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BREAD AND CIRCUSES

Food meets politics in the Singapore media

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Special Issue: Lifestyle Journalism

While there has been consistent academic interest in the link between the media and politics, this attention has mostly bypassed lifestyle journalism. Yet this can reflect political and social realities of a country if less clearly than more overtly political coverage. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the Singapore government has used food to help construct a national identity and how the local print media has been a partner in this. It analyses how food has been represented in the Singapore press in relation to attitudes that contribute to nation-building. The findings suggest that the food-related articles studied usually reflected a culture of self-improvement, an ethnic-cultural element and cosmopolitan attitudes, all of which were identified as touchstones of Singapore's government-approved national identity. In addition, there is also marginally more press coverage of cosmopolitan and foreign food compared to local food, in concurrence with government initiatives to place the country as a globalised hub.

KEYWORDS: Culture; Food; Government; Journalism; Singapore

Introduction

In the second century, the Roman poet Juvenal used the term “*panem et circenses*”, or bread and circuses, somewhat critically to describe the two things that people desire – and hence the two factors a state needed to supply to dissuade the populace from revolting. Fast forward 2000 years and it appears that few countries have adopted this as successfully as the South-east Asian city-state of Singapore. In its bid to become an entertainment and cultural hub for the region, it has built a multi-million-dollar concert

hall-cum-theatre, the Esplanade; it launched the world's first night-time Formula 1 race; it has built two massive integrated resorts with entertainment, hotels and casinos; and it is revamping its sleepy pleasure island, Sentosa, to make it a world-class destination. Circuses abound, but by far the greatest circus is food. Food is a popular topic discussion and it fills thousands of column inches each year. It has become axiomatic of the Singaporean identity that they are a nation of foodies, likely to queue for half an hour to eat at the better of two nasi lemak stalls even if they are side by side. Food fads are regular, with recent flurries of excitement over French macarons, Taiwanese bubble tea and US-style doughnuts.

This paper looks at the coverage of food in Singapore's national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, to explore its political impact (Woolley, 2000). It analyses the content of news stories and lifestyle features related to food to establish a taxonomy of food articles and to examine whether the representation of food in the media links with other forms of social control. This study does not suggest that the media is controlled and that therefore the representation of food in the newspapers is a form of government intervention. It is more subtle than that. Rather it seeks to demonstrate how the authorities in the country have used food to help build a national identity following Counihan and Van Esterik's idea that food is "a central pawn in political strategies of states" (1997, p. 1); and how the media has been a partner in this.

Recipe for a rojak nation

There are several sobriquets for Singapore, which sits barely one degree above the equator at the heart of South-east Asia. Among them are 'little red dot', for its small size and its position as a red (mainly Buddhist) island surrounded by green (Muslim) countries; another is 'rojak nation', named for a brightly coloured Malay salad. Internationally, it is variously known as the country where the sale of chewing gum is banned; where drug offenders are routinely hanged; and as the safest, wealthiest place in South-east Asia. These aspects are all connected by the unusual level of control exerted over the nation by its government and from birth to death citizens find their lives, identities and horizons circumscribed by government activity.

One defining characteristic is that it is a multi-cultural society. It became a nation in 1965 and its early years were marked by race riots. These became the starting point for Singapore to label itself a multi-racial country (Chua, 2003). Chua goes on to put it more explicitly that the government adopted multi-racialism as self-definition and

used it as a tool for governance based on a strict observance of races. Racial or ethnic festival cultures and food cultures are supported directly by the state and through the multiracial practices of official and unofficial public institutions; race is highly visible in its public sphere (Chua, 2003). Until 2010, every Singaporean was classified at birth as Chinese, Malay, Indian or Other (CMIO) on their identity card, based on the ethnicity of their father (Chua, 2003). But in private, Chinese do not always marry Chinese, nor do Malays stay only with their own, and the country has seen an increased blurring of racial identities, which has led to a recent relaxing in the rules of what goes on a citizen's identity card.

