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book review

Tasting Singapore

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Nicole Tarulevicz
Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore
University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, 2013
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When the tourist first arrives at a Singapore food court, he or she is confronted by a diverse array of food stalls offering noodles of various kinds, Indian roti, Malay satay, the Hainanese chicken rice that is as close to a national dish as Singapore gets, not to mention many more mainstays of Southeast Asian and international cuisine. There is so much on offer that it is tempting to over-order and then, satiated after a few bites, be unable to finish everything on the table or do each dish full justice. Similarly, this ambitious book sets out to provide a cultural history of food in Singapore but perhaps bites off more than it can chew.

For those new to Singaporean cultural studies, the book offers much by way of introduction to local attitudes to food and its symbolism and the more general state regulation of bodies, public spaces and housing via urban planning and population

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policies, as well as the discourses of health, sexuality and cultural heritage. The book demonstrates the microscopic depth and breadth of the state's role in marketing its national ideology to domestic and foreign audiences, one that makes shopping and eating a national past-time and identity formation that is the only appropriate outlet for the expression of libidinal desires otherwise construed as political threats to the status quo. In two early chapters, Tarulevicz asks how rules around cultural heritage, the family and the body shape food culture in Singapore. She touches on urban planning and architecture, cookbooks, domestic science textbooks and manuals, and colonial advertisements to show how Eurocentric or British colonial recipes, ingredients and cooking styles provided an unrealistic (and impractical) goal for young women in the tropics. Tarulevicz suggests that domesticity was a site of citizenship training and ideological control by a state more interested in food consumption than its production and preparation. Food as raw product or material ingredient is regarded as foreign to this port city without a hinterland, and it is through this lens that food advertisements in *Menus for Malaya 1953* and the *Singapore Tattler* are regarded. The book makes a strong historical argument about the transnational nature of Singapore as an *entrepôt* whose lack of natural resources is countered by its geographical location in the Straits of Malacca. These conditions were exploited by both the colonial and postcolonial governments who understood the city-state's prosperity to derive from its openness to immigrants and transnationals who brought their food tastes and habits with them.

Not all food tastes or habits mix easily together, however. Chapter 3 focuses on city ordinances designed to regulate public behaviour, such as Singapore's anti-littering campaign, the chewing gum ban, the surveillance of amenities such as the Housing Development Board (HDB) lifts to prevent public urination, and the hygiene codes applied to hawker centres that specify no spitting and mandatory hand washing. While the point here is about the construction of the ideal citizen-subject, it was less clear how this construction contributed to the cultural history of food in Singapore.

Chapter 4 on the shrinking size of Singapore kitchens in new apartment buildings is much more interesting insofar as it reveals how spatial dimensions dictated by urban planning affect daily cultural practice. Diminishing domestic kitchen size restricts home cooking and encourages people to eat out. Tarulevicz

astutely points out that state urban planning policies encourage a form of public consumption that, together with Singapore's size and *entrepôt* economic status, makes the consumption of food and foreign goods an integral part of national identity. As a result of this economic imperative, street food becomes the site of public memory-making and identity is vested in the consumption of food outside the home, not in its preparation in the domestic kitchen. After all, to cite sociologist Chua Beng-Huat, in Singapore 'life is not complete without shopping'.

Chapter 5 focuses on the colonialist nature of the home science curriculum in Singapore to argue that the domestic sphere was used to establish gender and racial constructs that fit the national agenda of the elites. Tarulevicz's analysis of domestic manuals and textbooks from the colonial era to after independence reveals a continuing colonial bias that encourages a lactose diet, for example, and the use of the oven for baking, which is rare in Asian cooking. The prioritising of European cooking traditions over local recipes and ways of cooking demonstrates an unfamiliarity with local food traditions. (84) This disjuncture between the discourse and reality of cooking meant that the ideology of domesticity rather than the practice of cooking became 'a site of citizenship training'. (91) The textbooks and home science manuals considered cover the period from 1961 to 1989 but, while the author notes the changing trends, syllabi and health foci adopted by the education ministry over these three decades, one wonders whether this critique still holds true today. Why stop at 1990? Has there since been a shift away from the colonial bias?

Interestingly, in the subsequent chapter Tarulevicz notes that the gap between discourse and practice continues in cookbooks which function as 'aspirational and cultural guide' rather than instructional texts. Singaporean cookbooks, she argues, have always been implicated in the writing of the nation's identity and history insofar as they reflect its diverse cultural traditions, not merely its staid CMIO 'ethnic' categories (Chinese–Malay–Indian–Other, where Other includes Peranakan and Eurasian) but also those of the many expatriate communities that call Singapore home. Tarulevicz examines cookbooks from the pre-independence period aimed at colonial Malayan British and European expats, a couple produced by the American Women's Association in the 1980s, as well as many Singaporean ones produced after independence. She shows how 'local' food in the recipe books written by

Singaporeans was construed as popular hawker dishes to be attempted (less successfully) at home. Singapore cookbooks function quite self-consciously as national identity markers for tourists and overseas nationals, who buy them as souvenirs of time spent eating through Singapore or as documentations of identity rather than as manuals for actual cooking.

