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Contemporary food memoir in Singapore: authors, publishers, forms and styles

ABSTRACT

While foodways and the role food culture plays in Singaporean life have attracted significant and interesting scholarship, the study of Singapore food writing is an emergent field. This investigation focuses on the contemporary food memoir in Singapore, a highly visible and growing sub-genre of Singaporean food writing, profiling recent book-length Singaporean food memoirs. It will compare examples by expatriate Singaporeans with locally produced texts, identify common concerns and tropes, and suggest the cultural role these texts play in Singapore today.

KEYWORDS

food memoir
food writing
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The kitchen was the centre of our lives ... In many ways, people were nicer and the food was tastier then (Sanmugam 2011: 14).

INTRODUCTION

Food writing is currently attracting popular and scholarly attention. This is an emergent area of study in relation to Singapore (Brien 2014) where, despite significant scholarship having addressed local foodways (see, for instance, Hutton 1989; Huat & Rajah 2001; Duruz 2006, 2007, 2011; Bishop 2011; Leong-Salobir 2011; Tarulevicz 2013) and these studies often mentioning Singapore cookbooks, food writing – in common with many other examples of Singaporean popular culture – has not attracted significant or sustained notice (see, Brien 2014). The following will, therefore, profile the contemporary published book-length Singaporean food memoir. For the purpose of this discussion, these texts are defined as autobiographical narratives that focus on food and culinary content (Waxman 2008; Brien 2011). The investigation will identify a series of common concerns and tropes, as well as differences and variation, across the form. It will also begin to tease out the role these texts play in preserving and promoting Singaporean food culture, both for local consumers and

others. Although many languages are used in Singapore, English is the national language (Alsagoff 2010) and this study refers only to the food memoir in English. In order to focus on contemporary manifestations of this specialist literary genre, a selection of food memoirs from the past decade will be considered. While memoir-based magazine or newspaper food-based articles (produced in print or online) and memoir-focused weblogs are an important component of this phenomenon, the focus will be on book-length published memoirs and will not be included in this investigation.

EXPATRIATE SINGAPOREAN FOOD MEMOIR

The first type of food memoir to be considered are those by Singaporeans who do not live in Singapore. This is because a number of memoirs by expatriate Singaporeans have attracted considerable international success and attention, and become high profile publications in the international arena. Lucy Lum's *The Thorn of Lion City* (2007) was, for instance, published in New York by Public Affairs, a member of the Perseus Book Group, which was named Publisher of the Year in 2007 by *Publishers Weekly* magazine as 'the most important independent publishing company in the nation' with its focus on producing 'serious nonfiction' texts (Milot 2007). It was simultaneously released in London by Fourth Estate, the prestigious imprint of major publishers, Harper Collins.

Born in 1933, Lum grew up in Singapore before moving to England in 1970. *The Thorn of Lion City* memoir focuses on her childhood and how her immigrant Chinese family was dominated by a cruel and superstitious grandmother who thought raising girls was a waste of food. Although Lum relates many scenes where she was treated harshly, including being beaten, her volume also includes many beautifully written scenes of food being prepared and eaten, although, food is sometimes cruelly withheld from her. Each of these descriptions of food, however, works in the narrative beyond the level of culinary or personal information, to support or underscore an important historical issue or other point relating to life in Singapore. By retelling her beloved father's memories, for instance, Lum can not only reflect on his hopes for a better life in Singapore in the 1920s, but also describe what Singapore was like before she was born. In Lum's narrative, Singapore in the 1920s and 1940s is replete with street food vendors (usually referred to collectively as 'hawkers'), including 'Indian tea-sellers, who carried copper urns heated by charcoal fires on bamboo poles and sold ginger tea or Ceylon tea; some carried rattan baskets full of delicious *roti*' (flaky flat bread) (9). Describing her birth, Lum situates this among the street food of Singapore:

I slipped out of my mother in the blink of an eye at the maternity hospital close to Serangoon Road where the air was thick with spices from the shops where they were milled, and people queued on the pavement, clutching their previous bags of turmeric, cardamom and cumin, grown on their plots of land and brought to the shops for grinding. ... Along the road, tucked away, tiny restaurants served curries, sweetmeats and yogurt on banana leaves cut into squares (23).

The presence, and then removal, of these hawkers from the streets of Singapore is a reoccurring theme of the Singapore food memoir, as is the physical change that has occurred from high-rise development, land reclamation and other urban refurbishment. These changes are often acknowledged with a mixture of recognition of a need for development and nostalgia for the lost physical past.

