

Verena Tay

You Are What You Eat: A Dietary Contemplation of Identity

Billions of people have lived on this earth for many millennia, developing all sorts of cultures and always crisscrossing the various continents in search of a better life. In the face of such diversity, if it were possible to summarize the human condition into four essential experiences, then I would choose the following in descending order of importance: respiration, consumption, elimination and reproduction. Obviously without oxygen, one would be dead within minutes. Eating and drinking are necessary so that one has the nutrients for the basic functions of life. Elimination of carbon dioxide and feces, urine and sweat are vital, for what comes in must go out in one form or another. And without reproduction, the human species would not be perpetuated.

Of these four experiences, Singaporeans have transformed the consumption of food and drink into a national preoccupation. India has the *Kamasutra*; Singapore has the *Makansutra*—a guidebook issued yearly listing the best eateries across the island (*makan* being the Malay word for ‘eat’). A tiny island of over four million people from different races and cultures, Singaporeans are spoilt for choice among the cuisines and types of food available befitting all budgets: from the humble Indian *prata*, Malay *nasi lemak* or Hainanese chicken rice available at neighbourhood hawker centres and *kopitiams* (or coffee shops) for two US dollars or less to multi-course Chinese banquets (filled with politically incorrect delicacies such as sharks’ fin, birds’ nest and giant abalone) costing hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. Along almost every street one can always find some place to eat, be it Asian or Western food.

Thus for the average Singaporean, the taste, texture, variety, quality, quantity and price of food (and drink) are very important. While I personally recognize and welcome the fact that culinary experimentation is a mandatory part of travel, I must also state that the Singaporean abroad is often a miserable creature, seldom finding a similar epicurean utopia overseas as is found at home.

Unlike some Chinese Singaporeans, I am not a *‘fun tong’* (in Cantonese, literally ‘rice bin’, meaning a person who must always eat rice, and lots of rice, for every meal). Yet I found out that ingrained customs die hard. Although I had a wonderful three-month sojourn in Scandinavia during the winter of 2000/01, a downside of the trip was the necessity of eating some form of sandwich every day not only for breakfast, but also lunch, Scandinavians not being accustomed to preparing hot food for their midday meal. To make up for having to eat bread for two meals daily, I would try to invent as many combinations and styles of sandwich fillings as possible—only to have the Norwegians laugh at me for mixing and matching food in ways inconceivable to them.

Upon hearing about my impending travels to the US for the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, my friends and relatives typically responded: “Where on earth is that? What is the food like? Must be all potatoes/bread/burgers/corn/pasta/pizza.” Torn between the need to participate in the adventure of travel and the need to follow the imperative of my Singaporean gut, the possible prospect of eating only potatoes/bread/burgers/corn/pasta/pizza for three months was not appealing. So I made sure I stocked up by eating my favourite Asian dishes before leaving for the US.

Alas, upon arrival in the US, my gut has betrayed me time and time again, refusing to go on a Western gastronomic journey when faced with any other choice. At JFK, I checked into the Howard Johnson airport hotel for a night’s stay before travelling on. The front desk had dial-and-deliver menus: two from different Chinese restaurants and

one from a pizza place. Cheesy, greasy pizza after more than 24 hours in the air? My instinct screamed, “NO WAY!” I ordered Chinese take-away.

While with my two hosts in upstate New York, I happily consumed whatever was offered to me. The crucial test of my culinary tolerance came on the very first day I arrived in Iowa City. Landing at mid-afternoon at Cedar Rapids Airport, I was brought by Bart Scagnelli to the beautiful bed and breakfast where I had booked a room. After settling in, the first two tasks I set myself to were to get acquainted with the city and locate dinner (both tasks being interchangeable in importance). I walked to Shambaugh House and met Christopher Merrill and Kate Karle. Like a typical Singaporean, the first question I asked was where to find places to eat. Chris kindly directed me to follow Clinton Street southward.

As I walked through downtown Iowa City, I was happy at last to associate physical structures with the street names that I had come across in my internet search for maps of the city. Yet at the same time, I was doing something completely different: in retrospect, I was then constructing a special mental map of my own with each step forward. It was no longer important that I knew the difference between Iowa Avenue or Washington Street. Propelled by the churnings of my stomach, it was more essential to note all the food places that appealed to me.

And what limited appeal there was. Hmm... restaurant—no... bistro—no ... bar—no... cafe—no... pizza, sandwich, burger, pita—no... Mexican food—no... Eritrean-Ethiopian food—definitely not on my first night in Iowa City... The more I walked, the more I wanted rice. In fact, after so long on my feet, all I wanted to find was the comfort of Chinese food, even though Chinese food in America is often different taste-wise from what is found in Singapore. But being new in town, I was not successful in finding the local Chinese takeaways that night. So I settled for the next best thing: vegetable biryani at the India Café. So much for being free and easy or being willing to experiment while abroad...

