

INTO THE MELTING POT

Through the lens of that unique Lunar New Year creation *yu sheng*, find out how the simplest dishes can be canvases upon which cultural and national identities are inscribed.

FOOD AS CULTURE

Amanda Lee Koe is a 2013 Honorary Fellow at the International Writing Program, University of Iowa. She is also the fiction editor of *Esquire* (Singapore), editor of creative non-fiction online magazine *POSKOD*, communications director at *studioKALEIDO*, and co-editor of literary journal *Ceriph*.

ACCORDING TO CHINESE FOLKLORE, THE FOUR

corners of the sky collapsed onto itself after a fierce battle between the gods of water and fire. The Chinese Goddess Nuwa tempered five-coloured stones to mend the sky, then cut off the feet of a great but luckless turtle, whose formidable appendages were used as struts to hold up the firmament.

Her work done, Nuwa grew restless and a little lonely, so on the first day, she created chickens to keep her company. On the second day, she created dogs, followed by sheep on the third, pigs on the fourth, cows on the fifth and horses on the sixth. On the seventh day, Nuwa folded up the sleeves of her robes and fashioned human beings from yellow clay, sculpting each one carefully. She was fatigued — and a little impatient — after creating hundreds of such figures in this manner, so she dipped a rope in the clay and flicked it so that blobs of clay landed everywhere. The handcrafted figures became nobles, while the blobs turned into commoners.

This seventh day falls on *zhengyue*, the first month of the Chinese calendar

and is known as *renri* (literally Human Day) — the birthday of mankind. *Renri* also coincides with the seventh day of the Chinese Lunar New Year.

On *renri*, Singaporeans and Malaysians of Chinese descent celebrate their universal birthday by eating *yu sheng* — more popularly known as *yee sang* in Malaysia — a peculiarly local practice of eating raw fish salad (see text box) that traces its history back to the 1960s.

A LUCKY DISH OF FISH

Fortune or luck is a great arbiter in Chinese culture and the Chinese are unabashed in their pointed preference for material wealth. The longing for instant

prosperity and wealth is underscored in the *lo hei* exercise, with its broad tossing and sweeping gestures.

One of Singapore’s most renowned cooks, Chef Sin Leong, recalls how upset his diners were when in the early days the dish of *yu sheng* was tossed by the chefs in the kitchen before it was served. “They said we were taking away their good fortune, so they would rather toss it themselves!”

The performatory ritual of ushering in wealth is only symbolical; more importantly, eating in ritual contexts can also reaffirm relationships with other people.¹ The communal partaking of *yu sheng* is perhaps the closest thing the Chinese, known for their usually reserved na-

tures, ever come to “dancing like no one is watching” as a family over food.

FOOD AS A FORM OF CULTURE

The department of anthropology at Oregon State University defines culture as “learned patterns of behaviour and thought that help a group adapt to its surroundings”.² Culinary culture is central to diasporic identification, with the focus on the place of food in society, more specifically in the enduring habits, rituals and daily practices that are collectively used to create and sustain a shared sense of cultural identity.

To this end, restaurateur, chef and F&B consultant, David Yip, hopes to reinvigorate cultural identity across the Chinese dialect groups in Singapore with his epicurean club Jumping Tables, a sporadic and informal culinary gathering that features respected chefs whipping up time-honoured recipes the traditional way. Yip invites a number of chefs — from humble eateries to established restaurants — to cook at these gatherings.

One of the chefs Yip was most eager to feature at Jumping Tables was Chef Sin Leong, one of the founding chefs of Red Star restaurant in Chin Swee Road and owner of the now defunct Sin Leong Restaurant, a local institution in Cantonese cuisine that first opened in 1971. When Sin, 86, agreed to participate in Jumping Tables, Yip and his guests could barely contain their excitement.