Life before the high-rise flats that are now home to most Singapore residents was lived in both urban housing and village *kampungs*, many with, or near to, home gardens. Lum describes home-grown tapioca and sugar cane (1), papaya, banana, cherry and jackfruit trees (4), and curry being made from the tip of flower spike of a banana tree (139). She also outlines how these home gardens played a central role in saving lives during the hunger of the Japanese occupation during the second world war. Lum's father was employed as a translator and her family received food in return for this labour, but many others had access to much less and Lum describes how many survived on tapioca and sweet potato and suffered from malnutrition. The privations and rupture of social and cultural life during the occupation is another theme of many Singapore food memoirs. Even if the memoirist is too young to remember this period, the occupation is referenced through the memories of older relatives or as a general marker of previous hardship and food insecurity, and often contrasted with later plenty.

Alongside Lum's troubles and trials – both public and private – there are also some great pleasures related through her text. As a child, personal pleasure is often found in sweet treats and Lum describes her favourite childhood delicacies, 'ice-*kachang* ... red beans and agar-agar, piled high with ice-shavings and streaked with the delicious multi-coloured syrup that always dripped down our chins' (69) and '*chendol*, coconut milk served with teardrop-shaped green bean flour noodles and *gula melaka*, brown sugar that came in tube-shaped blocks' (69) (italics in original). She also relates enjoying eating the sweet rice left over after brewing rice wine (127). Lum's school 'tuck shop' is fondly remembered as a collection of hawker food stalls selling snacks such as 'home-made cakes, vermicelli, fried noodles, mixed nuts in paper cones made out of the pages of an exercise book' (54), although most of all she

liked ‘chocolate milk from England, which I loved to buy even though it cost half my tiffin [a colonial Anglo-Indian term for a light meal] allowance’ (54).

Considerable culinary information is also relayed through these food memories. Papaya, for example, readers learn, was eaten as a fruit, but its leaves were also used in the preparation of a stew of pig’s stomach, mustard greens and tofu that was flavoured with garlic and dark soy sauce. In this case, the papaya leaves were used to scrub out the stomach’s slimy lining (44). While some dishes and individual ingredients described are still well known and readily available in Singapore today, others are endangered or even lost, and Lum’s narrative – as many other Singaporean food memoirs – thus serves as a form of food history, chronicling and documenting past foodways and dietary preferences.

Although no recipes are included, there are many descriptive narrative passages of ingredients and cooking techniques. This, in common with other food memoirs contributes to a meta-narrative about the taste of Singapore food that is highly consistent and extremely persuasive. This food writing narrates that Singapore has a delicious as well as distinctive and interesting food culture that plays a significant role in Singaporean life both currently and historically. Descriptors such as ‘tasty’, ‘delicious’, ‘mouthwatering’ and ‘flavourful’ recur across passages and one of the most overwhelming responses to reading these memoirs is a desire for the delicious dishes described therein (Brien 2014).

Lum uses the description of many foods, including the economical pigs’ stomach dish above, to reveal another recurrent trope of Singapore food memoirs – that of the nation state’s various ethnic groups living peaceably together, with their differences safely expressed through their specific food preferences. She describes, for instance, how her grandmother, in searching for the most inexpensive meat, had ‘discovered that Europeans, Malays and Indians did not eat pigs’ stomachs, which could be bought for next to nothing’ (44). Food is also mobilized as a way of diffusing ethnic tensions and Lum recounts many instances of members of various ethnic communities coming together over food. This can occur due to curiosity, a desire to share or a genuine appreciation of other ethnic groups’ foodways.

In common with other Singapore memoirists, Lum also relates how food plays an important part in Singaporean religious life, whether as offerings for Chinese spirits in her own home or in ceremonies such as circumcisions, weddings and funeral vigils. Lum thus describes the lengthy, and usually communal, preparations undertaken for the feasts that accompany such ceremonies and other festivals. She also describes the Muslim Ramadan fasting and the difficulty some experienced in refraining from food or drink from dawn to

dusk and how this was particularly hard for some children. Such passages allows Lum to reveal how food could bring those from recognisably different religious communities together. Food is not always associated with the positive, however, as it is also shown to be the basis of superstition and even magic, as in the case of a family friend feeding puppy meat to her husband in an attempt to break a spell she believed his mistress had cast on him.

Culinary medicines are also described, as Lum's mother says, 'Food is medicine and medicine is food' (111). The traditional recipe of making soup from flying foxes [bats] – a medicinal preparation enhanced with restorative herbs recurs across memoirs, as do the special foods for the weeks after childbirth, 'ginger roots, dark brown sugar and black Chinese vinegar were heated, then left to mature in great earthenware pots; later pigs trotters were added to the mixture, cooked, and served to Mother at every mealtime for four weeks' (21). Who prepares the food in these memoirs is also very revealing. Lum, for instance, describes how, as her family becomes more prosperous, her grandmother hires a cook. There was a hierarchy of servants in the Singapore homes of this period: Lum's family cook, for instance, was well aware of 'her own value: she stated at her interview that she would do no housework and would shop where she pleased' (47). In contrast, the girl servants who did the rough work of the house, were purchased, and were treated little better than slaves.

Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family* (2011) is another memoir written by an expatriate writer that was produced by a major American publisher, in this case, Hyperion in New York. While most Singapore food memoirists write at length about the dishes they remember from their childhoods, and how they miss these and/or have tried to recreate these flavours, Tan's memoir narrates her rediscovery of family foods that she did not previously appreciate. Set decades after Lum's narrative, Tan writes of growing up in Singapore with no real interest in her family's cookery until, when aged 18, she leaves against her family's wishes to study journalism overseas. Her memoir then focuses on how, more than a decade later, Tan undertook a yearlong quest to learn how to cook her grandmother's recipes. This was not only, however, purely a journey of gastronomic recovery for, during this year, she also discovers a number of her family's secrets. The memoir thus has a dual focus: the quality of Singapore traditional cookery (and the memoir includes ten recipes) and how such food can express, cement and even rejuvenate family relationships. This link between inter-generational family ties and traditional cookery is a common trope in the food memoir both in Singapore and internationally.

Following the triumphal redemptive narrative arc of many contemporary memoirs

(Robertson 2012), Tan finishes the year by having gained the requisite culinary skills to enable her to cook traditional recipes such as salted vegetable and duck soup, mooncakes and her late grandmother's pineapple tarts. These and other recipes occur through many Singaporean memoirs, including *belacan* (a salty fermented shrimp paste), *achar* (mixed vegetable pickle), *mie siam* (spicy rice noodles), *kueh* (cakes) and other well-known, but sometimes disappearing, dishes. The focus here, however, is not only on these heritage dishes, but also clearly on how family relationships and an individual's sense of identity are expressed and enhanced through the act of cooking (or learning to cook) and eating together.

Another expatriate Singaporean, Sharon Wee, published her cookbook memoir in 2012, although this volume was published in Singapore by major local publisher, Martin Cavendish. This is also quite a different type of memoir, because *Growing up in a Nyonya Kitchen* began as a cookbook, and includes more recipes. The volume clearly describes, however, how Wee needed to access her family's cookery knowledge to (re)create these recipes as her late mother had, and this knowledge and the stories it reveals broadened the scope of the book beyond practical cookery instruction. The issue of the authenticity of dishes produced within a particular family, which is the foundation for Wee's narrative, is another common feature of these memoirs. The dishes may be common to the Singaporean context, but their execution, and therefore their specific taste, is completely individual. In this way, Cheryl Tan learns to make her *grandmother's* pineapple tarts, rather than any other type (or taste).

SINGAPOREAN BASED MEMOIRISTS

Singapore-based food blogger Jocelyn Shu adds nostalgia to this mix, recognising in the title of her memoir, *Nostalgia is the Most Powerful Seasoning*, that the overlay of memory and sentiment adds flavour to cherished dishes from the past. Shu reflects clearly how memoirs written by authors living in Singapore present narratives of the local cuisine that largely repeat the themes, tropes and emotions, as well as the range of recipes, that drive those by writers living outside Singapore discussed above. While underscoring the historical and cultural value of the foods they describe, these memoirs commonly not only describe the unique flavours of Singaporean cuisine and its deliciousness, but also display a deep nostalgia about past Singaporean foodways. Interestingly, Shu's book was produced under the banner of the Singapore Memories Gastronomic Literary series with government support from the National Heritage Board of Singapore.

This series includes Devagi Sanmugam's *Tricks & Treats: Childhood and Other Tales* (2011). Sanmugam, who is known as the 'Spice Queen' of Singapore, has written some twenty cookbooks and is also a celebrity chef who has worked for the Singapore government, so she came to the role of memoirist with a high public profile. Another memoir in this series is Aziza Ali's *Sambal Days, Kampong Cuisine* (2013). Ali, a chef, is widely credited with introducing fine Malay dining to the Singaporean public with the high end Malay restaurant she established in Singapore and ran for 24 years, and had also written a cookbook *before this memoir*. Her memoir is filled with heritage Malay dishes, as well as stories of not only her family cooking and how she learnt from these relatives, but also a large number of communal cooking events. She also includes a number of discursive descriptions of sometimes complex but achievable recipes.

These government-supported volumes profile a wide range of traditional Singaporean foods, and also present, in detail, how the ingredients are prepared and these dishes cooked and served. These memoirs also describe a harmonious society inhabited by recognisably discrete ethnic groups – Sanmugam is Indian, Shu Chinese and Ali Malaysian – yet, all are Singaporean. The series also includes *Rebel with a Course* (2012) by Eurasian Damian D'Silva, an ex-aeronautical engineer, who traces his culinary development back to when, during the 1950s and 1960s, he learnt how to cook what he identifies as traditional Eurasian favourite dishes in his family kitchen. The menu of D'Silva's restaurant 'Immigrants' displays this interest, currently serving a number of Eurasian dishes served in small-plate style such as Corned Beef Cutlets, deep fried fritters made of 'mashed potatoes, corned beef, onions, chillies, salt and nutmeg coated with crackers' (Immigrants 2014).

