

Home Cooks and Little Singapore Stories

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Oral history with home cooks tells us much about history and memory in Singapore. The three oral testimonies discussed here might be understood as ‘little Singapore stories’, in reference to the popular account of the island’s history promoted by the government, commonly called the Singapore Story. The women I spoke to, who had prepared family meals for most of their adult lives, recounted micro-narratives that sometimes reinforced well-known themes in the city-state’s history. At other times, when culinary experiences in the private realm of the home differed from the norm, my storytellers provided new perspectives that coalesced into a more nuanced and variegated narrative of modern Singapore. Speaking with home cooks were insightful in three ways. It highlighted the agency of little-heralded social actors, showing my narrators to be independent-minded Singaporean women, workers, wives, and mothers. They also had to make do with the historical circumstances, carrying out an under-appreciated form of work amid rapid socio-economic development. Finally, oral history enriches our understanding of personal, familial and national histories in modern contemporary Singapore. Studies of food, women, work, the family, and the nation may not be complete without efforts to speak to the people who cooked meals at home.

INTRODUCTION

Oral history with home cooks tells us much about history and memory in Singapore. The women I spoke to, who had prepared family meals for most of their adult lives, recounted micro-narratives that sometimes reinforced well-known themes in the city-state's history. At other times, when culinary experiences in the private realm of the home differed from the norm, my storytellers provided new perspectives that coalesced into a more nuanced and variegated narrative of modern Singapore. Of the home cooks themselves, oral history highlighted the agency of little-heralded social actors, while also showing how they had to make do with historical circumstances. The oral history of home cooking in Singapore is ultimately of immense value.

The oral testimonies might be understood as 'little Singapore stories', in reference to the popular account of the island's history promoted by the government, commonly called the Singapore Story. The term was coined in 1997 when Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong launched the National Education programme in schools, explaining, 'our young must know the Singapore Story – how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation'.¹ Where the official account narrated history from the vantage point of the political leaders and followed the trajectory of major historical milestones and government policies, little Singapore stories revolved around people's perspectives and experiences – history from the ground. In oral histories with home cooks, the big events of the Singapore Story could be seen in the background, but the memories of home and its meals also clarified and deepened the history of the making of modern Singapore over the last 60 years.

My interviews were part of a heritage research project on Singapore's culinary past.² The project centred on six dishes that illuminated different periods and aspects of the island's history.³ The research was mostly based on documentary sources but it also delved into the little-studied history and memory of home cooking, utilising a mix of oral and written sources. As the project's main oral and social historian, I conducted thirteen interviews with home cooks, often with one or more family members present. All the home cooks I spoke to were women.

Our interviewees came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Among them were a significant number from the ethnic minorities: two Malays, six Indians and four Chinese Peranakan among the Chinese. The interviewees ranged in age from their fifties to their nineties, covering the evolution of cooking practices from the colonial era prior to World War Two to the 1970s and beyond, when Singapore had transformed into a developed nation-state. One of our interviewees was Irene Lim, a 93-year-old Chinese Peranakan who subsequently published her memoir, which included great detail on the dishes she ate.⁴ Some of the women, like Lim, were well-educated, able to converse in English, and from upper-class backgrounds. Others had little or no formal education, or supported working-class families, including a former hawker, cleaner and factory worker.

In this paper I focus on three interviews, with Eileen Kiong, Syamala Senan and Zaiton binte Abdul Rahman. Though detailed and illuminating, these should not be thought of as the ‘best’ or most representative interviews. Rather, they were chosen to highlight salient themes in home cooking and the wider context in which meals in Singapore were prepared and consumed. They indicate a range of socio-economic experiences and they had family members participating in the interview, always to great effect. Most crucially, their memories of home-cooked food offered new insights into the recent social history of Singapore and the position of women in this time.

HOME COOKS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SINGAPORE

There is a growing body of work on the social history of Singapore, spanning the colonial and post-independence periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of this scholarship utilises oral history, while others rely mostly on archival sources, such as coroner’s records. Such social history has taken the narrative of Singapore history beyond the trope of a successful entrepôt or a well-governed nation-state. James Warren’s work on the rickshaw pullers enabled him to conceive of colonial Singapore as a grim ‘coolie town’, taking away the predominant focus on the

⁴ Irene Lim, *90 Years in Singapore* (Singapore: Pagesetters, 2020), with contributions from Kah Seng Loh and Linda Lim.

port's political and economic elites.⁵ Conversely, Brenda Yeoh's study of shophouses uncovered dynamic subalterns who contested and frustrated municipal control.⁶

Likewise, oral histories conducted with lightermen, urban kampong dwellers, trishaw riders, and Chinese Singaporeans, used in conjunction with archival and published sources, have excavated the lives of hitherto-neglected social and occupational groups, broadening the basis of Singaporean history.⁷ Many Singaporean narrators have departed from accounts based on documentary sources or elite vantage points, providing more sophisticated accounts of well-trodden historical events such as the Japanese Occupation.⁸ While providing new perspectives, oral history has also given various social groups a place, a role, a voice, and some measure of agency in Singaporean history.

