FOOD DEFINES US: A VISUAL DISCOVERY OF SINGAPORE'S GASTRONOMICAL CULTURE

Kok Cheow Yeoh
Assistant Professor
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University,
31 Nanyang Link, #03-43, WKWSCI Building, Singapore 637718, Republic of Singapore.
kcyeoh@ntu.edu.sg

Adeline Ong
At the time of writing, Ms Ong was an undergraduate student at the
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University
a.ongyh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Singapore is a city of many names, one of which is "food paradise." Yet, there is a lack of research in the field of gastronomy in Singapore. This project seeks to explore the social and cultural implications of food, and investigate the correlation between food and identity in multiracial Singapore. Captured through the lens of a digital SLR, this research is a visual narrative that makes use of visual semiotics to analyze the implicit and explicit meanings of food in photographs. By explicitly documenting activities related to gastronomical events, we hope to deconstruct and contest the realities of signs embedded within. The photos are organized into three broad categories: i) food forms a central tenet of our identity which connects us to our past, present and future. In other words, we use food as a medium to reach out to our ancestors and loved ones as well as the spiritual entities beyond us; ii) food defines the way we live, work and play. As such, food becomes a telling factor in explaining who we are and our place in the world by investigating the setting in which we consume food. Finally, iii) food gives us energy, order and life as such that the realizations of our material environment are governed by how things are designed, manufactured, distributed and used.

KEYWORDS

Singapore, gastronomy, food, identity, visual, narrative, photography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore is widely hailed as a cosmopolitan city with its multicultural and multiracial mix of people, who have gathered on the island as a result of globalization. Physical boundaries no longer stand today as people transcend lands and oceans with ease. Although globalization centers an eclectic mix of people upon Singapore, it also heralds the era of mass-productivity and consumption. While we are active consumers, we remain passive in questioning the status quo for any social change as we readily consume homogenous products produced by a few dominant manufacturers. This leads to the implication of whether anything and everything we do is an accurate reflection of our identity. If this implication holds true, then even the most basic needs to fill our stomach can be an indicator of who we are [photo 1]. Food preparation, presentation, consumption and disposal would have deeper implications that go beyond mundane routines and the availability of food [photo 2]. While there are many recommendations, guidelines and restrictions involving food diet and beverage, a visual documentation of how Singaporeans live, work and play through food is pertinent in exploring how food is intertwined with Singapore's identity as a young nation since officially leaving the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 (Mindef, n.d.).

Photo 1.

Photo 2.

This project is exploratory in nature and does not seek to look for a definitive answer. Rather, it aims to provide some insight into food and its implications through the use of powerful visuals captured by a digital camera. We begin with a literature review on food and identity, set within the theoretical framework of visual semiotics, followed by the methodology, results, limitations and conclusion sections. This project aims to explore the wider social and cultural implications of food and investigate the correlation between food and identity in multiracial and multicultural Singapore.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW/ BACKGROUND

"Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who are you," said Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, author of one of the most famous books ever written about food in 1825, *The Physiology of Taste*. And indeed, we are what we eat! Human beings are constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food we consume (Fischler, 1988). At the most basic level, we require food for sustenance; on a deeper level, food is laden with cultural messages and functions as a signifier of ourselves. What we eat, who we eat with, how we eat and where we eat are directly influenced by telling factors like our age, gender, social status and income (Finkelstein, 2003). Thus, every meal and every mouthful tells the story of who we are and our place in the world (Bell & Valentine, 1997). In short, food not only nourishes but also signifies (Fischler, 1988). Food and culture culminate into unique cuisines that define and form a collective identity for the various ethnic groups present. By understanding how these cuisines came to be, we get a deeper insight into the connection between food and culture. Claude Fischler and Crouch & O'Neill present two facets of the omnivore's paradox that explain the role and rise of cuisines in the world today.

