Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (eds.)


This book is one of a 25-volume book series launched by World Scientific, a Singapore-based international publisher of academic books, to commemorate Singapore's 50th year of independent nationhood. In keeping with the spirit of the theme of celebrating the nation, the contributions from the nine scholars from sociology, anthropology and geography are both academic and personal in reflection. The contributions in this volume include personal reflections of renowned academics that results in a highly informative, yet theoretically significant contributions. The editors, geographer Lily Kong and anthropologist Vineeta Sinha are amongst the leading Singaporean scholars in their respective fields and they have deftly combined the diverse ingredients of foodscape in Singapore, including street food, snacks, farming, cooking, food blogging, globalisation of food and food nostalgia in a recipe meant to titillate the senses and the intellect.

In their introduction, Kong and Sinha theorise the academic study of food and show how the various contributions on Singapore in the volume illuminate contemporary perspectives. Heeding the advice of various distinguished scholars to “think through food” by recognising that food is a “highly condensed social fact” and a “marvelously plastic kind of collective representation”, Kong and Sinha narrate how food can be a conceptual and empirical lens to illuminate the social, political, spatial, economic and cultural aspects of human existence.

The first chapter is by Singapore's most famous sociologist Chua Beng Huat. Chua is renowned for his many works on explaining and exploring many aspects of Singapore society using sociological lenses. In this work, however, Chua puts away his academic hat and puts on a biographical one to give an account of the history and sociology of hawker food in Singapore. Using memories from his childhood in Bukit Ho Swee, a then-Chinese village in the southern part of colonial Singapore, Chua shows the transition of hawker food as necessary fare for the Singaporean population, which experienced a very quick and drastic transition to an industrial society following self-rule. The personal narratives of the author help the readers, especially the younger ones, to imagine and reconstruct life in late-colonial Singapore through the lens of food. Although this piece is highly biographical, it highlights two phenomena that can generate new research into understanding Singapore through the lens of food. Chua mentions how the spatial and temporal organisation of hawker
foods in the village of his youth was destroyed in the infamous 1961 fire that destroyed the village in Bukit Ho Swee. A research question that can be raised here is if the “unhygienic hawker stalls” were a possible reason for the suspicious breakout of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire. Another point that the author makes is how the provision of cheap food in hawker centres is central to keeping wages low in Singapore, hence keeping the economy competitive. This fascinating connection between food, economics and politics can be further explored to understand Singapore society even better through the lens of hawker food.

Chapter 2, by geographer Adeline Tay, is a fascinating account of Singapore’s “Snackscapes” or the world of snack foods and its place in the local society. Tay argues that snacks are not merely supplementary foods, but are an integral part of Singaporeans’ foodscape. They reflect both the sociology and history of Singapore society. Tay’s prose on snacks is based on personal recollections. For example, Tay’s visits to the mama shop (a sundry good stores peddling snacks and often run by the Indian Muslims; the word mama is the Tamil word for “uncle”) as a schoolgirl reveals how the mama shop has become as a site for collective memory for Singaporeans as most Singaporeans growing up in the 60s, 70s and 80s would definitely have encountered the mama shop in their everyday lives. An important theme running through Tay’s article is that the story of snacks in Singapore is a story of time. Tay cleverly shows how the rhythm of snacking is reflective of the rhythm of work time and non-work time in Singapore. Using biscuits as an example, Tay points to how biscuits are reflective of the way one goes about daily life in Singapore. Biscuits have a long history in Singapore from the time they were sold by weight out of golden tins to the present moment when they are sold in modern, vacuum-sealed bags. Biscuits support work life in Singapore where the majority of the citizens work at desk-bound office jobs. Here, biscuits can be stored in the office drawers and consumed in between fixed mealtimes. A sizeable proportion of the workforce is in the service industry where work at unsociable hours allows for consumption of biscuits when food cannot be easily purchased on the job. After work, when one returns home and waits for dinner, biscuits provide that temporary filler. Biscuits, then, beat closely to the heart of the nation, being accommodated and accommodating extremely well to its rhythmic nuances and activities. By extension, the way one goes about daily life in Singapore, the way one understands time, is inextricably linked to practices of snacking, so argues Tay.

Singapore sociologist Kelvin Low is well known for his pioneering work on the sociology of senses. In Chapter 3, Low uses his earlier work on the sociology of senses, heritage, military history and identity to approach cookbooks and food memoirs to understand how food remembrances and cooking in texts