Conversations with home cooks are especially important on a number of levels. Topically, like the aforementioned works, they move beyond elite politics and perspectives to areas that have received far less attention in Singaporean history: economic development, the formation of nuclear families and the understated role of women in both. In particular, the small stories told by home cooks enable us to penetrate the veiled history of the Singaporean home. This was a private space where work – which includes the making of family meals – was often informal, invisible, undocumented, and deemed inconsequential by the state. Through oral history, my storytellers were not only able to qualify mainstream accounts of Singaporean history but, more crucially, to relate their own narratives in detail.

5 James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

6 Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

7 Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Jason Lim, *A Slow Ride into the Past: The Chinese Trishaw Industry in Singapore, 1942-1983* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Kah Seng Loh, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press and Asian Studies of Australia Association Southeast Asia Series, 2013); Ernest Koh, *Singapore Stories: Language, Class, and the Chinese of Singapore, 1945-2000* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010).

8 Kevin Blackburn, 'Family Memories as Alternative Narratives to the State's Construction of Singapore's National History', in Kah Seng Loh, Stephen Dobbs and Ernest Koh (eds), *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Memories and Fragments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25–41.

It is worth repeating that oral history is a viable, indeed necessary, research method for understanding Singaporean history, though this point requires a caveat. Since the late 1970s, the National Archives of Singapore has systematically conducted a large number of oral history interviews.⁹ The structure of these interviews has tended to follow closely the accepted milestones of national history and the government's socio-economic policies. My research on a historic kampong fire found that people often repeated the official account of the island's public housing development, or seemed unwilling to speak openly about contentious issues, such as the origin of the fire.¹⁰ As is true of oral history in general, what people say in an interview corresponds to their life experiences in the society in which they live.

Interestingly, the little Singapore stories of home cooking were more challenging to uncover than I had initially anticipated. For home cooks to recount their recipes and meals, I had simplistically thought, would be a straightforward or even benign undertaking, as it would not involve contentious political events. But I learned that conversations about eating at home are rich and insightful precisely because they stand



A recipe archive, with Loh Choe Jin and her granddaughter Isabel Drake, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

at the threshold between private and national history; they reached beyond food to connect with a person's private life, family and work, and also with moments of national time. These were not always topics about which people wanted to speak openly.

The main hurdle I encountered in oral history was the personal. A number of my requests for an interview were turned down. Although rejection is a normal part of oral history work, it is worth reflecting on here. In many instances, the reason was unclear. In one case, a friend

who tried to arrange for me to speak with her mother and her brother's mother-in-law – both experienced and excellent cooks – was nonplussed when they declined; she

could only say that her mother was in ill health and perhaps not well enough to participate in an interview.¹¹

The reason was more apparent in another case. When explaining the rejection, another friend suggested that her mother, being strong-willed (the family called her the 'Iron Lady'), may not want outsiders to critique her cooking, even though it was communicated to her that this was not my intent.¹² Interestingly, I had previously interviewed the 'Iron Lady' about her experience as an assembly line worker in a semiconductor factory. Then, she had talked freely and excitedly about her dedication to work, her pride in it – how 'not one unit of her wiring has been rejected' – and her ability to reconcile her job and raising the children.¹³ There was something telling here about when and how far an elderly person was willing to speak on subjects in her realm of experience. This may have something to do with the private nature of the home and the family, the food made inside it, and its wider connections with the society and nation.

Singapore experienced transformative economic, urban and social change after the tiny city-state in Southeast Asia became independent in 1965. In the 1970s and 1980s, it made a successful shift from entrepôt trade in the colonial era to export-led manufacturing driven by foreign capital investment. Economic growth was tied to demographic and housing developments in ways that involved Singaporean women. The industrialisation programme aimed to provide jobs for a rapidly growing population after World War Two. This population, comprising nuclear families from inner city tenements and squatter areas, was also being rehoused en masse to new public housing towns. Public housing was a physical and environmental upgrade but had a socio-economic effect: it required regular, rather than casual, employment to pay for the new housing.¹⁴

11 Shamira Barr, Whatsapp correspondence with author, 3-4 January 2019.

12 Prasakthi Allagoo, personal conversation with author, 13 August 2019.

13 Supammal Peramal, interviewed by author, 26 February 2018.

14 M. Castells, L. Goh and R. Y.-W. Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990).

Public housing connected to the government's industrial policy and drew the nation's nuclear families into the wage economy. This was a momentous experience for the young women and mothers who became part of a pioneer generation of full-time factory workers, mostly employed in industrial estates near their homes.¹⁵ In its pursuit of economic growth, the government encouraged women to undertake such employment, although this often left them struggling to bear the twin burdens of salaried and domestic work.¹⁶ Cooking still remained largely women's work, and was made more difficult by the demands and stress of working salaried jobs. Reports of working wives' and mothers' fatigue appeared in the mass media in the 1970s and 1980s, though one newspaper article also warned of parenting as a major disruption of one's life.¹⁷