2.1 The Omnivore's Paradox

As omnivores, humans thrive on a multifarious mix of foods and diets in order to adapt to their surroundings. While we are not dependent on a single source of food for survival, we are compelled by the need for variety – a diet that spans an array of proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals derived from many sources. Yet we need to be wary of these ever-changing sources because they may entail danger. Therein lies the omnivore's paradox, according to Fischler (1988), who sees it as a double bind situation between neophobia – fear of the unknown – and neophilia – the need for change. In the contemporary society, Crouch & O'Neill (2000) suggest that the omnivore's paradox resurfaces due to the abundance and diversity of food products found in affluent societies. Another notable factor involved is the avalanche of food-related information put forth by mass media (Beardsworth and Keil, 1992) that projects fictitious social relations onto the act of consumption (Baudrillard, 1981). Individuals are constantly challenged to reconcile exploration and innovation with the need for safety and security, which renders the omnivore's paradox especially poignant.

2.2 The Principal of Incorporation

To resolve the tension in the omnivore's paradox, some people may choose to eat in reference to their general wants rather than needs (Crouch & O'Neill, 2000). Hence, the act of eating or incorporation is infused with personal meaning, and is a concept that underlies the omnivore's paradox. Our choices of food and the way we eat reflect our attempts at controlling our mind, body and identity (Fischler, 1988), of which cuisines play a central role. When eating, we not only incorporate the intrinsic properties of food but that of the cuisine and culture [photo 3]. Food manifests as a symbol of a group's belief systems and the social distinctions that are underwritten by them (Crouch & O'Neill, 2000). These cuisines then serve as collective identity and a means to bridge the gap between the individual and the world. The act of incorporation sends food from the outside world to inside of an individual, thus marrying the world with the self and nature with culture (Lupton, 1996). Through incorporation, food becomes the self and we are what we eat (Gibson, 2007). Cuisines, which represent a body of practices, representations, rules and norms based on classifications (Douglas, 1966) act as a safety net of assurance and security by purporting a collective identity. However, a worrying implication arises according to Fischler (1988): how will we know who we are if we are not aware of what we eat?

Local cuisines and ethnic foods are being produced in increasingly global networks (Finkelstein, 2003) that have changed the individual's relationship to food through standardization. When food becomes a regulated commodity, it promotes greater passivity and disinterest in the consumer (Finkelstein, 2003). This is because consumers are usually categorized into active or passive people. The former is careful, conscientious and seeks to maximize utility while the latter is easily manipulated by market forces (Campbell, 2005). Critics of mass society say consumers are passive, which is a view shared by Fischler (1988). Fischler points out that modern consumers are largely passive and oblivious of the food's production, history and origin. It does not help that modern food has become less identifiable, being processed, packaged and presented as if it were dematerialized and stripped of its sensory characters (Fischler, 1988). The consequence is that we end up losing our sense of identity and place in the world.

Photo 3.

Photo 4.

2.3 Rise of the Slow Food Movement

The slow food movement has emerged as a means to ease our fears amidst globalisation and mass productivity. Slow foods are products that are natural, craft-produced (rather than produced via machines), authentic and local (Stillman, 2003). This is a movement provoked by the fast food era that is characterised by purveyors of quick and cheap consumerables (Pietrykowski, 2004), best manifested by McDonald's. As the world's largest fast food chain, McDonald's has over 31,000 restaurants managed in more than 119 countries world wide (McDonald's on FAQ, n.d.) – and it is only one of many such fast food chains that are spreading their networks all over the world. Slow foods oppose fast foods and seek to preserve local cuisines

by strengthening the networks of social relations between consumers and producers (Pietrykowski, 2004). Through actively engaging in the consumption practices like knowledge and appreciation of food and its associated heritage, slow food advocates hope to create a shared community (Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002) and re-establish a collective identity [photo 4].