Stauth (1997, p. 51) calls Singapore “a project of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural polity and a post-modern global city that combines civility, nostalgia and economic functionality”. The authorities have chosen whichever aspects of race help them in their aim of building stability and cohesion, taking aspects of western consumerism and Confucian Asian values to suit. This produces paradoxes: At the same time as decrying the debilitating effects of westernisation and promoting a culture based on Asian values, the country has developed a consumerist culture, falling in love with the “romance of market expansion” (Evers and Gerke, 1997, p. 2). The government encourages this and Chua (1994) says that there is an added benefit to the government as the good material life reduces criticisms of the regime, especially for the middle class whose existence is a result of highly successful economic policies. Newman and De Zoysa make the point that this is no top-down authoritarianism; it is reliant on voluntary compliance, because “high economic growth levels – accompanied by a firm social contract, full employment, growing prosperity, plus national pride – compensate for the stringent controls over social behavior” (1997, p. 633). Leong (2001) goes further and looks at the national identity as a commodity marketed to domestic consumers in order to inculcate a sense of nationality so that the nation as imagined community (Anderson, 1983) is also a community of consumption united by partaking these same cultural products. This echoes Johnston and Baumann's (2007) idea that American cuisine is a cultural construction produced through discourse as part of an imagined community of America. Stauth draws a connection between “mass consumer culture and social organization, namely, the question of the new possible role of consumer culture as a bridge between state and individual” (1997, p. 57). In other words, the Singapore government has co-opted not just food and shopping, but consumerism as a force to control the populace. Bread and circuses.

Portion control in the national kitchen

This result has been achieved through tight controls by the democratically elected People's Action Party which has been in power since before independence. Chua describes the government thus: "...financially uncorrupt, manages the economy well, has improved the population's standard of living and governs through due parliamentary process, all with a dash of self-sacrifice on the part of its leaders and members" (1994, p. 657).

But this success has also created a sometimes uneasy relationship between state and people. Velayutham said the government's approach to nation-building based on economic developmentalism and survivalism has "created an ambivalent and tenuous relationship of mutual obligation between the individual and the nation-state" (2004, p. 1). For example, more than 80 per cent of the population live in public housing tower blocks, all of which must keep to a quota of each race according to the national averages to prevent the formation of ghettos. To adapt a food metaphor, unlike America's melting pot the Singapore has kept all the races distinct – a variety of flavours in the rojak rather than a minestrone soup.

The controls extend to food. Chua and Rajah state that, in Singapore, "food and food ways are characterised by a large variety of cuisines that are iconic of the presence of different ethnic communities which make up the nation, reflecting the official categorisation of the populace as a 'multiracial' nation" (1996, p. 1). Equally, they point out that the CMIO classification of Singaporeans similarly classifies the food sold in the ubiquitous hawker centres where inexpensive cooked meals are sold. Consumers can identify the ethnic origins of the food they are about to eat – it comes from an Indian stall, perhaps, or the hawker works under the signboard of Chinese porridge. The system encourages Singaporeans to see themselves in racial terms rather than as a homogenised whole, and this in turn has led to a challenge in building the national identity, just as Appadurai noted that in India regional cuisines (variety) create a "polyglot culture" and the one arises from the many (1998, pp. 5 and 21). Effectively, it has led to the paradoxical premise that what makes Singaporeans the same is being different. Singapore calls itself a rojak nation – but there are different kinds of rojak. Chinese rojak is a salad of pineapple, cucumber, turnip, fried bean curd and dough sticks with prawn paste and crushed peanuts and chilli sauce; Indian rojak is battered fried tofu, hard boiled eggs, prawn fritters served with a thick, spicy, sweet-potato

sauce. The term 'rojak' hence incorporates Indian-ness and Chinese-ness, while at the same time reminding the cognoscenti that while the race is important, it is also somewhat indeterminate. Ironically 'rujak' is itself an Indonesian word meaning 'mixture', and comes from a Malay language.

