

An Interview with Associate Professor Kelvin E.Y. Low

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Kelvin E.Y. Low

Image Credit: Kelvin E.Y. Low

Culture Academy	Food is often tied to social memories. What are some of your memories around food?
Kelvin E.Y. Low	<p>Growing up with my elder brother, McDonald’s was always a treat and a child’s delight that changed up the rhythm of home-cooked food over the week. Eating out was frequent and experienced both within the nuclear and extended family, where hawker centres, restaurants such as Jack’s Place, or seafood eateries like Long Beach were places usually frequented by my family, either to get-together for a birthday celebration over seafood, or just to eat out over the weekends.</p> <p>I remember how my grandfather used to buy <i>tau suan</i> whenever I visited him on the weekends with my family, and he would also packet economic rice for us, as early as 430pm as that was his dinner time! My father, who loved sweets, used to buy home <i>kueh lopis</i> or <i>putu mayam</i>, which developed a sweet tooth in me.</p>
Culture Academy	Besides individual experience, generally, why do people develop strong emotions around food?

<p>Kelvin E.Y. Low</p>	<p>In Singapore, food dishes and practices are more often than not related to different ethnic groups and this linkage has been established over a long period of time, though not without modifications and/or adaptations. Additionally, they are also tied to the tourism landscape, where food has been inducted into the realm of national representation and as part of cultural experience. Foreigners who visit the island city-state need to consume the must-haves including chicken rice, chili crab, or laksa among many other dishes that have come to stand for Singapore as a food paradise. Growing up in such an environment where food and cuisine are diverse, aplenty, and easily accessible/affordable, Singaporeans have come to associate such foods with home, and this connection persists even when we travel. A taste of one’s favourite foods when abroad, combined with the other sensory experiences of smell, texture, touch and embodied memories, brings one home in sentiment and feeling, even if one might be miles away from Singapore. Such is the potent and poignant strength of foods that can allow one to relate to home in diverse ways. Built into these memories are also the social relations that people share in acts of commensality, including partaking meals both at home and outside with loved ones, friends, or others that together shape food experiences and memory-making of one’s identity, sense of belonging and in effect ‘home-making’.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>Food is a multisensory experience and a performance art. What are some broad changes in hawker culture ‘performances’ that have changed over the years?</p>
<p>Kelvin E.Y. Low</p>	<p>Street hawkers in the past used to sensorily peddle their wares, and one can easily recall the tok-tok mee vendor, or the ice-cream man with the ring of his bell that was easily a source of sonic/gastronomic delight for kids. Hawkers in the main relied on such sensory acts as part of their daily business practice, and foodies/consumers respond to that on the basis of tacit understanding. Hawker culture in contemporary times have changed to that of experimentation, revamping, and updating in the ways traditional foods and cuisines are presented, in catering to a broader consumer base with both the young and old in mind amid changing tastes and newer culinary praxis.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>How might the inclusion of Singapore’s hawker culture into the UNESCO representative list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity change the way Singaporeans perceive hawker culture?</p>
<p>Kelvin E.Y. Low</p>	<p>If anything, such UNESCO-recognition brings global recognition that hawker culture forms a pertinent aspect of Singapore’s history and heritage in our wider foodscape and foodways. It is a timely inclusion in a sense where we continue to be reminded of the importance of how street hawking first began, and how it has since developed extensively into the hawker culture that we now know and experience intimately if not on a daily basis. Hawker centres dot neighbourhood estates across the island and have become a key feature and staple outlet for those who live and work in the country. These important everyday practices, no</p>

	doubt banal and quotidian, form key nodes of culinary experience that make-up the everyday Singaporean way of life.
Culture Academy	What would or would not change as hawker culture gets passed down to the next generation?
Kelvin E.Y. Low	Hawker culture and hawker heritage are not merely about preserving the past nor sustaining attention cast upon hawker culture as a form of intangible cultural heritage. We need to be cognizant that we are of course talking about hawkers as human actors making a living, including hawker food trade as everyday practices, and issues of posterity that demand our constant attention and investment. In order to maintain this discourse and practice, the hawker infrastructure should continue to be developed and enhanced so that training, motivation, succession and adaptation continue to receive attention from the state and people in the forefront. Only then can we ensure and assure generations of hawkers, both older and current, that hawker culture continues to fill an important heritage and sentimental space in the hearts of locals if not visitors. Only with this combination of attention, resources and time may hawker culture segue into the future, as representing a part of Singapore’s history and heritage. We should also note that food practices and how dishes are put together continually evolve and become ‘updated’ with the shifting tastes of consumers and with successive generations of younger hawkers. In this sense, food heritage is not static. Instead, it may undergo shifts, calibrations, or even overhaul so much so that heritage palates may as well transform together with current taste and expectations. What is more important amid these processes is how consumers and producers both tend to the revitalization and tweaks made to a variety of dishes and how they continue to relate to them as forming part and parcel of what it means to consume food heritage in the context of Singapore.