

What getting a listing means

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Unesco has cast its net far and wide since its quest to list the world's most compelling heritage traditions began in 2008.

About 400 customs have already been enshrined in its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which aims to show the diversity of world heritage and ensure their protection.

A listing often means cultural branding and bragging rights while also stimulating economies and boosting tourism.

If Singapore's bid succeeds, hawker culture could join the likes of Malaysia's Mak Yong theatre, Indonesia's batik and India's yoga on the world stage.

Other candidates hoping to make the cut include a high-profile attempt by Paris to list its sidewalk bistros and cafes, where locals and tourists alike gather for French comfort food at moderate prices.

The Unesco programme also allows more than one country to nominate a shared heritage.

A Unesco report noted that countries that applied for such a listing took unprecedented steps to safeguard traditions and usually secured official assistance.

They noted that bids were invariably accompanied by a media blitz, which raised the profiles of these traditions.

Cultural geographer Lily Kong said that if Singapore's hawker listing is successful, an enhanced sense of pride and ownership in the country's cultural heritage will be forged.

Dr Kong noted that the process itself is important as it brings Singaporeans together to articulate what it is that matters to the nation



If Singapore's hawker listing is successful, it will join the likes of Malaysia's Mak Yong theatre (above) and Indonesia's batik on Unesco's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. PHOTO: BERITA HARIAN FILE

as it matures.

"It is important first and foremost to recognise and valorise aspects of our lives that have come to define and bind us as a people," she added.

Dr Kelvin Low, deputy head of the National University of Singapore's sociology department, noted that food and the practices related to its production and consumption "are powerful symbols that represent a nation".

Architectural conservation specialist and Singapore University of Technology and Design assistant professor Yeo Kang Shua said the

nomination process can bring attention to the hawker culture and the challenges it faces, including rising operational costs.

He added that the best way to show support is to patronise hawkers.

Hawkers interviewed said the nomination can give due recognition to the labour-intensive trade.

Mr Daniel Chia, founding president of Slow Food Singapore, added: "Hawkers can feel proud that they are a part of Singapore's intangible cultural heritage and find added meaning to what they are doing."