The media has played a significant part in the construction of the new nation, and food writing may be considered a part of this. One striking feature of Singapore journalism is that it is considered an aid to government in the process of nation-building (Kenyon and Marjoribanks, 2007). In a defining comment at the 1971 International Press Institute's annual assembly in Helsinki, the then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained his ideas on the role the national media: "Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of Singapore, and to the primacy and purpose of an elected government" (cited in Latif, 1998, p. 151). A few years later, *Attacks on the Press 2004* (CPJ, 2005, p. 118) called the Singapore government "one of the world's most efficient engines of media control". Hence, if the national newspapers may not be a reflection of how all Singaporeans think, then they certainly mirror what the authorities would like them to be concerned about. That includes food. Food links to status and prestige (Powdermaker, 1959) which gives another reason why it should be of interest to a government concerned with nation building. Not just in Singapore. Across the developed world, food writers are increasingly admired, respected and emulated as keepers of the faith, experts to be heeded. As Brown (2004) noted in the US, heavyweight writers are moving into food journalism, and even the *New Yorker* devoted a double issue to the subject. In Singapore, to be a food writer holds similar kudos to being a political writer, but with few of the attendant risks (Duffy, 2010). This is part of a broader picture, as there have been calls for academics to consider the force and effect of lifestyle journalism, as well as the more commonly studied news practices (Hanusch, 2009).

You are what you eat

That food has been used to mark cultural boundaries has been well documented, and without doubt food is a hugely powerful system of values, regulations and beliefs (Probyn, 1999). As Counihan and Van Esterik put it, "life can be studied and understood through food" (1997, pp. 1-2). Barthes urged scholars to overcome the idea that food was a trivial subject for study, and saw instead that it constituted "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour"

(1961, p. 21); while Hanke (1989) looks at food as a reflection of a rising culture of conspicuous consumption in America. Mead (1961) distinguishes between food as nourishment and food as a source of pleasure as an indicator of an advanced society. Korsmeyer (2005) sees power play inherent in food and flavours as they transmit messages of pleasure, displeasure, power, coercion or submission. Goode says that food is certainly employed and deployed in such a way as to “define inclusion and encourage discipline, solidarity, and the maintenance of social boundaries” (1992, p. 234), while Shugart (2008) establishes that many scholars explicitly note that food functions as a form of communication, and implicit in their characterisation is the more specifically rhetorical function of food as a means to construct and negotiate cultural identity.

But what does it take for one culture to adopt and accept the food of another culture (Falk, 1991)? It does so by establishing a common denominator – in the case of Singapore that of multi-culturalism. Indeed, it is possible that the act of introducing increasingly globalised, cosmopolitan food to Singapore’s smorgasbord has had the effect of strengthening commitment and acceptance of CMI food; that is, a Chinese Singaporean may feel little acceptance or kinship for Indian food, and consider it ‘other’; until he is confronted with Italian, Mexican or Brazilian food, at which point the Indian food may become more Asian, more ‘us’. In this way, the introduction of foreign cuisines can strengthen the Asian-ness of Singapore.

Rozin (1982) also tackles the question of how one culture adopts the food of another, and puts it into a quasi class setting, suggesting that for food to be accepted, it must act as a positive representation, and must represent something of greater value than something else. This is visible in the cosmopolitan attitudes towards food evidenced in the Singapore media, where the idea that foods from around the globe are part and parcel of everyday life is a clear ‘positive representation’.

Certainly, one of the difficulties facing any investigation into food is the way it spills into every aspect of life (Probyn, 1999). “Insofar as food is intimately linked to religious ideas as well as health, nutrition and aesthetics in a civilizational sense, it is also ultimately imbricated with *political* systems of one kind or another,” suggest Chua and Rajah (1996, p. 3). Barthes (1961) likewise said that food has a political side as well, and is always bound to the values of power. For example, to reverse the brain drain of talented and well-educated Singaporeans overseas, the government has sent missions overseas to try and tempt them back by reminding them of home cooking (Straits Times, 13 April 2007). While Nestle (2002) looks at the influence of the food

industry on politics, this research is concerned instead with the influence of politics on the cultural power of food, and aims to describe how food is represented in the media – a tool of nation building – and the social and cultural messages attached to food.