It was in this period that the quality and frequency of home cooking apparently declined, or at least shifted in substantive ways. Many women began to prefer shopping at supermarkets like Cold Storage, once the preserve of expatriate wives, though this was also partly due to a turn towards canned, frozen or Western food; Yeo Hiap Seng's tinned chicken curry quickly became a local favourite.¹⁸ The mass media responded by advertising culinary courses on local dishes offered by expert cooks, including 'survival cooking' for the 'career housewife', though some of these had costly fees that were beyond the means of working-class women.¹⁹ The press also began to run stories of exceptional males: an emerging minority of 'new local men' who had begun to shoulder domestic work. These men were apparently younger, middle class and more progressive; they were 'under 35, mostly English educated and widely travelled' and had experienced first-hand the culture of shared domestic responsibilities in Western countries.²⁰ The media left the national imperative of economic growth unquestioned.

15 Janet W. Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore: Restructuring a Developing Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

16 Linda Y.C. Lim, *Women in the Singapore Economy* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1982).

17 Esther Tzer Wong, 'Balancing Work', *Straits Times*, 30 March 1984, 2.

18 'The Big Jump among Asian Customers', *New Nation*, 30 April 1973, 18.

19 Deborah Chia, 'Cooking Course with More to It', *New Nation*, 17 June 1980, 12.

20 Nancy Byramji, '...But the New Local Hubby is Not Far Behind', *Straits Times*, 28 October 1979, 11; Siew Hua Lee, 'At Home with Mr Mum', *Straits Times*, 19 April 1987, 1.

My oral history interviews with home cooks brought out personal strands of these vast demographic, socio-economic and housing changes, in addition to what was prepared and eaten at home. As some scholars have noted, flavours of food consumed at home may create ‘sites of memory’ that document wider processes of social change.²¹ But this intimate connection between cooking and society also presented a difficulty for oral history fieldwork: people may not be willing to speak to a researcher about their private lives in a period of change and disruption, in addition to having their cooking scrutinised by others.

Another question concerns the official narrative. The dramatic developments in Singapore’s recent history were driven by the People’s Action Party government, including the new public housing and multinational investment that impinged on people’s lives. Oral history could be intertwined with memories of the activist government. Since the 1980s, the government has also promoted an official narrative of national development, attributing the success story to far-sighted and effective policies; in 1997, this officially became the Singapore Story.²² Singaporeans may thus frame their memories around this account.

Would oral history elicit little Singapore stories or a personal version of the Singapore Story? This brings context and nuance to an emerging scholarship on the social and oral history of food and of homemade meals in particular. While food has become an increasingly salient field of historical research in recent years, oral histories – excluding those with prominent chefs – remain comparatively rare. There is much scholarly potential in listening to people’s voices. In her ‘culinary chats’ (*charlas culinarias*) with Mexican and Chicana working-class women, Meredith Abarca thoughtfully surmises these subalterns as ‘grassroots theorists’ whose speech about their craft came across as personal and

21 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, ‘The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History’, *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (June 2016), 869; Pascal Ory, ‘Gastronomy’, in Pierre Nora (ed), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol. 2: Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 442–467.

22 Kah Seng Loh, ‘Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 1–21; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

powerful.²³ Likewise, Amy Trubek et al. in their research find home cooking to be an act of agency, revealing its practitioners to be skilled craftworkers.²⁴ These conclusions largely resonate with my own.

Conversely, oral history can complement or clarify interpretations of home cooking derived from other forms of historical evidence. Scholars of food history and domesticity have unearthed discursive representations of the housewife across the twentieth century, having become a subject of social commentary made by others. For instance, she has been dismissed as a mere ‘can opener’ rather than a cook, who in deciding to join the workforce was blamed for the decline of home cooking.²⁵ Ruth Cowan notes that the appearance of modern culinary equipment and new recipes did not reduce women’s domestic workload, leaving them with demanding dual roles in economic production and social reproduction.²⁶

Oral history offers a way to explore these perspectives and experiences from the vantage points and voices of the women themselves, providing greater narrative nuance and richness. These personal stories can transcend one of the major problems in the home cooking discourse – the nostalgia of third-party commentators (such as the children of homemakers) for an idealised home and its comfort food.²⁷ Oral testimonies can also lend empirical weight to Richard Wilks’ argument that homemade meals are quality food, beneficial for the health of families and even larger communities.²⁸ This is a point to ponder with regards to the perceived decline in home cooking during Singapore’s industrial development. As a source, oral history also contributes to social history and

23 Meredith E. Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 9.

24 Amy B. Trubek, Maria Carabello, Caitlin Morgan, and Jacob Lahne, ‘Empowered to Cook: The Crucial Role of “Food Agency” in Making Meals’, *Appetite* 116 (May 2017): 297–305.

