

"LET LIFEGUARD MILK RAISE YOUR CHILD": GENDER, FOOD AND NATION IN SINGAPORE'S PAST

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ABSTRACT

The slogan "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child" was emblazoned on teacups sold in Singapore during the 1980s, and offers a point of departure for my paper, which seeks to interrogate the complexities expressed in the distancing of the categories of "Good Mother" from "Good Cook" in Singapore. Women, in particular, received a series of contradictory messages about food and food preparation in the period from Singapore's Independence in 1965 to the end of the cold war era. On the one hand, school textbooks in subjects such as Home Economics and Domestic Science were presenting cooking and domestic hygiene as a form of nation building, with the student as proto-housewife. On the other hand, the realities of economic development and increased female participation in the workforce, coupled with the presence of domestic servants, meant that home-cooking took a surprisingly marginal place in discourses around femininity. While the student was constructed as the proto-housewife, the reality of housewifery was, as always, classed and raced. It is in this context that products like Lifeguard Milk could advertise that they would "raise your child."

Keywords: Singapore, women, home economics, domestic science

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INTRODUCTION

At the National Museum of Singapore one of the permanent exhibitions is a Living Gallery celebrating Singaporean food. Towards the back of this exhibition is a glass case displaying twenty-two tea-cups. The cups are not particularly ancient or artistic—some have advertising on them, some do not. The cups may not be remarkable, but the slogan on one of these cups, however, is quite remarkable: "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child." Lifeguard, an Australian dairy company, produced this cup in the 1980s as part of an advertising campaign for the Eastern market, including Singapore and Hong Kong. So perhaps what is more truly remarkable is not the slogan, but its normalised inclusion in the National Museum of Singapore.

Processes of normalising slogans and other symbolic formulations are not atypical among nation states, especially new states and multiethnic states. A small island-state of only 647.5 square kilometres, Singapore has a multi-ethnic population of over five million, including around one million foreign workers and non-citizens. It has been a sovereign state for less than forty years, and it was largely uninhabited until the nineteenth century. Singapore has deployed a range of means to create, maintain and organise national identity including in the domestic spheres. The focus of this paper investigates how Singapore has sought particular constructions of domestic femininity for nationalist purposes.

The pace of Singapore's journey since World War II—from colony to economic powerhouse—has been rapid and dramatic. This transformation relied heavily on the labour of women in both the home and in paid employment. To use the slogan: "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child." That is, the Singaporean state deliberately inaugurated social changes—especially around the provision of domestic care—in order to facilitate economic change. Rhetoric about gender roles remained conservative and the reality for many women was a complex balancing of public and private responsibilities. Yet government efforts, participation in paid employment and affordable prepared food, led to a separation between the categories of "Good Mother" and "Good Cook" for Singaporean women.

Examining discursive sites that were particularly subject to government efforts to sculpt femininity—school textbooks and cookbooks in particular—shows that the state took a keen interest in domestic gender roles and the organisation of domestic space. Food preparation and cooking at home, however, are marginalised in discourses of femininity, reflecting the importance to the state of domesticity as a site of citizenship training—with ideology preeminent over outcome. That is, teaching young

Singaporean women to have a neat kitchen or to prepare thrifty meals enshrined the values of social order and fiscal responsibility, not how to bake a sponge-cake.

REDRAWING "PUBLIC" AND "PRIVATE"

The importance of citizenship and instilling national values reflects Singapore's newness as a nation-state and its unusual path to independence. Singapore's birth as a modern nation was unique in that it was an unwilling one. Just months before Singapore was expelled from the new Malaysian Federation, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew spoke of Singapore's future as viable only within the context of the Federation. When he announced the news of Singapore's independence to the citizenry of what was to become the nation-state of Singapore, he did so with regret. With tears in his eyes, he said: "all my life...the whole of my adult life...I have believed in merger and the unity of these two territories."² From this inauspicious start as a nation, Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP) set about making a nation.

In the process of constructing the modern state, organising society and developing a national narrative, governments not uncommonly attend to matters of marriage, family and domestic relations. In Singapore, however, policies around these issues take on a special significance because of the pronounced emphasis on "the people" as "the only resource." Ideologically, if people are the only resource of the nation, then the future of the nation rests on the future of the people—and the ongoing production of the "right" kind of citizens. Early concern for Singapore's national future thus justified state intrusion into the previously private sphere and renegotiation of boundaries between "public" and "private." Quintessential examples of this process include active intervention by the government in marriage, policies pertaining to women's role in the work force and attempts to control sexuality and reproduction.