Food and food writing

Most academic studies of food writing have concerned themselves with cookbooks, most notably Appadurai's (1998) study of cookbooks in India and how they helped create a national identity. His preoccupation is sociological rather than political, looking at the rising middle classes finding an identity that transcended regional boundaries, and the use of regional cuisines in forming a concerted image of India. He notes the concern with the search for authenticity as a significant value in food writing, a theme echoed by Johnston and Baumann (2007) and Jones and Taylor (2001). The former are more concerned with the representation of food as a signifier of status, and the role of food writers in that process, saying that "food writers have considerable power to shape perceptions of food as high quality, fashionable, and worthy of attention from high status consumer" (Johnston and Baumann, 2007, p. 165). They identify omnivorousness as a marker of high status, when it is framed as authentic or exotic. The latter, meanwhile, quote Anthony Giddens' idea that a principal mechanism of modernism is the way places are 'disembedded' from their original locale and brought into contact with other places (Jones and Taylor, 2001, p. 178). Just so, Singapore proclaims itself as a food hub where all cultures meet and all cuisines are available, but at the same time food is expressed in traditional and authentic terms, setting itself against modernism. Jones and Taylor (2001) note the antinomy of novelty and tradition, the former promising excitement and the latter promising authenticity. The challenge facing both the nascent nation-state and the food writer is to communicate both at the same time.

A government desires the reassurance that comes with unchanging certainty; this desire can lead to the urge towards social control which food writing can support. James (1996, p. 78), however, believes that the way food is imagined in academic and popular writings is something fluid and temporal, and suggests that "consumption practices are seen as precariously flexible, rather than fixed and constant, markers of self and identity". Her larger question is whether food in a globalised world can still act as a marker of cultural identity based on distinctions of "we eat this, they do not" between groups. The irony is that food offers a flexible symbolic value because it

invokes inflexible cultural stereotypes; but flexible or unchanging, it is the invocation rather than the food itself that is important. Hence the representation of the food in the written word invokes different cultural values, both nostalgia and innovation, authenticity and creativity, the global and the local. “Globalization of food... is a complex interplay of meanings and intentions which individuals employ subjectively to make statements about who they are, and where and how their Selves are to be located in the world” (James, 1996, p. 92). The variety that comes with culinary globalisation is interpreted differently to find different meanings and create different selves; it is fluid rather than fixed, and is thus a fine tool for a country to use to create an identity, if less effective in maintaining it.

This idea of fluidity reflects a growing idea that a city is the product of what flows through it as much as what is inside it. Beck (2002, p. 17) defines cosmopolitanisation as internal globalisation from within national societies, and in his terms it is helpful to view Singapore as a hub of information and influences flowing through at the same time as the people and the government try to control those influences. It makes it harder to declare one food national: “Anyone who still wants to raise the national flag, when it comes to food, founders on the ever more hollow myths of national dishes, which at best are no more than islands in the broad stream of the dominant and by now banal culinary cosmopolitanism,” writes Beck (2002, p. 28). Indeed, the country finds itself in the odd position of having a national dish of chicken rice, although neither chicken nor rice is produced on the island and the dish itself originated on the Chinese island of Hainan.

The media equally reflects Singapore’s avowed status as a cultural, culinary and media crossroads of the region and the world, and the fluidity and uncertainty that comes with that role. The country has embraced globalisation more than many and almost one-third of the population are foreigners. Food is used as a magnet, a reason to visit, and a perk of living in the country. Singapore is not alone in using food as a badge of sophistication, reach and power: Appadurai (1998, p. 4) notes that in pre-industrial India it was common for elites to show “their political power, their commercial reach, and their cosmopolitan tastes by drawing in ingredients, techniques and even cooks from far and wide”. However, this naturally creates its own tensions as globalisation is complex and shifting (Bokser Liwerant, 2002). Just as it encourages nations and people to forge broader connections, globalisation also encourages small social groups and ethnic communities to create and recreate their own networks side by side or in

opposition to nation states. This interplay between small group identities and national identity brings confusion as well as certainty. Singapore has sought to create a new identity based on the ideal of multiculturalism, that the variety of different groups is a defining element of identity, and food part of that.

Altogether, the role of food in identity is clear and the role of the press in representing both the national food and the national identity offers an interesting area for study, and led to four research questions:

RQ1: What are the common themes of food reporting in Singapore that could help develop a taxonomy for clearer understanding of how it contributes to construction of a national identity?

RQ2: What kind of national identity is constructed through food writing, and does this correspond to the image encouraged by the government?

RQ3: How are nation-building tropes encouraged by the authorities manifested in food writing in the national print media?

RQ4: How are controls on society and personal identity replicated in the representation of food in the media?