25 Samantha Barbas, ‘Just Like Home: “Home Cooking” and the Domestication of the American Restaurant’, *Gastronomica – The Journal of Food and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2002), 43.

26 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

27 Jean Duruz, ‘Home Cooking, Nostalgia, and the Purchase of Tradition’, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 12, no. 2 (2001): 21–32.

28 Richard Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2006).

the history of the labouring classes, in contrast to cookbooks that, even when read in discerning ways, represent the viewpoints of the dominant group.²⁹

In Singapore, there has been little academic research on home cooking, whether through oral history or other means. This differs from contemporary interest in hawkers, which has grown in recent years due to state support for hawker culture and cuisine, culminating in its nomination by the government for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status in 2019.³⁰ Vineeta Sinha observes that home cooking in the city-state, as in modern contexts elsewhere, has declined as working women prioritised wage employment ahead of domestic work. While many Singaporean women today possess a degree of culinary ability, cooking at home is episodic rather than regular – akin to a form of play. Sinha refrains from lamenting this as a diminution of home cooking but wonders about the possible social consequences of frequently eating out, such as the decline of culinary skills transfer within the family.³¹ Oral history, as we will see, takes us closer to understanding these developments.

EILEEN KIONG: A FAMILY HISTORY

My interview with Eileen Kiong and her extended family threw light on many of these issues. This was a lively, multi-vocal discussion with the 91-year-old matriarch and cook, joined by three daughters, a son, and a granddaughter. The family is of Peranakan (Malay-Teochew) descent, a minority ethnic group in Singapore. Doris Teo, one of the daughters, did most of the talking and translating with Eileen, though she understood English, content to listen in consent, speaking on occasion to underline or clarify a point.

The presence of three generations of the family, residing in the same house, signified their collective approval of Eileen's homemade meals. The conversation was

29 H. Le Dantec-Lowry, 'Reading Women's Lives in Cookbooks and Other Culinary Writings: A Critical Essay', *Revue Française d'études Américaines* 116, no. 2 (2008): 99–122.

30 Melody Zaccheus, 'Singapore Submits Unesco Bid to Recognise Hawker Culture', *Straits Times*, 29 March 2019.

31 Vineeta Sinha, 'Mapping Singapore's Culinary Landscape: Is Anyone Cooking?', in Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (eds), *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes: Culture, Community and Consumption in Post-Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 159–184.

spontaneous, with people speaking at the same time and over one another, and filled with laughter. As with most of my interviews, the participation of family members made the conversation more pointed and rewarding. Near the end of the interview, the granddaughter, who had stayed at the margins of the conversation but had listened intently, described her grandmother's *laksa* (a popular spicy noodle dish) as '*lemak* (rich, fatty) yet not *lemak*'. Eileen's *laksa* was different from commercial versions: she did not use cockles and made her own *sambal* (chilli paste). Her *laksa* story thus distinguished the dish from the narrative of public hawker fare, transplanting it to the home and family.³²

The story narrated by Eileen with her family was a broad one, overlapping with much of Singapore's national history. Early in the interview, she pinpointed the beginning of her culinary narrative at the start of the Japanese attack on Singapore in 1941, when she was 13. The Japanese attack and subsequent occupation of the island is a formative moment for Singapore's nationhood – a time of socio-economic hardship and deprivation that made people understand the need for defence and self-reliance.³³ For Eileen, the Japanese interregnum was also transformative but from a cooking perspective: the family's Cantonese cook was no longer available, so she had to shoulder the responsibility.

Eileen's oral history account also moved through the family's different homes, from shophouses in the town area initially to public housing apartments built farther away from the city. This paralleled Singapore's urban development to which oral history provided further insight. Likewise, other milestones in her narrative derived from her personal and family history and followed demographic and social trends. Most notably, her marriage found her living with her mother-in-law, as was customary in Singapore, a good cook who taught her several dishes. The main difference from the national experience was that, unlike many Singaporean women, Eileen did not join the workforce but remained a homemaker. She belonged to the pre-war generation

32 Eileen Kiong, Doris Teo and Lilian Teo, interviewed by author, 5 July 2019, tape held by author.

33 Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story'; Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of a National History*.

and had been a full-time housewife for a considerable time before the industrialisation programme of the 1960s.

On her cooking, Eileen and her family talked animatedly about the wide variety of Peranakan and Teochew dishes she made, particularly Teochew fish dishes like the spicy *kuah lada*, *siew-i bah* (a pork dish) and the more uncommon chicken dish called *ayam buah keluak*. Although they had lived in an area known for good hawker and restaurant food (in Geylang), the family rarely ate out. All of them expressed a critical view of the food served in Peranakan restaurants. Eileen surmised that ‘home-cooked food tastes better’ while ‘outside food is nothing’, being both a ‘waste [of] money’ and unsavoury (*bo hor jiak*).