Over the next two days, I discovered the China Star at the Old Capitol Mall and the Taste of China on North Linn Street and sampled what each had to offer. There seems to be a mysterious kind of uniformity in American Chinese takeaway food, no matter what sort of cuisine they offer (be it Cantonese, Hunan, Szechuan, or what have you). Compared to Chinese food in Singapore, the portions and slices are bigger, the sauces seem to have less variety and are chock-full of salt and MSG, the noodles and dumplings are coarser.

In addition, there are certain conventions in the US that I doubt can be widely found in Asia (definitely not in Singapore). For instance, a packet of fried dough crackers comes along with a bowl of soup (possibly modelled after the American practice of offering tiny packets of soda or cream crackers with soup). And only overseas, especially in the US, can you find something called the Singaporean fried noodle—which DOES NOT exist in Singapore. Not to mention the ridiculous presence of the fortune cookie which, in my opinion, is a thoroughly American invention.

In satisfying my stomach’s imperative, I became disappointed with myself. What is the point of travelling if not to be adventurous with food and drink? Is this gastronomic conservatism a sign of my approaching middle age? Am I getting so set in my ways that I am unable to adapt as easily as before? Am I too jaded with life experience, having done it all and stocked up on too many T-shirts, to want to try or accept new things?

I know I am not alone in experiencing such culinary xenophobia—many travellers often long for a taste of home. Yet, despite having survived several long stays away from Singapore before, this was the first time that I had ever felt this aversion to non-Asian food while abroad so strongly and so soon after arrival in a foreign land. I kept

reflecting why this was so, developing all sorts of theories, however far-fetched. Am I so homesick already, less than two weeks out of Singapore? With this trip financed by Singaporean government money, am I so caught up with my role as cultural ambassador that I cannot accept local food? Or am I clinging to a vestige of Singapore to counter-balance the feeling of being overwhelmed by Americana, even though this US trip will last only three months? None of these theories seemed to fit the total discomfort of my gut.

Nevertheless, the young Chinese man serving behind the counter of the Taste of China helped me to begin putting things into context. In my experience thus far with service staff in Iowa City, they tend to range between very welcoming (with big genuine smiles) and full of polished politeness (professionally dealing with your requests before going to the next person). By comparison, the Taste of China young man is sullen and gloomy. Although he is not rude, I have not seen even the slightest hint of a smile on his face during the two times I have eaten at the Taste of China. With a concentrated frown, he quickly takes down your order, stabs the requisite numbers into the till and barks out your order to the cooks waiting behind in a dialect that is alien even to my ears while he waits for you to fish out your payment—all with a seemingly disinterested and frustrated efficiency, as if he wishes he could be anywhere else but this Chinese takeaway.

His aloofness discouraging me to start a conversation with this man, I nevertheless pondered upon his condition as I ate my small beef chop suey with white rice during my second visit to the Taste of China. Why is he behaving this way, unlike so many other people whom I had met thus far in Iowa City who seemed happy or even contented to be where they were for the present moment?

With his reluctant demeanour, so unlike the purpose and breezy confidence that most students I have seen thus far on the street seem to possess, the young man does not seem to be an international student working at the takeaway on a part-time basis to earn money to help with tuition fees. Possibly a recent immigrant from China, judging by his accent. Perhaps he has come to this beautiful country to seek his fortune in the land of plenty and exercise his talents and energy to the fullest. But what sort of future can he have in a Chinese takeaway befitting his true interests and talents (whatever they may be)?

One thing is certain: the young man's immediate environment is not particularly stimulating. Compared to the fresher, larger and mall-based China Star found right in the heart of downtown Iowa City, the Taste of China is a smaller, dingier, street-based shop located at the edge of downtown. Filled with a summer fly or two, it reeks of stale oil, oyster sauce and MSG since the kitchen behind the sales counter is relatively open to the shop front, allowing the sounds and smells of cooking to permeate into the front seating area.

Though not crowded, the Taste of China has a constant stream of customers. Every few minutes, a new one enters the shop to buy takeaway or eat in. I began to wonder what the young man feels about these customers, most of them Americans. If he is an immigrant, does he in any way feel an American, cloistered day in and day out within the enclave that is the Taste of China? Has he ever laughed at these stupid Americans, buying what they think is authentic Chinese food (made all the more authentic by the way he shouts orders to the cooks in an incomprehensible language), but that is probably quite different from what the kitchen/his family prepares for staff/family members to eat? Or is he so inured by the daily grind of mundane routine that he does not care at all?

However, ultimately who am I to judge—I, the visiting, J1-visa bearing, short-term scholar from a country also full of migrants, purportedly here in the US to network with other writers from around the world and promote Singaporean culture? Someone who is not really faced with the immigrants' dilemma: on one hand needing to

assimilate into American society and yet on the other needing to value one's original cultural identity. Ironically, for a person government-sponsored to publicise the Singaporean way of life abroad, I have been questioning my national and cultural identity in recent months.