Methodology

In order to understand how food-related articles in the national press could be seen as supporting government efforts to construct a national identity, the study involved a content analysis of articles in *The Straits Times*, the country's most widely-read English-language newspaper and which also has the closest links with government. The research focused on food in the public sphere rather than in the private sphere of the home as this was a more likely arena for the government to seek to control. It also reflects the ease and cheapness of eating out in a country where all public housing estates incorporate a hawker centre – a collection of stalls selling freshly cooked food – and where people can eat a good meal for under \$5. Hence the six search terms used to identify food articles in Factiva were: “food”, “dining”, “hawker centre”, “coffee shop”, “eating” and “restaurant”. Articles from both the news or lifestyle section of the newspaper were considered in order to gather a broader picture of the place food has in society. The selection included articles that made brief allusions to food in order to consider the subject in a broad cultural and political context, as well as when it was the main focus of the article. Articles concerning food outside Singapore were removed.

The study selected articles from two constructed months (one for 2007 and another for 2008) by taking the first day from January, the second from February and so on; and one real month (February 2009) in the interests of completeness. As this gave a small sample size of 244 articles, it was considered expedient to select 20 food-related articles from other months for the inter-coder reliability process, which resulted in an acceptable inter-coder reliability of over 80 per cent. The articles the search yielded were then analysed by one writer, and can be broadly categorised as follows:

- Restaurant or hawker stall reviews
- Food reviews and the latest food fads
- Interviews with chefs, expatriates and foreign celebrities in which they tend to give comments about local food
- Interviews or articles about overseas Singaporeans, in which they tend to mention that they miss the food back at home
- Interviews with restaurateurs or food company owners about their entrepreneurial experiences
- Articles about local chefs competing in international cooking competitions
- Articles about the government, voluntary welfare organisations or religious organisations giving food hampers and vouchers to the needy
- Articles about food and health-related issues
- Articles about special occasions and the food associated with them
- Articles about the importance of civic-consciousness in dining areas
- Articles about the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) recalling tainted food items

While Titz et al (2004) looked at the criteria often used in restaurant reviews, including quality and quantity of food, ambience, service and suchlike, this study was more concerned with the broader representation of food in society, and sought other criteria. Hence, the texts were analysed looking for indicators that they contained references to any of the 10 national tropes discussed by Chua and Kuo (1991), of which further explanation is given below. Chua and Kuo noted that the Singapore authorities have tended to swing between promoting Asian values and building a more Westernised society, or even taking what suited their plans best from each of the two

sides. Westernisation led to a backlash that came in the form of a loss of cultural identity that did not sit well with the population and there was a swing towards greater ethnicity in food, language and moral education. Food is one area in which ethnicity can be celebrated without causing tension. Hence Chua and Kuo draw a distinction between two discourses running concurrently, the one on national identity and culture and the other on ethnic identity and culture. Balancing these two is at the heart of the identity dilemma confronting the country, and has produced different discourses from which one can extrapolate certain national characteristics, or touchstones of a national identity, while acknowledging that this process is both fluid and ever-changing. To these we have added our own operational definitions, arrived at during the inter-coder reliability process.

1. Ethnic-cultural element (Defined as any reference to the “Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others” categories)
2. National pride (Defined as any mention of the country doing well or when foreigners and expatriates make positive comments about the nation or its people)
3. Strong achievement motivation (Defined as the drive to succeed personally or for society)
4. Materialism (Defined as an interest in trappings of material and economic success)
5. Generalised social discipline (Defined as the social control of individuals, for the benefit of the society as a whole)
6. Culture of self-improvement (Defined as a desire to do things better or improve the status-quo)
7. Meritocracy (Defined as the idea that hard work leads to success for any individual, regardless of their socio-economic position, age, ethnicity or gender)
8. Concern with national interest (Defined as the concern with the betterment of society economically and/or socially)
9. Cosmopolitan attitudes (Defined as being influenced by the best practices used overseas)
10. Excellence as a national goal (Defined as striving for national excellence so that the nation looks good)

The main analysis for this study considered whether the articles reflected any of these 10 touchstones of Singapore's national identity. Reading the articles also suggested a taxonomy of five categories: "Where and What to Eat" (food reviews or the latest food fad), "Experts and Expats" (food interviews with chefs, expatriates or celebrities), "Poverty and Politics" (when the government is giving food vouchers to the poor), "Health" (healthy food) and "Others". This concept of expat food, incidentally, differs from James's (1996), where it represents holiday food eaten by a native of the writer's culture while travelling overseas. Lastly, the research considered whether the cuisine featured was local or foreign; and whether the cost of the dish was low-end (\$2-10), mid-range (\$11-25) or high-end (\$26 and above). The intention was to study whether there was greater coverage of local, inexpensive food, or cosmopolitan, high-end food.