TERRY TAN

The complexity of identifying expatriate from local author is exemplified by the case of now expatriate, but always called Singaporean, television chef and food writer Terry Tan. Tan's *Stir-fried and Not Shaken: A Nostalgic Trip Down Singapore's Memory Lane* (2008), was published by Singaporean press, Monsoon Books. Born in 1942, Tan's memoir charts Singapore's culinary culture from the 1940s to 1970s, including the Japanese occupation and recollections of his grandmother's flying fox curries – he remembers her 'sousing them [the bats] with spices and coconut milk' (99), a wide range of now disappeared street food from hawkers who were, he notes 'of a genre now consigned to history' (115) and the similarly defunct *pasar malam* (night markets) with their food stalls. The phenomenon of what Tan

calls ‘vanishing foods’ (202) recurs through his memoir, including delicious-sounding snacks such as crab apples pickled in salt and chili, pieces of deep fried tapioca coated in powdered sugar, bean curd stuffed with stewed duck, and various rice flour and coconut cakes. After one such lengthy description, Tan acknowledges the importance of these memories for him: ‘I know, I go on about food, but is it not the most important element in life?’ (202). Tan traces this understanding back to his childhood, relating how he always loved food. When he gained first in his class in his primary school report card, for example, he reportedly chose the reward of a month of his favourite hawker stall *kway teow* soup over a coveted Mickey Mouse watch: ‘The prospect (even to this day) of enjoying my favourite dish for a whole month was too delicious to turn down’ (37). He also writes of craving hawker stall satay and *kai choke* (chicken porridge) (38). All is not seen through a lens of misty nostalgia. Tan writes far less positively about the meat his father and his assistant-cum-chauffeur would bring home to be prepared and eaten – iguanas, deer, wild ducks, snakes and a dog – foods which Tan describes as ‘unspeakable degustation’ (48).

This focus on the past continues in his final section, on the 1970s, when he writes of the various food venues then available, and how these reflected the growing affluence of Singapore – coffee houses, ice cream parlours and hawker centres (when street hawkers were gathered together into permanent locations). He also notes other changes such as, ‘In the mid-1970s, posh hotels and supermarket chains suddenly began to spring up’ (236) and a trend for Singaporeans to seek out the best of what were beginning to be identified as iconic local dishes – the best ‘*an pan* (red bean paste puffs), *chiffon pandan* [a distinctively flavoured leaf] cakes, *kueh lapis* [rice flour cakes], *nasi padang* [a rice dish], Hokkien noodle soup with pig’s tail, fish head curry’ (236). He also describes a range of now famed or much-missed branded products and convenience foods. This is in direct contrast to his childhood in the 1940s, which was marked by such bucolic scenes as his family’s ‘personal milkman’, a Punjabi cowherd who would milk his cow at Tan’s doorstep (27), although his mother would then boil this milk ‘for hygiene reasons’ (27), and it was eventually replaced with tinned condensed milk. Other memoirists, while looking back to prepared-from scratch meals, also remember some pre-prepared foods with pleasure.

CONCLUSION

Each of these food memoirists narrates much more than culinary memories in their texts. All the above memoirs, for instance, contain passages that mourn lost foods and the landscapes in

which they prepared, were consumed and enjoyed. This provides an opportunity for such memoirs to offer a space where authors can gently criticize the ongoing pressure of development in Singapore. This final aspect – of the locations where cooking and eating occurs – is also notable in these memoirs. As these memoirs largely narrate home-cooked family meals and small-scale family events such as picnics as well as larger community events such as weddings and funerals, they provide evidence of, and commentary on, changes to attitudes to, and practices of, home cookery. This reflects current demographic research indicating that many Singaporeans now eat out for many of their meals. In 2010, the government Health Promotion Board reported that over 60 percent of all Singaporean residents usually ate lunch and/or dinner outside the home with its associated health consequences (Health Promotion Board 2013).

While there are many other such issues that can, and will, be identified in further research investigation, this preliminary survey of Singaporean food memoirs reveals that they have much to offer readers in terms of cultural, social, historical and political information as well as the rich and interesting personal stories of their authors. This is not to deny that these food memoirs are also a fertile source of culinary material, including recipes and traditional cookery techniques, and it is hoped that further research will further reveal, and then evaluate, their potential contribution to knowledge in a wide range of areas.

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