Nationalism is commonly thought of as an imagined community³ and preserving nationalism becomes, as Leslie King proposed, "a concern with constructing or maintaining the identity or character of the national community."⁴ Briefly and broadly, civic-nationalism, on the one hand, is a

2 Lau, A., *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), 265.

3 Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1993), 11–16.

4 King, L., "Demographic Trends, Pronatalism, and Nationalist Ideologies in the Late Twentieth Century," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, no. 3 (2002): 367–389.

sort of nationalism derived in terms of citizenship.⁵ Ethno-nationalism, on the other hand, relies on an idealised past of an agrarian society where women, via their role as mothers, become guardians of cultural identity. Women symbolise stability in the face of change.⁶ Ethno-nationalism is typically contrasted with civic-nationalism and in Singapore, these models of ethno-nationalism and civic-nationalism have been uneasily integrated.

Although Singapore does not have an agrarian past to idealise, for the state, the need to maintain ethnic divisions and ethnic harmony consumes considerable attention. This attention falls particularly on women. The state represents women as reproducers and guardians of community. Women, mothers in particular, thus protect both the community identity and a broader "Asian" identity. A multi-ethnic state that conceives of ethnicity in terms of a series of distinct groups must police the boundaries of ethnic identity, but not so rigorously as to cause a disruption to racial harmony. Women are positioned as guardians of a harmonious cultural identity through their role as mothers.

In contrast to a state policy that rejects hybridity in sexual relations and marriage, the Singaporean state accepts cultural hybridity represented by food. To eat out, even far out, is much more acceptable than marrying out. Food boundaries are more flexible in part because, as Arjun Appadurai noted, "eating permits a variety of registers, tied to particular contexts."⁷ Something may be acceptable out that would not be in the home. Following from this logic, the consumption of a dish of another culture out may be read as evidence of cosmopolitanism, yet cosmopolitanism does not extend beyond the plate to the bedroom. The concepts "out" and "at home" are useful metaphors. With more Singaporeans, regardless of class, eating meals outside of the home than in, these public foodscapes form a vital part of Singaporean life. By design, and through infusing those public foodscapes with national and personal identity, the places and cuisine Singaporeans eat transform into representations of their nation; turning the table into the site of nation-making. In the Singaporean context, what you eat is not a necessary determinant of ethnic identity and consequently, what you cook does not necessarily function to maintain cultural or ethnic boundaries.

While Singapore may distance food from ethnic identity, women are not analogously distanced from family. Government policies around

5 Beiner, R., *Theorising Nationalism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 127.

6 Charles, N. and Hintjens, H., *Gender, Ethnicity and Political Ideologies* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.

7 Appadurai, A., "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 3–24.

domestic arrangements have inevitably impinged on women's rights, since in Singapore, as in many other societies, the categories of "woman" and "the family" are frequently conflated. Rather than being read as interference with women's rights or the private sphere, state intervention in domestic affairs can be understood simply as a matter of intervention in the family—an institution of national interest. For the Singaporean government it seems that there is no distinction between women and the family. An overt example of this is evident in a querulous statement in 1995 by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong: "I mean, how can we be anti-women in our values? We are pro-family."⁸

The Singaporean state has taken the position that it is natural for women to be treated differently from men, which in practice means women may be disadvantaged by the state. In 1993, Goh issued the statement that "having complete equality" was neither wise nor possible.⁹ He maintained that it was appropriate for women to be treated differently from men "so long as the welfare of women and of the family was protected."¹⁰ This attitude has led feminists such as Lenore Lyons to argue that women-citizens exist in Singapore only as mothers.¹¹ Yet the Singaporean economy, and thus the Singaporean state, is reliant on the participation of women in the workforce. Women might thus be described as mother-citizens and worker-women.

It is not only the state that has sought to frame the role of women in Singaporean society. Non-Governmental Organisations such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) have played a key role. AWARE has particular influence via its publications. A 1993 publication, *The Ties that Bind: In Search of the Modern Singapore Family*, is a good example of how this happens. The dominant message of *The Ties that Bind* is that things were difficult for women in the past but that modern Singapore is much better.¹² The improvement in the position of women is attributed to the hard work and benevolence of the state.¹³ One oft-cited example of the advantages available to modern Singaporean women is the availability of household assistance in the form of domestic workers. While

8 Goh, C. T., quoted in *Singapore: A Pro-Family Society* (Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, 1995), 1.