Eileen’s attitude towards cooking was interesting: she enjoyed it if she was able to do it without having to rush. This was although, as she professed, she had ‘no choice’ but to cook the dishes her family liked, rather than what she wanted (she seemed to enjoy baking cakes and puffs). Like the ‘Iron Lady’ who turned down my request, Eileen did not want people coming into the kitchen to tell her what to do. Eileen’s identity and role were tied to the home, the family and the kitchen. This can be read as evidence of the hegemony of the gendered politics of domesticity. However, within this gender culture Eileen exercised autonomy within the household in her control of the kitchen and her ability to produce delectable dishes for her family. There was also an autonomy over memory and recollection: the ‘Iron Lady’ declined the interview while Eileen consented, but both women exercised their agency to decide if they wanted to share their memories of a private life.

Like many experienced home cooks, Eileen prepared and made her own condiments such as spices and curry powder. Her culinary learning and methods were informal and collaborative, rather than technical or formal. She cooked using her taste, instead of formal recipes, and she possessed durable memories of the dishes she ate. She obtained other recipes from neighbours, continuing a tradition of informal learning in which her first teachers were an aunt and the Cantonese cook. Eileen kept a recipe book but this she would not show me – a sign of the private nature of home-cooked food. Home cooking is by nature historical, but access to its archives,

namely, personal memories and recipe books, is no less difficult than in the case of documentary state archives in Singapore.³⁴

Although many culinary histories have emphasised the role of modern tools in defining home cooking in the twentieth century, Eileen was largely dismissive of refrigerators, even though they were present in her home at an early age.³⁵ In Singapore, refrigerators and many other modern gadgets became commonplace in the 1970s as the standard of living rose, even in working-class homes.³⁶ The local media lauded a range of electronic gadgets, from refrigerators to electric cookers, food blenders, microwaves and ovens, as heralding ‘a new life style’ in modern public housing. These tools, it was dubiously suggested, would encourage appliance-oriented men to help out with housework.³⁷ To these discourses, Eileen felt that perishables kept in the refrigerator would not be fresh, so she preferred to purchase fresh groceries daily, either from vendors who used to ply their goods at the doorstep of her home or, in more recent times from a nearby wet market. Even in old age, she took the walk to the market as a form of exercise.

Eileen’s oral history professed a distinct narrative and agency about what constituted healthy food. In recent decades, the Singaporean government has emphasised the importance of healthy eating in response to the high incidence of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. But Eileen only laughed when I asked if she had reduced salt or sugar in her cooking, saying, ‘Sugar not reduced, but salt yes. I like sugar. I ate so much sugar [but] I still haven’t died’.³⁸ Peranakan food and Teochew desserts are, she told me, by nature quite sweet. But she has used corn oil in place

34 Kah Seng Loh, ‘Encounters at the Gates’, in Kah Seng Loh and Kai Khiun Liew (eds), *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books and Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), 1–27. In Singapore, access to state archives frequently requires the approval of the creating or depositing government agency.

35 See Cowan, *More Work for Mother*; June Freeman, *The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004).

36 Kwok Yoke Tay, ‘The Internal Use of Space: Implications for Family Interaction’, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1975.

37 ‘Gadgets: A New Life Style’, *New Nation*, 18 May 1973, 13; Sian Ann Tan, ‘New Waves in Household Aids’, *New Nation*, 24 April 1981, 40–41.

38 Eileen Kiong, Doris Teo and Lilian Teo interview, 5 July 2019.

of lard and peanut oil for health reasons. Eileen thus made a considered response to the question of healthy food, striking a balance between maintaining standards of quality cooking and taking care of her family's well-being.

While Eileen's oral account overlaps with well-trodden themes in Singapore history, it was illuminating to see how home cooking connected and underpinned the inter-generational family. At the heart of it was an independent-minded matriarch, who had her own notions of what was considered good and healthy food and how it should be made.

SYAMALA SENAN: MAKING DO IN SINGAPORE

My interview with Syamala Senan had many similarities with Eileen's, but also significant differences. Syamala was a younger person – she was in her mid-sixties – who had migrated to Singapore from the Indian province of Kerala. She is a Malayalee, a minority group among Indians in Singapore. Unlike Eileen, she participated in the interview mostly by herself. I knew her daughter, Anusha, who had arranged the interview, and was in the house when the interview took place.

