

Hungry for a Better Malaysia



Malaysia's multi-ethnic society is a testament to the value of different cultures co-existing in a harmonious state. But lately, however, that racial unity and tolerance has felt threatened. If you thought there was nothing ordinary Malaysians could do to redouble the nation's commitment to racial unity, here's a team with a worthwhile project that proves that perception wrong.



Malaysia was built on a commitment to racial unity and tolerance, with each race respecting the beliefs and heritage of the others. The current social climate in Malaysia, however, has in some ways drifted away from that ideal. Today, racial unity seems so fragile that even a minor slight can cause some to feel affronted and create animosity between races. It's not all bad news, of course, but a peek on social media or the local dailies suggest that some Malaysians have become increasingly intolerant of our differences. But the silver lining is not all Malaysians are content to sit around and wait for the situation to right itself – or to grow worse. There are many ordinary Malaysians who are doing their part to show that unity is very much the core of this nation and one fine example is the *Rojak Projek* by Lim Sheng Feiyan – more fondly known as Faye Lim – and her team.



"Food is symbolic of love when words are inadequate," says the official Facebook page, and there is some truth to the statement. For Malaysians, there is no love sincerer than the love and pride we feel for Malaysian food. Walking past a *mamak* restaurant, it's common to see people from different races enthusiastically enjoying various types of food that, collectively,

is simply known as Malaysian. Our food has always been the symbol of peace which allows us to sit, eat, and enjoy each other's company despite our differences. So with food as the element to unite fellow Malaysians, Faye Lim and a team comprising of different friends from various backgrounds got together to establish *Rojak Projek* – a concept aimed at cutting



out the noise that was dividing Malaysians and sending a message of unity by showcasing the unique and beautiful diversity of the country through Malaysian food.



Though Singapore-born, Faye said, "I am proud to say I am a Malaysian, since I've been raised in Malaysia since the age of three. I think after 22 years in Malaysia, no one can say I am less of a Malaysian. Like everyone here, I am affected by what is happening in the country, and that spurred me to think of way to remind fellow Malaysians on the beauty and uniqueness of our beloved country."



A graduate from The One Academy of Communication Design, Faye pointed out, "The idea for Rojak Projek came about when there was a lot of negativity in our country. There were devastating occurrences, one after another, and it felt like we have gone through too much in such a short time. Many Malaysians took to social media

platforms to rant. It felt as if there were no solutions other than contributing to the already negative remarks.

"It came to a point where I asked myself, 'Is there anything I can do with what I have and who I am to show that this country is not as woebegone as it seems?' I sketched down my thoughts, took time to observe my surroundings and from there, I asked myself what I loved about Malaysia. It was the beautiful tapestry of the people, food, culture, celebrations, Malaysian humour, and the land," Faye recalled. "Finally, I asked myself, 'What is the one thing that all Malaysians can relate to and love so much?' And the obvious answer to that: food! Our food is a symbol of our unity. So why not render our own various faces using the food of Malaysia?"

The idea for *Rojak Projek*, said Faye, did not come about instantly. She took time to process the idea and think it through to ensure her idea and the intent was translated clearly through the project. She further added that she wanted to bring to fore the colours and race because that is who we are. We shouldn't tell each other to be colour blind – we should be celebrating our diversity. After a while, it occurred to her that somehow the variety of Malaysian food is similar to the diversity in all of us.

"For example, there is *laksa* in Johor, Sarawak, Kelantan, and Penang, and they are all different. Can we really say they are the same? No, but do we love them all? Of course we do! It is those differences that make it special! Once I developed the idea and sketches, I started approaching others and getting them on board to give this project a shot," said



Faye on the birth of *Rojak Projek*. "The more we added our friends in this project, the more we discovered that there are many other types of food we have."

Faye, who works as the Creative Director of Canvas Art, credited her friends Jonathan Cool, Ahmad Faliq Fauzi, Chua Vui Chuan, Kenny Wang, Rachel Lee, Alisha Jackson, Jonathan Ng, Belveen Singh, Rachelle Gan, Melissa Tan, Tabitha Xavier, Ng Wen Yi, Jannah Sani, and Wening Cheah for believing in the idea and working together to complete the first batch of 60 artworks.

"The entire project which took almost a year to complete was intended to send a message. Everything we did had meaning. We wanted to experiment it to see if it worked. Believe me when I say that when we started this project, we didn't know what the output would be like. We made use of what we had around us. Even with the artwork, some had to focus on making the process efficient, some had to do the artwork and teach others. We worked together and we gave it our best," elaborated Faye, who also said that while it was hard work it was also fun and therapeutic to make the artwork. Once it was completed, they picked a significant date to show the artworks in phases. At the end, they put them together with their tagline "Hungry for a Better Malaysia." All those who participated had their visions for Malaysia.

"In order for us to have the artworks done, we first had to have a few *Rojak* parties," Faye said. "We invited our friends to the party and we mentioned to them on our Facebook invite that at the party, there would be great food, great company, and to top it off, Jonathan Cool, our main photographer, would be taking their black-and-white portraits. Back then, we wanted to let them think we were following a trend. They had no idea what we were really up to. All we told them during the *Rojak* Party was, 'Hey guys, we're gonna do something. We can't tell you just yet, but know that it's going to be really colourful and you just have to trust us.' The best part of this process was being able to find and connect with all old and new friends of all races," she enthused.



The hard work started after the *Rojak* party as the team were faced with the challenge of assigning the food to each person. Food assignment, according to Faye, was dependent on what would look good on the portrait, as each person had different features. It was mainly based on what type of food was suited for the artwork. The team also had to consider factors such as different types of food having different requirements for putting it all together, example oil-based and dry snacks.

"Food items were purchased at the local food outlets and the biggest challenge

was controlling ourselves from eating the food! It was hard to resist, but we knew if we ate it, there wouldn't be any artwork!" Faye said laughing. Another challenging aspect was time. Time was crucial for us and not every one of us could commit, which is understandable because all of us have day jobs. It was also difficult to nail down the direction at that time because we all had

different ideas. We wanted to get a mix of races, but our network wasn't wide enough, so we asked friends of friends to help out. But all in all, we managed to make it work to send the Malaysian message across. We do give many thanks and appreciation for those who tried even if it was only for a little bit."

Rojak Projek brought people together. As Faye explained, "It united friends, thoughts, a common vision for our country, and it gave us a voice. It was encouraging to see others who have shared and spoken in their own ways through their vision for Malaysia. It was

an honour and blessing to see that there are others out there who are hungry for a better Malaysia too. Everything needs to be done with love – the best that we can." Faye ended the interview with the fitting statement, "*Malaysia tak sama, kalau kami tak bersama*" – Malaysia is not the same if we are not together. ■

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