9 "Having Complete Equality not Possible or Wise: PM," *Straits Times*, 14 June 1993, 17.

10 Ibid.

11 Lyons, L. T., "The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 30, no. 1 (2000): 67–83.

12 Wee, A., "The Way We Were – The Singaporean Family of Times Past," in *The Ties that Bind: In Search of the Modern Singapore Family*, ed. Singam, C., 9–55 (Singapore: AWARE, 1993).

13 PuruShotam, N., "Women and Knowledge/Power: Notes on the Singaporean Dilemma," in *Imagining Singapore*, ed. Ban, K. C., Pakir, A. and Tong, C. K., 320 (Singapore: Select Publishing, 1992).

household assistance certainly provides relief for middle and upper class women, it is incomplete as a portrayal of Singaporean women, since the cost of domestic assistance is beyond the means of working class women.¹⁴

Illustrating the tension between the mother-citizen and the worker-woman, the woman who can afford a domestic worker is often a member of a dual-income family, and her paid work provides the income for domestic relief.¹⁵ This creates somewhat of a "paradox of affluence" for Singaporean women.¹⁶ Expectations are high in terms of women's ability to manage many responsibilities, including domestic staff. Feminine domesticity is thus classed, and the ideology of motherhood slides towards management.

An obvious irony for AWARE lies in the failure of an Association of Women to consider the well being of another set of women—the foreign domestic workers. These workers prompt concern in Singapore—concerns about Singaporean values rather than about foreign women. By the late 1990s, media outlets were reflecting concerns that young Singaporeans were too spoiled—being raised with everything being done for them—leading to weak citizens in the future.¹⁷ As Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang noted, "the anxiety that the presence of the trans-national servant may sap the vigour and verve of the nation's young, and hence its future, brings under scrutiny women's moral and social role in the family."¹⁸ The majority of domestic workers in Singapore are women with their own families, often in the Philippines and Indonesia.¹⁹ In emphasising the role of domestic workers in liberating Singaporean women, the dominant narrative about the role of women in Singapore society excludes the lives of the workers themselves.

The tensions for women between paid employment and family responsibilities are by no means unique to Singapore. Nonetheless, they are pronounced, with the Singaporean government quick to point out the critical role women played in the economy when pro-natalist policies were first

14 Davidson, G. M., "The Spaces of Coping: Women and 'Poverty' in Singapore," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17, no. 2 (1997): 113–131.

15 Yeoh, B. and Huang, S., "Childcare in Singapore: Negotiating Choices and Constraints in a Multicultural Society," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18, no. 4 (1995): 445–461.

16 Davidson, G. and Smith, D. W., "The Price of Success: Disadvantaged Groups in Singapore," in *Uneven Development in Southeast Asia*, ed. Dixon, C. and Smith, D. W., 81 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998).

17 Hilsdon, A-M., "What the Papers Say: Representing Violence Against Overseas Contract Workers," *Violence Against Women* 9 no. 6 (2003): 289–322.

18 Yeoh, B. and Huang, S., "Singapore Women and Foreign Domestic Workers: Negotiating Domestic Work and Motherhood," in *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*, ed. Momsen, J. H., 280 (London: Routledge, 1999).

19 Low, L., "The Political Economy of Migrant Worker Policy in Singapore," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 8, no. 4 (2002): 95–118.

discussed in the 1980s.²⁰ More generally, the Singaporean government wants women to be "both mothers and productive workers simultaneously."²¹ Singaporean women must contribute to the future nation both economically and by providing workers and citizens of the future.

The attitude and approach through which the Singaporean state has addressed women in terms of modern national citizenship, although particular to Singaporean historical change, are not unfamiliar on a global scale. The Singapore state's techniques call to mind Foucault's familiar concept of biopower as a symptom of modernity. He argues that "universities, secondary schools, barracks [and] workshops" all constitute "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations."²² In the Singapore context, the state has sought to maintain the direction and character of its population through organisations such as the Association of Women for Action and Research, among others. It is through these avenues that modern and dominant representations of biological sexual difference have been deployed to mold gendered behaviour in pursuit of economic growth. One particularly strong avenue for molding gendered national citizens is Singapore's educational system.