Before the meal commenced, Chef Sin insisted that the guests visit the altar he keeps in his kitchen, where his mentor, the late Master Luo Cheng, smiles out of an ornate frame, amid offerings of orchid blooms and clouds of incense. Hailing from Shanghai, China, Master Luo groomed Singapore’s four most prominent Chinese chefs in the 1970s. His protégés, Sin Leong, Hooi Kok Wai, Tham Yui Kai and Lau Yoke Pui, were later crowned as Singapore’s “Four Heavenly Culinary Kings”.

Under the tutelage of Master Luo, the four young junior chefs toiled in the kitchen under his stern eye and exacting standards at the famed Cathay Restaurant (at the old Cathay Building). Opened in 1940, it initially served European fare, but underwent a revamp in 1951 under Master Luo to become the finest Chinese restaurant in Singapore, specialising in Cantonese cuisine. The Cathay

The Art of Yu Sheng



Typically, diners gather around a large platter filled with slivers of raw fish, usually ikan parang (wolf herring), shredded green and white radish and carrot, pickled ginger, pomelo segments, chopped peanuts, deep-fried flour crisps and sesame seeds, among other ingredients. Someone usually takes the lead, calling out certain auspicious phrases in Mandarin — all of which invariably invoke wealth and long life — as the various ingredients and dressings (including pepper, plum sauce and oil) are thrown into the mix. Then all hell breaks loose.

Amid raucous cries of lo hei — a Cantonese term referring to the action of lifting one’s chopsticks and tossing the raw fish salad — diners will dig into the dish, raising their chopsticks as high as they can and mixing the ingredients while trying to keep everything on the plate.

In Chinese culinary symbolism, 鱼 (yu, meaning fish) is frequently conflated with its homophone 裕 (yu) meaning “abundance”, whilst 生 (sheng, meaning raw) can be taken as its homophone 升 (sheng), meaning “to rise”. When coupled, yu sheng is a symbol of a rise in abundance — be it prosperity, vigour, personal growth or happiness.

Like a layered Tang dynasty poem where each noun is a palimpsest for something more pertinent, many Chinese dishes and their ingredients are specially selected for their ability to engender good fortune. Even the humble deep-fried bits, in the hue and shape of “golden pillows”, belie a greater hope of 满地黄金 man di huang jin, that is, floors full of gold. Traditionally, the addition of each ingredient to yu sheng is accompanied by the recitation of a specific 成语 (chen yu), a four-character idiom.

Yu sheng is not for the shy and retiring. The partaking of the dish is as much about the ritual as the consumption. During the ensuing melee, diners might find themselves losing a chopstick, pelted in the eye by a peanut shrapnel, or worse, have their new clothes stained by plum sauce.

Yu sheng has become a Lunar New Year staple and it has become so popular that restaurants in Singapore serve it throughout the 15-day Lunar New Year period — not just on the seventh day. In the spirit of gastronomic creativity (and conspicuous consumption), the traditional translucent slivers of ikan parang have been replaced with salmon, lobster and abalone.

Restaurant closed in December 1964 and reopened under a new management at the renovated Cathay Building in 2007.

Chef Hooi, the founder of the famed Dragon Phoenix restaurant — located today at Novotel Clarke Quay at River Valley Road — remembers Master Luo as being very strict, not only making them sharpen their culinary skills but also inculcating in them good work ethics. “[Master Luo] believed that besides skills, good

chefs must be equipped with a high standard of social responsibility because they feed so many people.” Once the four apprentices had attained a certain level of culinary proficiency, Master Luo told them to go forth to spread the art of Cantonese cuisine.

The four took their teacher’s word seriously and each opened a restaurant: Sin opened Sin Leong Restaurant, Hoi started Dragon Phoenix, Tham opened Lai Wah

(ABOVE) Lo hei, or yu sheng, is a noisy, messy affair and a staple of Chinese New Year celebrations. Image courtesy of Urban Achiever (www.urbanachiever.com).

restaurant (in Bendemeer Road) and Lau launched Red Star. The four decided it was important their restaurants did not cannibalise one another's menus. Each would have their own signature dishes, "They were like brothers," Chris Hooi, the son of Chef Hooi, who now helms Dragon Phoenix, says. This bond was no doubt forged through their years of slaving over hot stoves together in the kitchen.