2.4 Conspicuous Consumption

While passive consumers sink in the fast food trap, active consumers readily align themselves with conspicuous consumption, an idea purported by Stillman (2003). Conspicuous consumption involves making choices to consume goods based on the status and prestige they confer upon the consumer. This means that cultural goods are no longer appreciated for their intrinsic value, but rather for their class tastes (Stillman, 2003). Theories of conspicuous consumption view consumers as discerning people who treat culture as markers of their social status. An example is the proliferation of fine dining restaurants with the progression of society. This could in part be due to an increasing number of consumers who see fine dining as a stepping-stone to the upper echelons of society. Whether we are active consumers utilising food for status or passive consumers pulled by market forces, it is an indubitable fact that food remains as a central part of who we are as individuals, ethnic groups and a country.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The project aims to examine the visuals on a denotative level – the identification stage – and take a step further to explore the connotative level – the interpretation stage. Linguistically, decoding of meaning is dependent on the way we use letters to form words but connotative meanings are context-dependent. This is complex because the viewer or audience must learn to match what he/she experiences to one of the various possible meanings held in their memory. The visual narrative has been chosen as the primary medium to investigate the correlation of food and culture in Singapore. Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe (Sontag, 1977). Through the lens of a digital camera, we hope to shed some light on food and its implicit meanings. Photographs help to capture a slice of reality and serve as indisputable evidence that the photographer was there and took that photo (Sontag, 1977). They may not reflect the whole picture, but at very least serve to reinforce a nominalist view of reality being made of an infinite number of small units (Sontag, 1977).

As compared to true-life accounts, visuals offer tangible representations of what happened – making them more believable than intangible memories. When done in stealth in public, photographs can capture impactful and true emotions that otherwise might not have been revealed. This is described as the Hawthorne effect, which causes people to change their performance in response to being observed. However, one criticism towards photography is the biasness associated with the photographer. By deciding what to include or exclude within the frame, the photographer instills his opinion into the photo, which can affect its objectivity. The people, places and items in the photo may be real but its presentation and interpretation can be entirely subjective. This is because human perception is brilliantly selective (Morgan & Welton, 1986) and most of the time we only see what we want to see. This is a two-way problem that affects both photographer and viewer of the photo. Thus, visual semiotics or the way we read signs forms a core component of the theoretical framework of the project.

All visual imagery can be treated as signs that make up the signifier and signified. The latter refers to the object or a form that we can see, touch, smell or hear while the former refers to the idea or mental construct of a thing; rather than the thing itself. Signs are governed by codes and guidelines like paradigms and syntagms, which assemble to form texts that could be open or closed, that in turn form discourses. Charles Peirce assembled visual signs into iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. Iconic signs resemble what they

describe; indexical signs work by association; symbolic signs may or may not have any resemblance to what the sign may signify (Watson, 1998). A sign can be iconic, indexical and symbolic at the same time. For example, a bun served with a cooked meat patty with vegetables and condiments resembles a burger, indicates a kind of fast food and symbolises the fast food culture or McDonaldization. Meaning is therefore negotiable and determined by readers of the sign, which explains why people of the same culture and language broadly and commonly accept certain visual cues or a set of behaviors. It can be something as simple as the clothes we wear or how we "communicate" via our body movements to show an attitude or emotion. This is possible only when a community collectively agrees on the meaning within their accepted norms.

The visual semiotics process is best understood by taking a broad approach in basing different models such as the theory of signs and perception theory, especially for the latter which states that visual organization and aesthetical forms are composed within the qualities of size, proportion and texture. According to Wallschlaeger and Busic-Synder (1992), visual organization offers principles that can assist in structuring the relationships among visual elements such as form, point, line, shape, volume, color, texture and so forth. These act as a visual guideline relative to compositions while semiotic theory assists in relating and describing relations between signs and their referents. These in turn, provide a broad model which can be selected, adapted and developed for specific problems that consider attitudes, associations as well as social and cultural problems.