Our conversation with Syamala was interesting from the start. She asked my co-interviewer and me politely but firmly about the purpose of the interview. We explained our research and assured her that she could stop the interview at any time. Privacy, it turned out, was her main concern, as she related an unhappy experience with another interviewer (possibly a census-taker) who had asked her questions about her family she found intrusive. In my mind, though she seemed assured by our replies, I was initially worried that Syamala might feel the same way about our questions on cooking! But the interview went well; I believe that she understood how our queries on her family were connected to her cooking, and vice versa. In fact, she warmed up to the conversation as it proceeded, which was further enlivened when Anusha joined us and asked about salient aspects of her mother's cooking.³⁹ At the end of the session, Syamala invited us to return for a meal.

39 Syamala Senan, interviewed by author and Geoff Pakiam, 25 September 2019, tape held by author.

Like Eileen, we found Syamala to be an expert cook with firm ideas about her craft and about life in general. Despite having spent four decades in the kitchen, she confessed that she was ‘not a cooking person’. She cooked out of necessity for the family, there being ‘no other way to eat when you’re hungry’. As a child in Kerala, she had been on the ‘sidelines’ of the work that transpired in the family kitchen, with her mother, sisters and sisters-in-law making the meals.⁴⁰ She was unable to cook when she first arrived in Singapore.

The reason for her attitude towards cooking became clear, and was linked to Singapore’s economic history. An important part of the interview centred on the ambivalence between cooking and wage work in Syamala’s life. Her identity, unlike Eileen’s, was not tied to the kitchen; she surmised that ‘education and cooking don’t go together’, noting how uneducated young girls learned cooking alongside their mother in the kitchen, while educated women like her were ‘thrust upon’ it.⁴¹ Syamala was an economics graduate and would have preferred a wage job to home-making. Indeed, we spoke to her in a home office area of the house where she continued to do part-time accounting.

For close to ten of her early years in Singapore, Syamala strove to be both a housewife and breadwinner, working accounting and audit jobs in companies near her home and cooking for the family either before or after her working hours. Cooking could never be something she enjoyed because ‘there were so many things to do’.⁴² She probably felt frustrated that she would have achieved more in her career without having to devote time and energy to preparing family meals. Syamala’s testimony offers a critique of Singapore’s development, highlighting the personal cost of the nation’s economic growth for working wives and mothers.

Syamala learned to cook through trial and error, gaining confidence and self-reflexivity in addition to competence. With a simple, Kerala-flavoured repertoire of a curry (usually with fish) and a vegetable dish, she felt that her cooking lacked variety. Her

⁴⁰ Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

⁴¹ Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

⁴² Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

husband was often critical about her cooking, but her children, including Anusha, and friends were expressly enthusiastic. Syamala spoke to us authoritatively about her preferred fish choices such as *ikan kurau* and *ikan tenggiri*, explaining to us the ways to identify fresh specimens at the market (the gills must be red and the eyes bright), and how to clean and cook fish well. Anusha had told me prior to the interview that her mother was ‘fanatical about where she gets her fish’.⁴³

Fish was a family staple, which Syamala attributed to the availability of fish in coastal Kerala. Much of her cooking narrative was in fact linked to the place of her birth, crossing between and connecting Kerala and Singapore. Her meals took us beyond the geographical bounds of Singaporean history. Later in the interview, she took out an old pot from the kitchen for cooking fish curry, which she had brought from Kerala to Singapore. The pot was not only a practical tool, but one filled with meaning for her as a migrant. This was a case of how, as David Sutton and Michael



Syamala with her old pot from Kerala, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

Hernandez noted, cooking tools can be imbued with the rich memories and even the identities of their users.⁴⁴ The old pot symbolised both Syamala’s connections with Kerala (her family is still there) and her transition to a new life in Singapore.

Interestingly, we found that Syamala used her meals as a way to socialise her children. Though she repeatedly stressed the practical need to feed the family, there was also an important disciplinary aspect to it. When we asked what the family’s favourite dishes were and how often she cooked

43 Anusha Senan, Facebook correspondence with author, 17 September 2019.

44 David Sutton and Michael Hernandez, ‘Voices in the Kitchen: Cooking Tools as Inalienable Possessions’, *Oral History* 35, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 67–76.

them, she said that the children (and even her husband) had to wait their turns. They could not all have their favourites on the same day but had to abide by her roster. The system of turns was a way to teach the children their roles in the family – to consider others and not be selfish – and instil discipline. She felt she had accomplished this seeing how her children have become responsible adults.

