacy. In that, everyday gastronomy can be viewed as a tool of soft power that operates at the level of recognition rather than attraction. By making breakfast habits an international heritage listing, Malaysia will be able to tell stories of multicultural coexistence and social solidarity through institutional verisimilitude rather than publicity.

### 6.2 Contributions to Theory

This research paper contributes to the idea of institutionalised cultural authority within the broader discourses of soft power and heritage management. This framework highlights that the diplomatic significance of cultural practices is ensured when they are stabilised within international structures. The Malaysian case can serve as an example of how the banal can be turned into a powerful diplomatic tool and used as an indicator of shifts in the global world order, in which legitimacy is increasingly manufactured through institutional certification.

In a broader sense, the research indicates that modern cultural diplomacy is undergoing a structural change, whereby international governance bodies are becoming more central to the authentication of national identity discourses. At that point, the states are no longer relying solely on mass branding campaigns or grand cultural shows to ensure their international visibility. Rather, daily social practices that are entrenched in everyday life can take on diplomatic meaning when realised within the institutional forms of global legitimacy. The example of Malaysian breakfast culture thus demonstrates that mundane cultural interactions can serve as lasting forms of symbolic capital in international discourse. With the further development of heritage governance into everyday life, the political usefulness of the everyday is bound to gain greater significance for how soft power and cultural representation will be configured in the future.

### 6.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, heritage practitioners, and scholars:

1. **Sustainable Management of Institutional Authority:** Since the authority of the "breakfast culture" now rests on its UNESCO status, the Malaysian National Heritage Department should ensure that safeguarding measures prioritise the *social function* of breakfast spaces (e.g., maintaining the affordability and accessibility of *mamak* stalls and *kopitiams*) rather than just the culinary output.
2. **Strategic Diplomacy:** Malaysia should, through the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, capitalise on this "Institutionalised Cultural Authority" in multilateral forums to make Malaysia a normative leader in multi-ethnic social governance. This is to move away from food-tasting events toward dialogue-based diplomacy that focuses on the UNESCO-certified model of coexistence.
3. **Community-Centric Reporting:** As a means to escape this process of sanitisation of heritage discourse, ideas of community must be included in future periodic reports to UNESCO, with other voices of communities being represented, such as those of the peripheral or rural areas, in order to keep Authorised Heritage Discourse close to lived reality.
4. **Audience Reception:** scholars ought to determine the perceptions of international visitors concerning certified versus branded tourism in order to assess the actual influence of institutional credibility.
5. **Digital Heritage:** It requires research to explore how the "Institutionalised Cultural Authority" of food is transferred into the digital space and social media, where the tension between the "organic branding" and the official authority is most apparent.
6. **Comparative Governance:** Comparative analysis of the breakfast culture in Malaysia and other inscribed foodways (e.g. the Hawker Culture in Singapore) would also be useful in understanding the various ways in which institutional logic is used by different states to negotiate regional identity and soft power.

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Conceptualisation, Z.L. and H.H.; methodology, Z.L.; software, Z.L.; validation, H.H.; formal analysis, Z.L.; investigation, Z.L.; data curation, Z.L.; writing - original draft preparation, Z.L.; writing - review and editing, H.H. and T.S.; visualisation, Z.L.; supervision, H.H. and T.S; project administration, H.H. and T.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

#### **Glossary of Terms:**

**Nasi lemak:** A staple Malaysian dish made of rice cooked in coconut milk, typically accompanied by sambal, fried anchovies, peanuts, boiled egg, and cucumber.

**Roti canai:** A Malaysian-style flatbread with South Asian origins, commonly served with curry-based dishes.

**Teh tarik:** A traditional Malaysian pulled milk tea, known for its distinctive frothy texture created through repeated pouring.

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