Results and discussion

A simple statistical analysis showed that many of the articles reflect three main attitudes (Figure 1): a culture of self-improvement (39.3 per cent frequency), a cosmopolitan attitudes (31.1 per cent) and ethnic-cultural element (31.1 per cent).

-- insert Figure 1 around here --

The findings also show that articles categorised as "Where and What to Eat" most often reflected a cosmopolitan attitudes (38.3 per cent) and an ethnic-cultural element (30 per cent frequency). Articles categorised as "Experts and Expats" often reflected self-improvement (45.2 per cent), cosmopolitan attitudes (32.3 per cent) and an ethnic-cultural element (32.3 per cent) as it is commonplace for an expatriate or visiting expert to be asked to demonstrate his or her Singaporean credibility by commenting on the local food. Articles categorised as "Poverty and Politics" tended to reflect a culture of self-improvement (41.2 per cent) and concern with national interest (23.5 per cent). Only one of the articles categorised as "Poverty and Politics" reflected the government's meritocracy policy, which suggests that government-encouraged meritocracy was delinked from poverty. Articles categorised as "Health" mostly reflected a culture of self-improvement and a strong achievement motivation (Figure 2).

-- insert Figure 2 around here --

Articles featuring local cuisines (29.9 per cent frequency) often reflected an ethnic-cultural element (64.4 per cent), while those featuring foreign cuisines (34.8 per cent) mainly reflected cosmopolitan attitudes (61.2 per cent). In terms of price, mid-range food was most common (21.7 per cent frequency) followed by low priced (16.4 per cent) and high priced (12.7 per cent) (Figure 3).

-- insert Figure 3 around here --

One common trope was that locals are preoccupied with food. Some equated “Singaporean-ness” with “being food-crazy”, such as this article in which a 12-year-old violinist studying in Britain said:

The family is also looking forward to the trip back home next month, when they can eat all the food they have been craving. They usually stop at the food centre in East Coast Park on the way home from the airport to fuel up on nasi lemak, satay and chicken rice. ‘We are Singaporean,’ Mr Ng said with a laugh. (*The Straits Times*, 18 June 2007)

Others also reiterate this preoccupation with food: “No place is too far for Singaporeans who will drive to Johor Baru and beyond for good food and more” (*The Straits Times*, 17 May 2008). Several articles in *The Straits Times* can also be seen as contributing in other, non-food-related ways to government efforts to construct a national identity, as if the press is one avenue through which locals learn what it is to be ‘Singaporean’.

[Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam] also said, in his speech, the Singapore spirit of ‘unity, tenacity and perseverance’ will take the nation through these difficult times... (*The Straits Times*, 8 August 2008)

Some who have experienced unemployment and then found jobs, like Mr Loong, adhere to the value of what the Chinese call *zili gengsheng* (regeneration through one's own efforts). ‘Only if you can't help yourself then look for help. This is the Singapore spirit, it's how we have been brought up’, he says. (*The Straits Times*, 7 February 2009)

Hence, although the idea of what the national identity encapsulates may be hazy to some citizens, these articles impart this message: to be Singaporean is to have the desire to persevere and constantly improve. This corresponds with the finding that a culture of self-improvement (39.3 per cent frequency) and a strong achievement motivation (21.7 per cent) are commonly reflected in the food articles.