Overall, Syamala's oral history conveyed a sense of 'making do', showing how a migrant woman and initial non-cook reconciled with the circumstances she was dealt in Singapore.⁴⁵ Having to feed and support a family in a time of rapid socio-economic change in the country led her to assume a dual position in the family. She had to cook and work – only one of which she wanted to do but which she had to accept. Just like her ordered meals to foster discipline among the children, who had to know their place in the family, she had to accommodate her position to the nation's development prerogative. Preferring compromise to conflict, she has come to accept her husband's criticism of her cooking. Conflict would be bad for karma, since 'our thoughts influence the things that I cook' and thus 'my heart must be good' so she could cook well.⁴⁶

Conversing about karma, compromise and discipline showed how far our culinary chat with Syamala had taken us into the private world of a home cook from Kerala. Despite her initial misgivings, she was willing to tell us much about how she made do as an educated migrant woman working and cooking in Singapore. This was akin to how Sukhmani Khorana views her cooking as a way to both trace her roots in India and chart new routes in Australia.⁴⁷ Syamala's interview extends Singapore history by encompassing the experiences of women who had arrived in the nation-state after independence. Like Abarca's 'grassroots theorists', Syamala gave shape to an extraordinary interview filled with candid detail and philosophical depth about women and family in the Singapore context.

45 Sharon R. Roseman, "'How We Built the Road': The Politics of Memory in Rural Galicia", *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996): 836–60.

46 Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

47 Sukhmani Khorana, 'Finding My Culinary Home: Migration, Memory and *Masterchef*', *Kill Your Darlings* 7 (2011): 73–79.

ZAITON BINTE ABDUL RAHMAN AND TAMBAH TAMBAH

I met Zaiton binte Abdul Rahman in her house with her daughter (my friend), Hasnita. Zaiton is 79 and of Malay ethnicity, a minority ethnic group in Singapore. Like Eileen but unlike Syamala, Zaiton took a relaxed approach to the interview, speaking briefly and softly, allowing Hasnita to translate and elaborate her replies (often in Malay). Hasnita's familiarity with her mother's story showed how much food connected the two women. Like Eileen, Zaiton enjoyed cooking and eating her own food. She had prepared a big spread of Malay dishes that morning, which we ate after the interview.

Zaiton did not appear to have faced the same tension between work and home as Syamala and many Singaporean women did, although she had an early opportunity for formal employment. Upon graduating from school at the age of 17, she worked briefly as a relief teacher. The following year, when she married, her husband did not want her to work. It is unclear if she had been unhappy at her husband's decision, which I did not find appropriate to ask at the time. But although she was an educated woman like Syamala, Zaiton did not apply to be a permanent teacher and instead became a full-time housewife.⁴⁸

Her cooking, Zaiton told me, ranged from popular Malay homemade dishes such as *asam pedas* (spicy and sour fish), curry (with fish or chicken), and *daging masak kicap* (soy sauce beef). What was especially interesting about her culinary repertoire was her inclusion of popular commercial dishes, such as *satay*, *laksa*, *mee siam*, and *nasi padang*, which are well-known hawker fare. Hasnita's



The meal Zaiton made on the day of our interview, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

⁴⁸ Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman, interviewed by author, 26 October 2019, tape held by author.

husband, a good friend of mine, had told me that he had been astounded when he first tasted Zaiton's cooking: it was far superior to that sold in restaurants and hawker stalls. This was also the view of numerous colleagues and friends of Zaiton's husband (who was a journalist) whom he invited to his home for meals. This does suggest that hawker cuisine, presently elevated as the nation's cultural heritage, should embrace its lesser-known domestic cousin. It is oral history that uncovers the social connection between commercial and homemade food.

By devoting herself to the kitchen, Zaiton mastered numerous recipes over the years. Sometimes, as she explained, this was simply out of necessity: there were not many restaurants in Singapore in the past and outside food was not as tasty or nutritious. Her meals were value for money and contained large servings of vegetables; in fact, it was mandatory for her to have *sayur* (vegetables) such as cabbage, *pak choy* (white cabbage) and ladyfingers. She was focused and organised in her work in the kitchen, able to finish cooking for a large family of seven children by two in the afternoon. Even *nasi padang* – 'her speciality', which had a minimum of five or six component dishes – was not difficult to prepare.

What was most interesting, beyond mere pragmatism, was how Zaiton creatively improvised to improve her cooking. She fried her *sambal* longer to make it more savoury. It was perhaps for this reason that Hasnita's favourite dish was *mee siam* (spicy rice vermicelli), where 'the sambal is the kick'; it was sweet and not sour or too spicy. Zaiton had exacting standards of what was good *mee siam*. Similarly, when she made *satay* (grilled meat on skewers), she fried, rather than grilled, the meat as was often the case with commercial *satay*. Like Eileen, in her *laksa*, she used *ikan tenggiri* (mackerel) rather than cockles. From a neighbour, Zaiton learned that adding lime leaves to *asam pedas* made it more fragrant. Shyly, she called the improvements that she found to her liking '*tambah tambah*' (to add on).⁴⁹ She improvised on many dishes she had learned from others.

⁴⁹ Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman interview, 26 October 2019.