TEACHING DOMESTICITY, TEACHING GENDER

The Singaporean government builds the future economy from policies about the private sphere and more overtly, via the education system. Education has, as one might expect, been incredibly important to the development of the Singaporean nation-state. Education is highly valued and students are taught how to understand the place of their nation in the world and their role as citizens of their nation. Education also functions in the Singaporean context as a method of social sorting. The highly stratified nature of the education system is used to reinforce the principle of meritocracy, an idea that is integral to the construction of the modern Singaporean nation and specifically the modern Singaporean woman.

Educating to construct the new nation, the Singaporean government paid significant attention to domestic matters. In Home Economics and

20 Lee, K. Y., "National Day Speech," Singapore Government Press Release, 9 August 1983.

21 Lyons, L, "The 'Graduate Woman' Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore," *Sojourn* 13, no. 2 (1998):1–19.

22 Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 140.

Domestic Science textbooks and curricular material, the student was educated about her future roles—simultaneously as proto-housewife and proto-citizen (the not yet mother-citizen). In this context the subject is doubled, and the student twinned with various domestic skills and civic roles. Home Economics is doubled via its alignment with the student-as-student, -proto-housewife, and -proto-citizen. The conflation of student and subject is particularly apparent in discussions of the body in these texts—the body of the student is that of the proto-housewife/proto-citizen, both the student and the housewife are disciplined subjects of Singaporean national identity.

A disciplined modern citizen is a clean, controlled and hygienic citizen. Long acknowledged as part of the origin of public health, hygiene was deeply embedded in Singaporean Domestic Education. The 1960s syllabus for Domestic Science in Secondary Schools, for example, has as its first teaching principle "Hygiene in the Kitchen"—and explicitly states that "the underlying theme is cleanliness of person, utensils, kitchen premises and in preparation of food."²³ Cleanliness of person and of kitchen are explicitly connected for teachers, as: "'care of hair' links up with 'correct foods to eat'; 'washing of hair ribbons,' 'brushes and combs' and this in turn links up with 'care of sinks.'"²⁴ Care of hair and care of sinks are ideologically linked in this syllabus—and the clean, tidy and disciplined body literally and metaphorically embodies the clean sink and the tidy kitchen.

A 1964 supplemental cookery text—designed in conjunction with the Domestic Science Syllabus to reduce copying from the blackboard—makes the student as much the subject as milk or pastry. The book begins with fourteen sensible suggestions to prevent accidents, including: "Be considerate to others at all times." At the bottom of this page a three-point boldfaced check-list—"Before cooking see that you have"—insists on neatness and orderliness of the body as fundamental to hygiene. Hands must be clean and nails short. Students must have an apron that is not only clean but also "neat." And "Tidy hair is safe hair."²⁵ While cleanliness in cookery is an obvious and important health and safety imperative, the juxtaposition of social advice—being considerate—with an aesthetic insistence on tidy hair and neat aprons, makes clear that this cookery course is about much

²³ *Syllabus for Domestic Science in Primary and Secondary Schools* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1961), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵ Robinson, M. H. and Fernando, R., *Elementary Cookery for Malaysian Schools* (Singapore: Creative Service, (1964), 1.

more than the preparation of food. It is also about manufacturing proper feminine behaviour and character. Learning to cook is about food, domestic life, hygiene and citizenship, and much of *Elementary Cookery for Malaysian Schools* is devoted to cleaning tasks and the associated social responsibilities.

At a more advanced level, the 1971 *'O' Level Cookery* textbook is a more comprehensive work, but no less concerned with connecting cookery with virtuous feminine citizenship. Women are held to a high standard, for "it is not sufficient to be able to produce a few perfect dishes"—the disciplined housewife "must combine these to form a suitable meal for any occasion."²⁶ Selecting what to cook is transformed into a major undertaking, and the making of menus is "a great art, requiring correct technical knowledge and good judgement."²⁷ Simultaneously, students are told that meal times should be enjoyable for all concerned "including the housewife." The student therefore must not only master the technical aspects, she must also learn to take pleasure in the performance of domestic roles. Simultaneously, the citizen should appreciate the art, correct technical knowledge and good judgement of the government, and take pleasure in the responsibilities of citizenship.