Foreign foods, as expected, tended to be more expensive (30.6 per cent at the higher end, 42.4 per cent mid-range and 14.1 per cent were low-priced) and associated with cosmopolitan attitudes (61.2 per cent); while local foods tended to be at the cheaper end of the scale (42.5 per cent for lower price, 28.8 per cent for mid and 13.7 per cent for high-priced food) and were very often described in ethnic-cultural terms (64.4 per cent). Furthermore, articles may also illustrate the “essence” of the national identity in the dishes they feature:

The best way to classify her [chef and restaurant owner Devagi Sanmugam] cooking is to call it Singaporean rather than Indian, Chinese or Malay. For example, the stir-fried sliced cabbage (\$5.50) is bright yellow with turmeric but tossed with dried shrimps – a Chinese touch. And the *belachan* chicken wings (\$8) – a take on the Chinese shrimp paste chicken – are as local as you can get. (*The Straits Times*, 8 February 2009)

This is intriguing because the way the journalist defines the dishes as ‘Singaporean’ seems to hint that such a dish is one that cannot be pigeon-holed into a CMIO categorisation. Rather, it is a dish that has influences from different ethnic groups. The journalist also seems to recognise that the “essentialised notions of ethnicity and ethnic foods” identified by Chua and Rajah (1996, p. 2) cannot be applied to a dish like “*belachan* chicken wings”. Hence, because there is culinary hybridisation in this dish, it is termed ‘Singaporean’. This is in line with Benjamin’s observation that the term Singapore culture is usually used to refer to an agglomeration of separate ethnic cultures rather than any newly synthesised culture they may create (Benjamin, 1976).

Where and what to eat

The articles classified as “Where and What to Eat” often reflected cosmopolitan attitudes (38.3 per cent frequency) and an ethnic-cultural element (30 per cent), and

usually featured food in the mid-price range (33.3 per cent) while cheap food (20 per cent) was twice as well represented as expensive food (10 per cent). These articles were fairly evenly split between foreign cuisines (41.7 per cent) and local cuisines (38.3 per cent). This indicates a focus on the country becoming more cosmopolitan rather than on the individual ethnicities themselves. Many articles featuring foreign cuisines attempt to convey the message that being able to appreciate foreign food is desirable:

There is absolutely nothing wrong with Heinz or Del Monte or any supermarket ketchup... Sometimes, the palate craves something different though. Enter the artisanal ketchup. (*The Straits Times*, 27 February 2009)

Articles also feature foreign food and regularly associate the taste for foreign food with cosmopolitan attitudes (61.2 per cent).

Chef Steven Ong, 39, of Centre Ps, who sells about 4,000 macarons a month, attributes their popularity to 'well-travelled and well-read Singaporeans who are increasingly aware of the famous French cookie'. (*The Straits Times*, 11 November 2007)

On the other hand, articles categorised as "Where and What to Eat" that feature local cuisines (38.3 per cent) generally reflect an ethnic-cultural element. The growing discourse on Peranakan (Straits Chinese) culture in the press is one example in which the *Straits Times* journalist not only features Peranakan food, but also delves into what should be considered authentic Peranakan cuisine:

Traditional Peranakan cuisine is riddled with pork. True Blue [a Peranakan restaurant] does not serve pork. Mr Seck acknowledges that some Peranakan customers are fussy about its absence ... But with so many versions out there, Peranakan purists wonder: Are people getting the real deal? How does one tell what is authentic and what is not? (*The Straits Times*, 2 February 2009)

Experts and expats

The statistical analysis also showed that articles categorised as "Experts and Expats" often showed a belief in self-improvement (45.2 per cent), and concern for both ethnic

and cosmopolitan attitude (32.3 per cent for each) that reflected the cosmopolitan attitudes held by citizens. For example, an interview with Brazilian restaurateur Fabiane Braga shed some light on the growing appreciation of foreign cuisines:

She says: ‘Singapore is a great place for me and my bistro. Singaporeans like to try new things and that is a good thing for me and my menu of authentic Brazilian dishes.’ (*The Straits Times*, 23 November 2008)

At the same time, the common references to ethnic food reflect the way that expatriates or foreign chefs gave positive comments about local food, the country’s multiracial composition and national excellence. For example:

Singapore has a fantastic blend of cultures and cuisines. I particularly enjoyed Ritz Carlton’s Sunday Brunch for its wide variety. I also love Hokkien noodles, *bak kut teh* [pork rib soup] and satay [grilled meat skewers]. (Pascal Tingaud, visiting French chef, *The Straits Times*, 15 February 2008)