4. METHODOLOGY

In order to fairly capture Singapore's multiracial composition, care was taken to visit a variety of settings reflective of dominant ethnic groups including Chinatown for the Chinese, Kampong Glam for the Malays and Little India for the Indians. Aside from these ethnic hotspots, other common culinary areas that were visited included homes, public and private kitchens, wet and dry markets, coffee shops, restaurants, night markets or *pasar malams* and temples. Even though there were stipulated places to visit to shoot photos for a more accurate representation of Singapore, there were no restrictions in terms of the kinds of places where photos could be taken. For example, it would be fine to take photos of people by the roadside or along seats in walkways as long as they were eating or doing something related to food. Thus, there was considerable freedom in the shooting process. Rather than shooting to reaffirm an idea, the project was focused on exploratory shooting where we took photos of people, places and sights (related to food) that intrigued us. In total, more than 4,000 photos were taken over an accumulated period of three years.

Most of the photos were shot in open, public areas, where consent was not a requirement. However, if the people being photographed expressed any discomfort or unhappiness during the shooting, we would not proceed further. Whenever possible, we would seek to indicate his interest through our body or verbal language to gauge the subjects' reaction before proceeding. Thus, there was some level of "informed consent" on the part of the people being photographed. The equipment used included: Canon 400D digital SLR body, Sigma APO 70-200mm f/2.8 lens, Tamron SP AF Aspherical Di 17-35mm f/2.8-4 lens, and Canon EF-S18-55mm f/3.5-5.6 lens. Nikon D80 and D300 digital SLR bodies, Nikkor 18-200 mm f3.5-5.6G IF-ED and AF-S DX 12-24 mm f/4G IF-ED lenses.

5. RESULTS

The photos taken were organized into three broad categories:

5.1 Food connects us to our past, present and beyond

Different cultures rationalize life and death through various rituals and ceremonies depending on their spiritual beliefs. Pictures of people offering foods to the gods and burning incense paper for the dead on roads and void decks were taken during the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. This coincides with the Hungry Ghost Festival for the Chinese [photo 5]. In this situation, food or the offerings act as a medium for us to reach out to our ancestors and loved ones who have passed away, as well as the gods beyond us. Food is a good indicator in enforcing a specific group's ethnicity and religious affiliations. The uniqueness of different religious groups are observable in the various prohibitions such as the Muslim community with a strict avoidance towards pork whereas in the Chinese community that observe Daoism, pork is offered in ancestral rituals and religious functions for familial and auspicious blessings.

Celebratory occasions like birthdays, religious festivities and rites intersect to form practices and expressions that makeup our present. Birthdays are never complete without birthday cakes, which symbolize growth; the sweets and nuts placed on tables for guests at funerals are not only for consumption, but are used to ward off any bad luck for the guests that attend the funerals. These traditional practices that have lingered on with time reaffirm a certain culture or religious group's beliefs, and serve as a collective identity that reassures the individual. Food is therefore a symbol of a group's belief systems, as identified by Crouch & O'Neill earlier.

Photo 5.

Photo 6.

5.2 Food defines the way we live, work and play

Images of food preparation and consumption by chefs, homemakers and normal citizens are very telling of the people themselves. The difference between a roadside hawker cooking for his customers and a chef cooking for esteemed guests in a posh restaurant does not only lie in the setting, but the quality of the ingredients and the presentation of the food. The photo of the lone trishaw man eating packet food in public view without any table or proper cutlery speaks volumes about his social status [photo 6]. What food means to us shifts over time. Children can derive joy from eating the simplest of things like a soft drink or an ice cream, clearly manifested by their happy and satisfied looks in photos while it will certainly take more than just ice cream to satisfy adults. Thus, the settings in which we consume food, the way we consume it and the kinds of food we consume define the way we live, work and play as we age. Food can be very a telling factor in explaining who we are and our place in the world. This knowledge turns us into active consumers, who may or may not practice conspicuous consumption.