Domestic Science also engages with ideas of hierarchical gender roles. In the 1976 syllabus, for example, the opening statement by Lee Siow Mong (then Director of Education at the Ministry of Education) tells teachers that Domestic Science "paves the way for happier homes."²⁸ "The times have changed" and modern scientific practise is connected to Classical Chinese practises—still, it is the view of the Ministry of Education that it is good to have a division of duties between men and women. The division of duties should not be regarded, teachers are told, as a matter of the inferior and the superior but as a way of dividing "a complete whole in home life" and life is, apparently made more interesting that way.²⁹ These too are relevant messages for the citizen—the part the citizen plays should not be viewed as inferior but rather as necessary, interesting and part of a complete whole.

The disciplined domestic body is essential for safety, another important topic in home economics textbooks. A clear moral dimension is present in safety discussions. One 1970s textbook, for example, grimly

26 Abbey, P. M. and Macdonald, G. M., *'O' Level Cookery* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill Far Eastern Publishers, 1971), 23.

27 Ibid.

28 Lee., S. M., quoted in *Syllabus for Domestic Science* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1976), 82.

29 Ibid.

warns that "burns, scalds, cuts, falls and poisoning are common" due to "carelessness, apathy, poor lighting and faulty equipment."³⁰ A "key point," emphasised in a shaded text-box, makes explicit the relationship between safety and responsibility: "Although kitchens can be made reasonably safe by good design, they have to be kept safe by good housekeeping."³¹ In this framing, the key piece of faulty equipment is the sloppy housewife and "good housekeeping" reduces kitchen danger.

Connections between the tidy individual housekeeper and the neat and clean individual citizen are encapsulated by the subheading in one of many similar texts: "Food hygiene starts with you."³² No detail is too small—point six in a nine-point plan for kitchen hygiene warns: "Do not use nail polish as it may chip."³³ Neatness is idealised—in a Home Economics textbook from the 1980s, for example, there is an image of a young girl, adorned in neat clothes, displaying her clean apron and her neat, clean self. Below this image, the text reads: "Keep germs to yourself."³⁴ Clean in clothes, body, habits and mind, the smiling Home Economics student is proud of her status, as well as her apron.

Within two pages, the young student is transformed into the ideal Singaporean housewife. A young woman of indistinguishable ethnicity, but with a slightly glazed look, is depicted washing a large pile of dishes, of which she is about half-way through. Her apron signals her status—it is fuller than that of the students—just as her role is fuller. She, still neatly and cleanly dressed, is now a citizen, not a proto-citizen. The illustration is simply titled "Washing up." The text acknowledges that not many people enjoy washing up. The textbook suggests, however, that if domestic work, mirroring the work of the nation, is properly organised, then washing up can be done both easily and quickly and significantly "made quite pleasant."³⁵

Proper domestic training leads to a properly feminine citizen. As one textbook suggests: "The homemaker should learn to play the part of the hostess while young. Whatever the occasion, casual or formal, she should learn to be calm and relaxed, to be pleasant and hospitable to her guests."³⁶

30 Camero, A. and Chong, E., *Towards an Understanding of Food and Cooking* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1979), 249.

31 *Ibid.*, 250.

32 *Food For Thought: A Handbook on Food Safety and Hygiene* (Singapore: Ministry of the Environment, 1989), 101.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *New Home Economics*, 2nd Edition (Singapore: Longman, 1986), 110.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Khalid, H. and Majar, S., eds., *New Home Economics: Book 2* (Singapore: Longman, 1983), 44.

She must "move around freely, gracefully and pleasantly all the time" and refrain from unnecessary, harsh or critical comments.³⁷

Calmly and tidily, the Singaporean state has taken a disciplined interest in the housewife expressed through its education programme. Of course, the working housewife—so essential for the economic development of Singapore—cannot possibly do all the things that these Domestic Science and Home Economics textbooks prescribe. In Singapore, however, it is not simply a matter of women's lives being doubly-burdened in pursuit of state ideological ends. For, squeezed between work and home, Singaporeans have witnessed changes in the arrangements of domestic life.