Beyond this, the four decided they would meet every week to discuss fresh ideas for new recipes. These gastronomic brainstorming sessions resulted in iconic Singaporean dishes such as chilli crabs and deep-fried yam ring as well as the modern version of *yu sheng*.

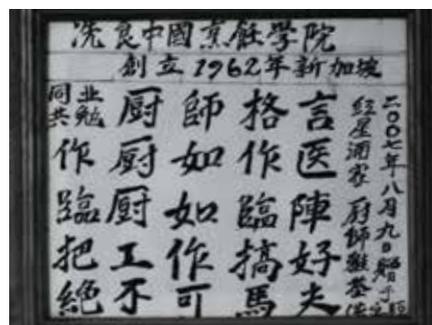
Master Luo's fervent wish to extend the popularity of Cantonese cuisine and his four apprentices' desire to execute this wish was almost evangelical in intent. When examined through the lens of the early immigrants — who were motivated by pride and desire to revalidate their racial and cultural identities, as well as that of generations to come, despite being physically far removed from the motherland — Master Luo's zeal for his native Cantonese cuisine is better understood. For Luo and his protégés, it was likely that the preparation, cooking and serving of Cantonese cuisine became the nexus of their diasporic Chinese identity.

Mankekar argues, much in the same vein, that Indian customers do not visit ethnic markets in the Bay Area in San Francisco merely to shop for groceries, but to engage with representations of their (sometimes imagined) homeland.³

INVENTED TRADITIONS AND NATIONALISM

People from the province of Canton (Guangdong) have been eating raw fish with sliced ginger and spring onions drizzled in lime as a porridge accompaniment since the 1920s. When these Cantonese immigrants brought their cuisine over to Singapore, changes were made to the original recipe. Perhaps the changes — that embellished the plain slivers of fish with creative additions such as fried dough crisps and plum sauce — were a result of the immigrants' exposure to the cuisine of their newly adopted home.

In 2012, a minor tussle over who rightfully invented *yu sheng* broke out — a professor from Singapore offhandedly suggested on a social media platform that *yu sheng*, among other intangible



practices such as Singlish, belonged to the UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁴ The list, which includes traditional social practices, rituals and festivals passed on from one generation to another, was established by UNESCO to help countries protect and preserve their heritage.

Singaporeans claimed that *yu sheng* was invented by the "Four Heavenly Culinary Kings" in 1963, debuting at Dragon Phoenix as well as Lai Wah restaurants during the Lunar New Year of 1964. Chef Hooi recalls, "(We) concocted a unique sweet-sour sauce, added crushed peanuts and sesame seeds to the fish (inspired by a local salad called *rojak*), and assembled other colourful ingredients to symbolise prosperity in Chinese culture. To make the carrot strips thinner, I purchased the first rotating carrot shredder at Tangs on Orchard Road."

On the other hand, Malaysians insisted that *yu sheng* originated in a restaurant in Seremban, in the state of Negeri Sembilan. The national papers each weighed in with their own "food experts", with the Malaysian national broadsheet *The Star* concluding that the dish origi-

nated in Malaysia, but was better promoted in Singapore.

Previous food fights between Singapore and Malaysia had taken place in 2009, when "Malaysian Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ng Yen Yen claimed that *bak kut teh* (a herbal pork rib soup) and Hainanese chicken rice, among other dishes, were authentically Malaysian, drawing many Singaporeans' ire".⁵

Malaysians and Singaporeans are certainly not alone in claiming authorship of famous dishes. The sticky sweet *baklava*, for instance, is claimed by more ethnic groups than *yu sheng* — the Greeks, the Turkish, the Iranians, the Bulgarians, the Uzbeks, and even the Chinese all claim to have created it.⁶ The pastry, filled with chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup, has been the subject of fierce nationalist debates involving individuals from passionate Greek-Cypriot *baklava* makers to the Turkish State Minister.⁷

As food often plays a major role in the invention of national identities, food fights of the sort described here may point to an already shaky national identity. Wilk's analysis⁸ of the rise of Belizean cuisine in the Central American state

emphasises the point that “both nation and cuisine are more intrinsically imagined than in most contexts”. Belizean cuisine—with dishes like *escabeche* (onion soup) and *panades* (fried maize shells with beans or fish)—was developed in response to the perceived need for a culture of nationhood after independence in 1981. In his analysis Wilk contrasts bland, imported meals of the 1970s with Belizean “local food” of the 1990s, where the latter performed the role of “an important imagined tradition of Belizean authenticity”.