5.3 Food gives us order, energy and life

Food packaging and preparation, marketing and displays related to food are often recontextualized and represented within our commercial and social environments in a manner that gives us a sense of security and reassurance. In a world where things are designed around our activity--domestic or commercial, involves a

collection of things made of materials. The manifestations of ideas for creation of things are bound by realization of materiality and these, in turn, govern the characteristics of how things can be designed and manufactured. Hence, we noticed that within and across the different cultures in Singapore, there are repetitive shapes, colors, and patterns that provide order for us [photo 7]. While institutional spaces are designed and furnished by designers and professionals with pre-determined budget and requirements, many designed things are often created and sold as a means for activities related to organization and productivity. As a result, this approach produces observable patterns and shapes that are repeated in many aspects of "designed" artifacts we surround ourselves with daily. Behaviorally, an Indian cook making *roti prata* at the canteen uses similar high-to-low actions as a Chinese hawker at the wet market chopping fish heads. While the Chinese usually hang chickens on hooks in an orderly line, the Malays line up their chickens flat side by side on display in markets. Indian food is often characterized by bright and vibrant colors, which can also be found in tentages and walls within Little India.

Photo 7.

Photo 8.

In Singapore, space is at a premium. High rental costs mean every interior layout must be designed with function in mind. From kitchen to living rooms, whether large or small, are often put to several uses. In planning and decorating, making the most of small spaces is absolutely essential. When several different activities jostle for space in a tight area, professional designers and space planners are presented with opportunities as well as challenges to integrate aesthetics with functionality. A well-planned kitchen, regardless of its size, is one in which food preparation; cooking utensils and storage are all close at hand. We observe that open storage gives kitchens a functional yet welcoming feel as everything that needs to be accessed can be located, used, and returned to its proper place with ease and a minimum of fuss [photo 8]. These similar patterns contain details that differentiate the different stakeholders yet all serve the same purpose to give us order, energy and life. Just like how we seek to resolve the tension in the omnivore's paradox to achieve stability, we also seek to establish some form of order (consciously or subconsciously) in our lives for safety and security.

6. LIMITATIONS

There is much more room for improvement, especially in the representation of the various traditional practices, festivities and beliefs of the Malays and Indians. Due to the lack of contacts with a variety of races and time limitations, we were unable to comprehensively cover all aspects of food and festivities that are representative of Singapore. Majority of the photos taken were related to the Chinese and their culture because this is what we are most familiar with and have the greatest access to as we come from a Chinese background. Even though other races were represented, they were still under-represented in the project on the whole. There is still a lack of depth in the specific cultures present. Such a problem could be solved by

systematically planning out the various ethnic hotspots and visiting these places multiple times to get more photos, as well as ensuring that there would be a photographer available to cover any major cultural events in Singapore, like Hari Raya, Deepavali or Chinese New Year. Future research into this topic could possibly engage in greater textual research on the history and origins of a particular culture, which would be a good complement to the visual approach.

7. CONCLUSION

Each culture selects food potentialities and while one values them, another depreciates. Humanity in the Western civilization abstains from the consumption of human flesh and those who do are despicably referred to as "barbarians." For example, the French are known for consuming snails, frogs and horsemeat while the Germans are "krauts" and "potato eaters" (De Garine, 2001). On the contrary, due to colonization, *nasi goreng* has become part of the fare of the Dutch, so has Indian curry for the British and North African food for the French. This adoption and rejection is an indicator of a society's attitude and prejudice towards food that stems from philosophical-religious beliefs, kinship, ethnic origins, social class and national identity (De Garine, 2001).