Since gaining full independence in 1965, the Republic of Singapore has been forging a national identity based on multiracialism, multiculturalism and multilingualism, since the population is approximately 75% Chinese, 15% Malay, 10% Indian and 5% 'Others' (a mix achieved by the huge number of immigrants since the start of British rule in 1819). Depending on which side of my family is considered, I am third- or fourth-generation Hokkien Chinese Singaporean. Yet, our time in Singapore has been insufficient for some members of my family to feel that their roots are really on this tiny island just 1 degree north of the equator and that they belong here: many relatives have migrated to Canada and the UK, from the 60s to the 90s.

Unlike my relatives, I have stayed a Singaporean citizen thus far. In terms of cultural identity, there are many types of Singaporeans, depending on race, language ability, type of education and length of time in the country. I consider English as my first language (English is the main language of instruction in Singaporean schools and the main language of communication among the many races in Singapore), my Mandarin is miserable (unfortunately I am a failure of the Singaporean bilingual education policy) and I only know a smidgen of Malay (despite it being the official national language of the country). So while the typical Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporean is glued to Channel 8 every night viewing locally-produced Mandarin TV shows or is savvy about the latest Hong Kong or Korean serials on video, I prefer to watch *CSI*, *Supernatural* and Discovery Channel on cable.

In my own way, I try to connect to the deeper cultural soil of the past by researching and telling stories from different Asian countries, especially by building up my repertoire of ancient folktales of Singapore from the *Malay Annals*, or the *Sejarah Melayu*. I have dreams of a project to celebrate the significance of Fort Canning Park in Singaporean life and history (Fort Canning is the hill located in downtown Singapore that was inhabited long before the British turned up in 1819 to turn a sleepy fishing village into a bustling port city.)

Yet feeling that I am a part of Singapore has always been hard. Because Singapore is so tiny, land is precious and buildings are constantly being cannibalized and torn down and new ones built as the city continually reinvents itself. Consequently, a building that is 30 or 40 years old is considered "ancient." The first and second generations of high-rise buildings built in the 60s and 70s and even the 80s, buildings that I grew up with, have already been destroyed or are being faced with demolition. The very home in which I have lived for almost 11 years is now being threatened by this market-driven urban renewal. So how does one retain one's identity if the physical landscape incessantly changes?

So perhaps it may be easier to define the Singaporean way of life through intangible means, such as the customs, practices and cuisines of its people? As I mentioned earlier, Singapore is literally a United Nations' buffet of food. Yet I have often wondered: how do others perceive Singaporeans? For instance, what do Chinese citizens from China think about the Chinese in Singapore? Are we very westernized in their eyes? Do Singaporean Chinese dishes taste the same as the food in China? Do these China Chinese laugh at Singaporean Chinese food the same way I have laughed at the quaint convention of the Singaporean fried noodle and fortune cookie in American Chinese takeaway cuisine?

In particular, how do the China Chinese view a favourite Singapore dish: the humble but ubiquitous Hainanese chicken rice? According to the food experts, you will never find Hainanese chicken rice on Hainan Island in China.

In fact, Hainanese chicken rice is a Singaporean invention. That special and talented breed of Hainanese ships' cooks who lived in Singapore during the early and middle parts of the twentieth century developed this mouth-watering dish of steamed or roasted chicken plus chicken-stock-and-ginger-boiled rice, served with lashings of garlic chilli sauce and dark soya sauce. So popular is the dish that you can now find chicken rice all over Singapore, from the simplest of hawker stores (for two or three Singapore dollars a plate) to the ritziest of hotel coffee shops (where they charge almost 20 Singapore dollars for a serving).

Ultimately, maybe one's identity is merely a state of mind. Perhaps by seeking Asian food and discussing food in Singapore, I am expressing my sense of identity, claiming my space, not because I am overwhelmed by the presence of another culture or because I am homesick or because I wish to be a rabid cultural ambassador. To paraphrase Malim Ghazali PK, my venerable IWP colleague, travel challenges one's perceptions, making you aware that what you *think* is may not be. So in seeking to touch the familiar in unfamiliar surroundings as my external world changes, have I clarified my sense of who I am? Or perhaps, those wise nutritionists express my musings most appropriately and succinctly, "You are what you eat."

A most amazing thing happened yesterday. After the IWP trip to Lake Macbride, we stopped by Wilson's Orchard to pick apples. I was most delighted at this unexpected side trip, as I had wanted to go apple picking while in the US. As I bit into the tart flesh of my personally selected fruit, I felt content—I finally felt that I was imbibing a part of the local soil. Perhaps now I am ready to eat at that American café at the corner of Iowa Avenue and Dubuque Street. The dishes that I saw customers tucking in the other day have begun to look appealing...