Citing food scholar Roger Owen, Tarulevicz argues that cooking foreign food ('cross-cooking') evokes the same excitement as cross-dressing: it is 'the obvious inauthenticity that is alluring: so faithful in every detail, so assertively different in effect'. (108) It is in the context of inauthenticity that Tarulevicz frames Singapore's national embrace of hybridity in food. This can be seen in the marketing of Peranakan Chinese food and culture. Peranakan food 'negotiates the multicultural in a socially acceptable way' by becoming 'the guardian of the past rather than an advocate for multiculturalism'. (103) Tarulevicz observes that this hybrid cultural identity of local born Chinese, who long ago adopted and adapted to Malay customs of language, fashion and cooking styles, is a small community and therefore 'does not destabilize existing racial hierarchies'. (103) Unmentioned is the additional fact that the English-educated Peranakans also form part of the governing elite. Returning to her parallel interest in the regulation of bodies, Tarulevicz notes that hybridity is less accepted in sexual relations gauging by the low levels of interracial marriage. As an example of how deeply hybridity is embedded in Singapore, she points to the Merlion, a lion-headed animal with a fish tail that she claims the city was named after. (104) However, this iconic creature with a fish tail is a modern invention of the Singapore Tourism Board: the founding myth in *The Malay Annals* that names Singapura as the Lion City makes no mention of any fish tail.

Food advertisements are the focus of Chapter 7. It is interesting to read about the marketing of brands popular in Singapore and Malaysia, such as Lingham's Chilly Sauce, Magnolia Ice Cream and Marmite, although the advertisements found in *Menus for Malaya 1953* selling 'European' products, such as fats and baking ingredients, might conceivably be targeting not only Europeans but also middle- to upper-class Singaporeans who were the beneficiaries of British colonial education. This chapter could have been enlivened with more images and, in addition to the semiotic reading of advertisements, could have gone further in exploring their cultural context. For example, what role does Magnolia Ice Cream and the local

Ayam brand products play in the everyday lives of Singaporeans? Were these advertisements circulating outside the cookbook and print magazines of the time? Relying predominantly on semiotic analyses reveals encoded messages but fails to address what Singaporean readers might have thought of these products or how they consumed them.

It is clear that food exceeds its material qualities in Singapore, just as it does elsewhere. Like citizens of all cultures, Singaporeans take their food seriously and so they should given its symbolism and political nature. Tarulevicz goes so far as to regard food as 'something of a substitution for sex' in the repressed authoritarian city-state. (137) In this she is backed up by many Singaporean films from the 1990s—the decade that saw the resurgence of a local film industry—which also foreground the sensuousness of food. The ongoing connection between food and the promotion of a Singaporean cultural identity for both local and international consumption is traced in the last chapter which focuses on the marketing of Singaporean cuisine (a recognised tourist attraction) by various state players and institutions. This includes the Singapore Tourism Board and Singapore Airlines advertisements in dedicated food and travel magazines, beginning with the national carrier's Singapore Girl campaign; a tour of the Living Galleries Exhibition in the National Museum where visitors get to experience a sensory compendium of its food constructed through the rigid lens of CMIO multiculturalism; and an account of the hawker centre, the iconic site and 'locus of memories' for locals, overseas Singaporeans and tourists alike. (154)

In its ambitious attempt to capture the defining characteristics of Singapore national identity through food, the analytical focus of the book sometimes gets fuzzy as the canvas is too large. The discussion of state policies and the regulation of sexuality, for example, tends to distract our attention from food history. In Chapter 3, on public space, it was difficult to see the connection between the section on orchid cultivation in the Botanical Gardens and food. Similarly, the early point about a colonial city as a place where 'spatial order also meant racial order' (41) is not taken up in later chapters. Specifically, I would note that, in designating ethnic enclaves, such as Chinatown, Little India and Arab Street or Kampong Glam, as tourist attractions, the Singapore government perpetuates the racial geography of colonialist space. These racialised neighbourhoods have undergone various urban

planning changes since 1965, just as they have seen new waves of migration that would affect the types of cuisine found there. A discussion of food in these areas would have been potentially very exciting. Although there are many fascinating details and sharp insights along the way, sometimes the book sacrifices depth of analysis for lengthy descriptions bookended by pithy single-sentence critiques that are not expanded. Nevertheless, this book—like the diverse offerings at the hawker centre or food court—provides the curious with a taste and feel for the multifaceted food, culture and history of Singapore.

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