Food is more than just a medium to satisfy our hunger. It has wider implications that extend to the formation of our identity. We observe that the abundance of hawker centers and fast food restaurants in Singapore are seemingly the choice of the working class. Food at these places provides an optimal diet for its consumers that seem content with primarily in meeting his/her nutritional needs where they do not to indulge in any gastronomic pleasures. Luxury food, on the other hand, caters to one's dining experience where quality and rarity triumph over quantity. This form of exoticism is an indicator of the ultimate privilege of the upper-class. As such, food appreciations as well as the environment in which how the food is prepared, cooked and served, as well as the price tag for these decadent indulgences have become a notable aspect of class differentiations.

Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words. In analyzing the overwhelming visuals, elimination and fine-tuning became part of a thought process that requires logical, analytical, and at times, intuitive thinking. For example, when we look at a picture critically, what is its core message? Does it evoke a sense of emotive appeal? Does it present a clear message that requires no second-guessing? Visual communicators have the responsibility to create messages which are both accessible and understandable. As a form-giver to a visual message, a photographer is the originator of the message. However, when visual materials such as photographs are not accompanied by a verbal message and these are presented to a spectrum of audience who bring their own interpretations, we cannot help but to conclude that the meaning of an image and how it is "read" is not fixed by us as it is equally being determined by our viewers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Both the authors wish to acknowledge the funding support for this project from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and the Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA) program at Nanyang Technological University.

REFERENCES

Baudrillard, J., 1981. *For a critique of the political economy of the sign.* Telos, St. Louis, MI: Telos.

Beardsworth, A., & Keil, T. (1992). The vegetarian option: Varieties, conversions, motives and careers. *Sociological Review*, 40, 253-293.

Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (Eds.). (1997). *Consuming geographies.* London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brillat-Savarin, J. A. (1825). The physiology of taste. Adelaide, AU: ebooks@Adelaide. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/b/brillat/savarin/b85p/complete.html

Campbell, C. (2005). The craft consumer: Culture, craft and consumption in a postmodern society. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(1), 23-42. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Crouch, M., & O'Neill, G. (2000). Sustaining identities? Prolegomena for inquiry into contemporary foodways. *Social Science Information*, 39(1), 181-192. Retrieved 6 April 2008, from Communication Studies: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

De Garine, I (2001). Views about food prejudice and stereotypes. *Anthropology of Food*, 40(3), 487-507. Retrieved 2 April, 2009, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Finkelstein, J. (2003). The taste of boredom: McDonaldization and Australian food culture. *American Behavioral Scientist,* 47(2), 187-200. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Fischler, C. (1988). Food, self and identity. *Social Science Information*, 27(2), 275-292. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Gibson, S. (2007). Food mobilities: Traveling, dwelling, and eating cultures. *Space and Culture*, 10(1), 4-21. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Hendrickson, M. K., & Heffernan, W. D. (2002). Opening spaces through relocalization: Locating potential resistance in the weakness of the global food system. *Sociological Ruralis*, 42(4), 347-369.

Lupton, D. (1996). *Food, the body and the self.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McDonald's on FAQs. (n.d.). FAQs. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from http://www.mcdonalds.ca/en/aboutus/faq.aspx

Morgan, J., & Welton, P. (1986). *See what I mean? An introduction to visual comunication*. London: Edward Arnold.

Mindef (n.d.), *1965 – Independence of Singapore*. Retrieved 16, April, 2009, from http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/about_us/history/birth_of_saf/v1n08_history.html

Pietrykowski, B. (2004). You are what you eat: The social economy of the slow food movement. *Review of Social Economy*, 62(3), 307-321. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. New York: Doubleday.

Stillman, T. (2003). Introduction: McDonald's in question: The limits of the mass market. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(2), 107-118. Retrieved 6 April, 2008, from Sociology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection database.

Stini, W. A. (1980). Human adaptability to nutritional stress. In P.B. Pearson & R. Greenwell (Eds.), *Nutrition, food and man* (pp. 40-124). Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

Watson, J. (1998). *Media communication: An introduction to theory and process.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wallschlaeger, C. & Busic-Snyder, C. (1992). *Basic visual concepts and principle for artists, architect, and designers*. Boston: McGraw Hill.