Unacknowledged in the manuals and ideologies of Domestic Science, has come, for some, relief through domestic servants. For others, it is hawker centres. The role of hawker centres (plus school and workplace canteens) as providers of cheap and quick prepared food cannot be underestimated. That is, families in Singapore had access to inexpensive, high quality prepared food—and a tidy alternative to home-cookery. The full relationship between the categories of good mother/housewife and good cook cannot be understood without acknowledging this lived context—one set apart from dominant Western depictions of mother-consumer from the same time period.³⁸

NOSTALGIA FOR WHAT NEVER WAS

More recently, these changes to gender roles and domestic arrangements have been shadowed by Singaporean nostalgia for home cooking. In the 2000s, this is especially evident in the cookbook market. As folklorist Janet Theophano notes, "there is much to be learned from reading a cookbook besides how to prepare food—discovering the stories told in the spaces between the recipes or within the recipes themselves."³⁹ For Theophano, the spaces reveal women's experiences, and are an avenue for accessing the voices of women long dead and generally forgotten by mainstream historical accounts. Given the relative newness of "Singapore" as a nation-state, the spaces reveal a different set of stories. There are certainly colonial

37 Ibid, 46.

38 Cohen, L., *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 313–316.

39 Theophano, J., *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2002), 6.

guides to housekeeping and domestic arts that might give us some insight into the lives of colonial women in Singapore when it was a Crown colony.

Less attention has been paid to the spaces in more contemporary cookbooks. I would suggest that the spaces in these texts are as revealing, although the story they tell is of a national agenda. That is, Singaporean cookbooks reflect Singaporean society—the struggles of a new nation, of identity formation of a multiracial society. Sometimes, this narrative is explicitly told in prefaces and recipe descriptions. But we can also see it in less obvious ways in a wide variety of Singaporean cookbooks, in recipe selection, in cooking method and in illustrations. Arjun Appadurai, in his seminal work on cookbooks and nation-making, talked of the sense of advocacy that animates many of the authors of Indian cookbooks, of the urgent need for specific regional dishes and practises to be included in the national narrative;⁴⁰ for Singapore there is a similar sense of advocacy, prompted less by a fear of national exclusion, but nonetheless representing a desire for national inclusion.

As literary scholar Nicola Humble reminds us "any cookbook offers us an abundance of meanings and readings."⁴¹ Audiences vary, and specific readers read in varied manners for varied purposes. We might simultaneously read a cookbook for inspiration, a new idea about what to cook for dinner and to be comforted by an imagining of the food of our childhood. For Humble, cookbooks may tell us a lot: "They tell us what we fear and what we desire, about our bodies and our appetites, our domestic politics, our economic circumstances and our fantasies. They tell us who we are, and who we want to be."⁴² In a postcolonial context, cookbooks also tell us who we have been. Appadurai suggests that cookbooks are often located in a literature of exile, of nostalgia and loss—both of the colonial power now diminished and of citizens in exile.⁴³

Many Singaporean cookbooks consciously call on the past for legitimacy, and so are unconsciously, to use Erik Hobsbawm's phrase, relying on "invented traditions."⁴⁴ The notion of recipes and traditions passed from generation to generation is certainly not unique to Singapore—such motifs are regularly deployed in the sales and marketing of cookbooks.

40 Appadurai, A., "How to Make a National Cuisine."

41 Humble, N., *Culinary Pleasures: Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 2.

42 Ibid, 278.

43 Appadurai, A., "How to Make a National Cuisine."

44 Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T., eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

In the Singaporean context, it is embodied in books with titles such as *Grandmother's Recipes: Tales From Two Peranakan Kitchens*.⁴⁵ But what is the past that is being evoked? For Singapore this is dangerous ground, for it is often the pre-nation-state past that is being evoked. The danger lies, not in the celebration of the colonial, but in the absence of the nation. Peranakan food, then, negotiates the multiracial in a socially acceptable way; it becomes the guardian of the past rather than an advocate for multiculturalism and provides an acceptable national past that, because of the small size of the community, does not destabilise existing racial hierarchies.

Cookbooks also function as a site of history-making. In 1998, Violet Oon, Singaporean food writer, published *A Singaporean Family Cookbook*. She situated her work in the context of quintessential Singaporean cookbook, *Mrs. Lee's Cookbook*, authored by the mother of Lee Kuan Yew, father of the nation. Violet Oon states that Mrs. Lee had told her she wrote her book for her grandchildren, with this statement, Violet Oon simultaneously established her legitimacy—she actually knew Mrs. Lee and spoke with her about matters relating to food writing—and framed her book as having a programmatic nationalist function. Violet Oon's wish in writing *A Singaporean Family Cookbook* was "to inspire Singaporeans to reach out for pen and paper to each record the recipes of their mothers and grandmothers to preserve their own family history. They will find that each recipe has a story behind it. And this story will give them an insight into their own cultural soul."⁴⁶ A collection of Singaporean recipes is thus an attempt at national solidarity, a way of providing insight into a cultural soul.