I was thus listening to an elderly woman who had innovated and pursued excellence in her craft while reconciled to her role within the family, as Syamala and many Singaporean women had done. Zaiton's agency was expressed not in waged employment, but in informal ways of learning and adapting home-cooked meals over the years. Like Eileen, she had done so as a child by observing her mother's cooking, by taste and by trial and error – 'try, try', she said modestly, downplaying the innovation in her cooking.⁵⁰ The unique *mee siam* recipe came from her grandmother. In the main, her cooking did not derive from recipes offered in television programmes or magazines, which she found to be disappointing. Unlike Eileen, Zaiton agreed to show me recipes that she had written down in a notebook. They were for her children to learn, she explained and, tellingly, were accompanied by precise quantities of ingredients. She has taught Hasnita a few recipes, although her daughter, a working mother, has yet to master them.

Zaiton's understated recollections underline a remarkable and little-studied culture of improvisation within domesticity in Singapore. She did more than to feed the family. As she strove to refine her dishes to a point of excellence, the food she cooked touched a wide and varied social circle: close family members, related kin, her husband's colleagues and friends, neighbours, and other visitors to her home.

CONCLUSION

These little Singapore stories of homemade meals are multi-layered and compelling. The three oral histories illustrate key themes in Singaporean history and the socio-cultural history of home cooking. Eileen Kiong, Syamala Senan and Zaiton bin Abdul Rahman shared similar experiences while differing in others – Syamala stood out in her avowed dislike for home cooking, though she would cultivate a personal philosophy and family culture around it. But they all participated in a singular set of historical circumstances: the socio-economic and urban development of Singapore in the last six decades.

50 Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman interview, 26 October 2019.

The oral histories are insightful in three ways. One, they reveal home cooking to be an under-appreciated form of work in the recent history of Singapore. All three women eschewed commercial food and technological gadgets, working hard at making delicious, wholesome family meals, mostly by hand. Home cooking was not a form of play: Eileen and Zaiton were full-time homemakers, while Syamala juggled cooking and employment. Home cooking was thus hard work but also skilled work. It was something bettered by motivation and experience, whether it was to distinguish fresh fish or improve upon a homemade *laksa*.

The culinary machinery lauded in the mass media as ‘a boon to housewives’ played a secondary role in the kitchen.⁵¹ Most of the technology, except perhaps for the rice cooker, was basic and non-electrical like Syamala’s old pot from Kerala, utilising manual labour and culinary expertise. These home cooks expressed nonchalant and critical views of hawker and restaurant food, as exemplified by Eileen’s dismissal of commercial Peranakan cuisine as *bo hor jia*k. There were various reasons why eating out was uncommon or undesired – cost, availability, nutrition – but perhaps the single most important factor was the perceived quality. If hawker food represents Singapore’s intangible cultural heritage, it should include the homemade versions that exist alongside and in conversation with it.

Home cooked meals did not just nourish the family but also helped maintain it as a social unit. Eileen’s daughter Doris (as well as her siblings and young daughter), Syamala’s daughter Anusha and Zaiton’s daughter Hasnita all praised and supported their mothers’ cooking. None of them have mastered their mothers’ recipes, or presently have the inclination to do so, thus the decline of culinary skill in Singaporean homes is likely real. But there have been partial transfers of culinary knowledge, memories and values. The children’s love for maternal cooking and their enthusiasm for me to hear their mothers’ stories reflect strong, enduring familial ties in the past and present. In an important way, home cooking nurtured and made possible the socio-economic development of post-colonial Singapore.

51 ‘Modern Cookers Save Time and Fuel A Boon to Housewives’, *Straits Times*, 4 March 1979, 27.

Second, my narrators came across as independent-minded Singaporean women, workers, wives, and mothers. They did not rehash common themes in Singapore history, but described, assessed and compared recipes, ingredients, dishes, and innovations in the past with much personal verve. They were devoted to their families and had firm ideas about what was good or bad cooking. Eileen discerned that it was necessary to reduce the amount of salt in her cooking but not sugar. The women learned to cook informally and by trial and error. As a migrant woman and wife from Kerala, Syamala succeeded in her work in both the kitchen and home-based office. Zaiton's humility belied her *tambah tambah*, a will to improvise, recreate and excel, as well as her domestic organisation and time management in making complex dishes such as *nasi padang*.

Finally, oral histories of home cooking – of informal work taking place daily within private spaces – are not only a viable form of research but also a vital one. It appears that the difficulty I had in finding agreeable participants for oral history interviews was the same reason why the testimonies I eventually obtained were so insightful: home cooking is an intensely private form of practice. Food is the theme, but its preparation and consumption connect it to histories of the individual, family and society. Oral histories with home cooks show people acting and reacting to dynamics at the personal, familial and national levels. Home cooking is well-remembered: people were not only able to recall the dishes, but also retrace the connections. Such oral history uncovers perspectives, practices, rituals and relations that are usually not documented (save for the odd recipe book), and which may differ substantially from history based on written documentation. Studies of food, women, work, the family, and the nation may not be complete without efforts to speak to the people who cooked meals at home.