Equally, expatriates can be locals overseas, reminiscing about food at home:

“Perhaps being tossed about in a globalised world does that: It teaches you to appreciate little things which are uniquely yours. Like the joy of sweating it out over a simple plate of chicken rice and a cup of kopi-O in a hawker centre. Where else are you able to choose from 20 food stalls in a single space in the warmth of the eternal tropical sun?” (*The Straits Times*, 26 February 2007)

Poverty and politics

The articles categorised as “Poverty and Politics” most often reflected a culture of self-improvement (41.2 per cent frequency) which suggests that although the government is concerned with the poor’s welfare, giving them food and other assistance, these citizens should improve themselves and not depend on government handouts.

The driving principles behind public assistance, like other forms of financial help, were that it would not be overly generous, should not erode the work ethic

and should give room for other helping hands in the community. (*The Straits Times*, 2 February 2008)

However, this culture of self-improvement is also reflected when an article demonstrates government efforts to improve the quality of life for the poor, which reflects positively on the government, that poverty is not seen as a systemic flaw to be criticised but an area for improvement to be praised: “Efforts are also being stepped up to provide more health checks, food packages, free haircuts and home nursing services for the poor and elderly, says Mr Yeo.” (*The Straits Times*, 5 May 2008)

Health

Articles categorised as “Health” often reflected a culture of self-improvement (34.1 per cent frequency) and a strong achievement motivation (20.5 per cent). One editorial calls for direct intervention to teach children and their parents to eat well, pointing out that schools have introduced healthy food, but kids can go to a hawker centre or home to eat unhealthily. What is interesting is the assumption of a level of control that people should be taught what to eat in all areas and at all times.

Indeed, guidance that the programme provides might also benefit parents. If their children are not eating right and exercising, very likely neither are they. So, prevention being preferable to and less expensive than treating disease, some adults as well as children need early tailored interventions. (*The Straits Times*, 24 December 2007)

In the same way, other articles urge readers to be more disciplined in eating and exercising, as in an interview with a television presenter who shed 20kg after committing to a strict dietary and exercise regimen: “You must want to make a change. It’s a change of lifestyle and there is no turning back. Trust me. I told myself, this is a personal challenge that I must ensure success in” (*The Straits Times*, 8 August 2007).

Conclusion

This is a single study of one aspect of the interplay between politics and lifestyle journalism, which could be extended to look at other consumerist-driven journalism staples such as fashion, beauty, health and travel. Future studies into food could be

augmented with more qualitative research into the opinions of the food writers themselves and of regular media consumers to find out how food influences their own identities and their perception of their nation. But it is hoped that this study could lead to greater interest in lifestyle journalism, particularly in countries with partially controlled press systems (which tend to be thriving at a time when the liberal Western advertising- and subscription-based model is floundering), as a means of social engineering.

To revisit the research questions, it seems that the identity constructed through food writing in *The Straits Times* is one where the ideal of self-improvement is the most common feature across the articles, appearing in 39.3 per cent of them. This correlates to government policies that encourage self-reliance among the population, including the lack of a welfare state and enforced savings programmes. This was followed by cosmopolitan attitudes (in 31.1 per cent of the articles), which correlates to government attempts to place Singapore as a global hub, a finding backed up by the frequency of international food appearing in the articles (34.8 per cent).

From this, it appears that food writing correlates first with government national-identity building, rather than personal identity building. This latter was more noticeable in the third-most common feature of the articles, that of food having an ethnic-cultural element (31.1 per cent). Evidently, many articles in the local press both reflect and create a preoccupation with food among citizens. Such articles are supplemented by other forms of media such as television food programmes and local food guides such as *Makansutra*. These all feed the idea that Singaporeans love food which then gets embedded into the national psyche. As *Makansutra*'s executive editor KF Seetoh says in the guide's 2009 edition, "food is the purest democracy we have", a remark interesting not only for its political undertones, but also for how food is emphasised as a key facet of Singaporean life.

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Figure 1: Frequency of attitudes that denote nation-building expressed in food-related articles (percentages)

Figure 2: Frequency of food-related articles by theme (percentages)

Figure 3: Frequency of other attributes of food expressed in articles (percentages)

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