The connection between participation and nationalism stands proudly in numerous projects and publications. The 2004 *Cooking with Singapore Families* marked the International Year of the Family in a collection that "brings together local celebrities and prominent personalities who firmly believe in the importance of family."⁴⁷ The collection also includes material from contestants in a National Library Board "My Family Recipes" writing contest. The accounts that accompany the recipes are described as illuminating "the richness and diversity that makes up Singapore today" in that they "re-affirm the family as the source of nourishment for body and soul for Singaporeans from all walks of life."⁴⁸ In a society in which the

45 Soon, R., *Grandmother's Recipes: Tales From Two Peranakan Kitchens* (Singapore: Saik Wah Press, 2007).

46 Oon, V., *A Singapore Family Cookbook* (Singapore: Pen Publishing, 1998), 7.

47 *Cooking with Singapore Families* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2004), 1.

48 *Ibid.*, 7.

state has made clear, via a White Paper on Shared Values, that "Family" is "the basic unit of society," the project's re-affirmation of family becomes political.⁴⁹

The Singaporean state is engaged in a wide-range of projects that draw Singaporean citizens into the national story by including personal and family stories in a national narrative. The National Archives, for example, encourages public involvement and use, stressing their role as repository of national memory. Housing "the memory of the nation" helps to enable "current and future generations of Singaporeans to not only understand and appreciate who they are and how they came to become a nation, but also enculturate a national identity that they will be proud to proclaim and share."⁵⁰ The national memory is prescribed as a positive memory that Singaporeans will be proud to share. Various multimedia tools reinforce this and Singaporean can, for example, deposit family photographs on the website www.yesterday.sg and find a place for their family in the photo-album of the nation. In this sense, cookbooks can be understood as a site of nation-making, a way of using food to reinforce a national story, especially in relation to the national past.

Heritage Feasts: A Collection of Singaporean Family Recipes, published in 2010 and sponsored by Miele, highlights the connection between national story and cookbooks. The book embodies many of the key features of Singaporean cookbooks; that the book is sponsored by a private company is in itself typical. That the profits from the sale of the book go to a charity, in this case the Kidz Horizon (which does fundraising for the KK Women's and Children's Hospital) is also typical. The book begins with the history of the sponsoring organisation, Miele. In an explicitly political gesture, the similarities between Miele and the Singaporean government are emphasised: "We build on our history and our founders' commitment to quality in the same way that modern Singapore has built on the strong foundations laid by its forefathers."⁵¹ Miele explicitly endorses the Singaporean government's view of heritage and history with the statement: "Appreciating our history is the first step towards shaping our future; to progress, we must honour our past." Heritage is defined in a palatable manor that strengthens the nation rather than dividing it.

Christopher Tan, food writer and consultant, is a contributor to the volume and provides an introduction called "What is Singapore Food?" He

49 "White Paper on Shared Values" (Singapore: Singapore Government, 1991).

50 Ibid, 4.

51 Tully, J. and Tan, C., *Heritage Feasts: A Collection of Singapore Family Recipes* (Singapore: Miele Pte, 2010), 9.

provides a framework for interpreting the *Heritage Feasts* recipes. In defining what constitutes categories like national food and heritage food, Tan is mediating the meaning of these categories for Singaporeans. In arguing for the preservation of "heritage" food, Tan argues: "Food is also a language. A cuisine is a collection of statements about people sharing a common culture or religion. A dish can be an eloquent paragraph about history, heritage and communal memory, a meal, a thesis. Food is no less capable a medium for expressing emotion and content than music or poetry."⁵² Tan suggests that like many languages, cuisines are also endangered. The imperative to save soon-to-be-lost culinary traditions is a favourite mantra of both public and private entities in Singapore—Tan is repeating a familiar view.

His is not the only voice. One of the things that make *Heritage Feasts: A Collection of Singaporean Family Recipes* representative of its genre is the inclusion of commentary by Singaporeans, in this case well known Singaporeans. Their repeated endorsement of heritage underscores a common understanding of it. Wee Wei Ling says: "Family values and tradition are important to me... That's what our heritage is about." Chan Heng Wing says: "Heritage is something you pick up; it's the little nuances that you see and learn as a child, it's the things you absorb unknowingly." We see here a conflation of heritage with culture as a way of deflecting attention from communalism, struggles for ethnic representation, and other potentially complex issues around history, race and identity.