The periodic tussles between Singapore and Malaysia over the origins of their “national dishes” perhaps underscore the latent anxiety that exists between the two countries over who is the rightful owner of certain dishes—and by extension the progenitor of their associated food culture. It is easy to concede that—having been brought together as Malaya first under British rule from 1824 (after the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty) to 1957, followed by Singapore’s short-lived merger with Malaysia from 1963 to 1965—there would have been organic similarities in the way the transplanted cuisines of the early migrants would have been prepared and evolved over the years. But there is more to the issue than meets the eye.

Beyond specific nationalist and ethnic anxieties, perhaps another primary distinction to make of the *yu sheng-lo hei* conundrum is one of etymology versus semiotics: Is the tussle over *yu sheng*—the dish of raw fish salad and its constituents, variations of which had long been in existence in China’s Canton province, or is it over *lo hei*—the performatory ritual of tossing slivers of raw fish and its accompaniments in a communal social setting? Where does one end and the other begin?

THE GASTRONOMIC MEMORY OF DIASPORA

In a nation that has often been accused—by foreigners and locals—of not having a strong local culture, questions on how and what we eat, as well as when and by whom our national dishes were invented can be particularly pressing. The city-state is after all marketed by the Singapore Tourism Board to the world as a food and shopping haven. Singapore’s latest tourism tagline is “Shiok!”, a succinct Singlish term that translates loosely

to “extreme pleasure”, derived from “*syok*” the Malay word for “nice”.

If food can legitimately be positioned as culture, then Singaporeans are certainly not bereft of it; in fact the culture of food defines its people—Calvin Trillin in *The New Yorker* said, “Culinarily, [Singaporeans] are among the most homesick people I have ever met.”¹⁰ Singapore has been built on the backs of migrants who each brought their bloodlines, languages, customs and signature dishes into a melting pot of cultures, yet still maintaining their own individual ethnic identities—articulated most clearly through food. This is why, perhaps, dishes like *yu sheng*, which have clear cultural roots as well as rituals that bring together extended families in a salute of chopsticks, can be viewed as true emblems of food culture and heritage.

In this mutating world, Singaporeans need to cultivate concern about their food heritage: how did dishes thought to be unique to the Singapore experience evolve? Who invented them and when? We should not be satisfied with the mere gustatory act of eating a delectable dish of *rojak* (fruits and vegetables tossed in prawn paste) or *char kway teow* (fried rice noodles in dark, sweet sauce). For in dishes such as *yu sheng*, meticulously prepared, served and performed by specific communities—even while revamped with new ingredients for a contemporary palate—the trauma, exile and nostalgia of the diasporic communities¹¹ are both ingested and externalised.

Food comes to Singaporeans naturally—we are passionate about it, we join snaking queues for ambrosial *laksa* (noodles in spicy coconut broth), we seek out obscure corners of the island for the best fish-head curry, and our conversations are frequently peppered with musings about all things related to food.

Casting an anthropological lens on the food we enjoy allows us to understand ourselves more deeply even as our eyes sweep over chilli crab, *chendol* and *mee rebus*. What we are consuming is not just crustacean and chillies, coconut milk and palm sugar, or noodles with piquant gravy, but unwritten parts of the histories of our diasporas, hidden in the woven intricacy of a *ketupat* (Malay rice cake), the folds of a *zongzi* (Chinese dumpling) and the artful blend of spices in a curry, passed down through generations in recipes and memory-laden flavours. And

when we bend our heads to eat, we suddenly realise that we are drinking from the bowl of our culture’s belly. ●

ENDNOTES

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