Heritage cannot be admired from afar. It is not simply encapsulated in recipes bound in books; it must be enacted. Tan provides a twenty-two-point "call to arms," a list of suggested ways that Singaporeans can "honour your heritage, which is also your country's heritage."⁵³ The intertwining of the personal with the nation is at the heart of the Singaporean government's approach to National History. The suggestions are wide-ranging and encourage attitudes to food and food practices as well as to social habits. Readers are told to "Bless your favourite hawker with verbal and monetary encouragement" to cook things using laborious recipes and so to preserve heritage. Using these wide-ranging approaches to changing behaviours reflects the Singaporean government approach. For a state deeply committed to rapid and ongoing change, the dangers of nostalgia – always a problematic concept in new states—are thus negotiated by a direct engagement with food culture. That is, the state, in conjunction with private

52 Tan, C. "What is Singapore Food?" In *Heritage Feasts, Heritage Feasts: A Collection of Singapore Family Recipes*, ed. Tully, J. and Tan, C., 15 (Singapore: Miele Pte, 2010).

53 Ibid, 18.

interests and the public, actively promoted food nostalgia and in so doing capitalised on existing popular obsessions with food.

CONCLUSION

This, then, is the context for considering Singaporean food nostalgia. The domesticity of Home Economics textbooks was rarely lived and thus nostalgia is for the imagined past, for what never was, as well as for what was. The popular Singlish phrase, "die die must try" is not so much a hyperbolic statement as it is a reflection of the lengths Singaporeans will go in finding great dishes. It should therefore come as no surprise that Singaporeans express their personal nostalgia in terms of childhood dishes remembered. Nor should it come as a surprise that the state should choose to co-opt this nostalgia for its own purposes. In fact, they have been quick to do in the form of Heritage Food Tours, Food Festivals and Health Campaigns.

Few of these public events focus on historic spaces of food preparation, food preparers or home-makers. While food may be a social lubricant and responsibility, this does not necessarily translate to food preparation. For Singaporeans, production of food is not identity forming; it is the consumption of the dish that is the marker. So, although food is exceptionally important in Singaporean society and although some people are nostalgic about a food culture that never was, the cooking of food is not a necessary marker of the good mother/housewife.

The tension created by these unstable nostalgias is physically embedded in gendered, raced, and classed domestic spaces. Kitchens historically have been, and often still are, the domain of servants, evoking the colonial Indian cook-boy and the contemporary Filipina maid. Both exert control over the kitchen in a way that the housewife in Domestic Science textbooks does not. The kitchen with domestic servants exists more as a work space of Others—and a grotesquery of hot, wet, and leaky—than the Western framing of kitchen as centre of the home with its emphasis on social function of "companionable shared times."⁵⁴ The social and moral functions of the kitchen, as identified by scholars of Western kitchen history, need to be eschewed in the Singaporean case. In the context of food nostalgia, it is the consumption of the dish that is the marker of identity

54 Mielke, R., *The Kitchen: History, Culture, Design* (Berlin: Feierabend Verlag, Ohg, 2005), 4.

formation—it is association and taste, not place and space that are significant. In a rapidly changing built environment, channelling nostalgia thus reifies the citizen-subject, providing a mirrored bookend to the historic citizen-constructs of Domestic Science.

Echoing the attitudes and goals of the Singaporean state, the National Museum of Singapore ratifies cultural knowledges of Singapore through material culture, whether displayed or absent. Returning to the Lifeguard Milk teacup and the slogan "Let Lifeguard Milk Raise Your Child," displaying items like the Lifeguard Milk teacup works towards normalising particular constrictions of motherhood, childhood, food, cooking, domesticity and Singapore. Recall, however, how Stuart Hall frames the sources of meaning in things: "It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them meaning."⁵⁵ The Lifeguard Milk teacup, an unexpected site, encapsulates the tensions between gender ideology and gendered reality, and embodies how the state places importance on teaching Singaporeans how to be citizens.

⁵⁵ Hall, S., quoted in Graham, B. et al. (eds.), *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy* (London: Arnold, 2002), 41.