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Eating in the city

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ABSTRACT

This special issue introduction examines why and how food matters in Asian cities and foodscapes, thus providing a different lens from Western interpretations of urban space. As cities transform, the ways that people eat and procure food also change, along with the sociocultural meanings of food itself. The special issue brings together seven research papers that together draw attention to the everyday culinary habits, rituals, creativity, and sensory experiences that are collectively used to nurture shared senses of cultural identity and economic livelihoods. In so doing, the papers as a whole consider important issues to do with urban infrastructure, urban governance, diversity, conviviality, and cosmopolitanism.

KEYWORDS

Food; urban space; urban governance; conviviality; diversity; cosmopolitanism

Introduction

Food plays a central role in everyday social life. Taken together, food and foodways constitute the manner in which people relate to urban space and to one another. As cities transform, the ways that people eat and procure food also change, along with the sociocultural meanings of food itself. Food cultures and foods fuse, become reinvented, hybridized, or altered and thereby engender newer or improvised forms of gastronomic spaces (Fernandez 2002; Lee 2017; Solomon 2015). The multifarious ways in which food has shaped and continues to shape our lives socially, economically, politically, morally, and nutritionally attest to the importance of studying gastronomic practices that connect people across regions, time, and social groups (cf. Morgan 2015). The mobility of different communities and their accompanying culinary habits also impact upon how eating cultures in host societies are localized and reorganized (Abbots 2016; Abdullah 2010; Duruz and Khoo 2015; Tan 2011).

If the city is a site of gastronomic production, consumption, exchange, and communication (Lum and de Ferrière le Vayer 2016), how do such urban social spheres relate to shifting identities for social actors when foodways traverse both different cities and across borders? Is there a discernible urban ethos and subscription to modernizing forces that thereby influence how foodways are enacted, modified, and transformed? By reflecting on the role that food plays in human relations and across different spaces, the seven papers¹ in this special issue serve as a platform towards unravelling the enduring everyday culinary

habits, rituals, creativity, and sensory experiences that are collectively used to nurture shared senses of cultural identity and economic livelihoods (Bhowmik 2010; Frost 2011). In so doing, the articles in this issue bring food studies into dialogue with key debates on diversity, conviviality, nostalgia, urbanization, and modernization found in the disciplines of anthropology, history, geography, sociology, and urban studies. Through connective, comparative, and historical perspectives, academics and urban stakeholders can together articulate a deeper meaning of food in relation to the varying regimens of city living so as to encourage stakeholders to consider its cultural significance as well as the economic centrality it represents to migrant communities and food enthusiasts.

In the context of rapid urban and global processes that unfold around the world, Leeds-Hurwitz (2016) recommends that examinations of foodways should therefore also attend to urban practices. A similar stance is adopted by Steel (2013) who notes that as foodways fundamentally shape how cities develop, the interconnection between culinary rituals and urbanization ought to be an important focal point for scholars of food and urban studies. Farrer's (2017) delineation of a research agenda for urban foodways comprises attention paid to an urban sociological analysis of food, emotions, and how their links reflect upon sensory experiences of living in cities. Such experiences may include a cosmopolitan outlook where consumers both appropriate and transform their own identities on the basis of in- and outflows of global culinary influences occurring in city life. Urban identities, the author further explains, are also tied to place-making, where eating across a variety of social spaces may lead to the establishment of different sets of socialities marked by contestation, negotiation, or resistance. In tandem with Farrer's (2017) delineation of a research agenda for urban foodways comprising embodied cosmopolitanism, culinary place making, and senses and affect, as well as the call to further scrutinize the *interrelations* between urban studies and food studies (Leeds-Hurwitz 2016; Steel 2013), this collection revolves around three core lines of inquiry:

1. How do people perceive their positioning—vis-à-vis class, gender, and ethnic politics—in the urban social order through their culinary practices, particularly amid the urban manifestations of global political-economic restructuring and sociocultural change?
2. How is modern urban life shaped by immigration and migratory foodways? How are such food practices in turn re-assembled by social orderings of urban environments?
3. How are processes related to food and foodways, senses, and urban change intertwined? How do the politics and sensescapes of gastronomy relate to the transformation and redevelopment of urban spaces?

Drawing on culinary cultures and encounters among communities in and of Asia, this issue engages with the vernacular politics (Solomon 2015) of how different groups live and eat together, thereby elucidating the workings of relationality, food cultures, spatialities (Anjaria 2016; Kong and Sinha 2016), and everyday life interaction. The papers demonstrate the intimate connections between eating practices and the urban everyday, where each influences the other in ways that shift, transform, and re-enact tradition and identity when we move the analytical lens from one locale to the next. Studying the foodways of various communities would also provide newer ways to apprehend urban sites, and to further consider how social processes such as exclusion, engagement, or negotiation remake the manifestations of political and physical spaces of the city (Anjaria 2016). Another analytical

direction involves examining how different scales—the local, regional, transnational, and global—are intertwined when foodways move across them and are interpreted by social actors in their everyday culinary rhythms.

In the first paper by Elaine Ho, she brings us to both visible and invisible food spaces in two Chinese cities, Guangzhou and Wuhan, which have seen a rise in the number of African tertiary students who chose to study in these two places given economic affordability and available opportunities. Unpacking the gastronomic practices of these foreign students in China, her article illustrates how food as a lens draws forth a subscription to cultural hierarchies that place Westernization and cosmopolitanism at opposite ends with Chinese food cultures. At the same time, though, African migration, along with other groups of foreigners working and living in China, has also brought about changes in the Chinese urban landscape. With the rise of the middle-class Chinese population, alongside the presence of foreigners, things “Western”—cafes, bakeries, shopping malls, and businesses—have all sprung up. Ho suggests that the African students situate themselves as part of internationalization processes in Chinese cities in order to counterbalance accounts of Chinese racism.

Also addressing geopolitics and culinary exchanges is Daniel Bender and Adrian De Leon’s paper on boodle fighting, a Philippine military tradition where soldiers gather to consume a buffet of meats, curries, and rice using their bare hands. By employing this tradition as a case study, their paper illustrates the convergence and negotiation interfaces of the ethnic, imperial, and postcolonial in the foodscapes of both home and migrant Philippine food establishments. Such a militarized, gastronomic form of commensality therefore sheds light on how imperial and military histories intertwine with diasporic food practices. The intertwinement comes in the form of “militourism” (Teaiwa 1999), which conjoins culinary tourism with militarism, thereby effecting an alignment of diasporic identity, belonging to the nation, kin relations, as well as armed forces camaraderie. Within these webs of sociality also lies transformation in dining experiences in cities such as Toronto as well as in the Philippines, as the authors further explain how boodle fighting has shifted from a type of military ritual, to a culinary tourist event. Given its positioning as a hub of gastronomic multiculturalism and of Filipino migration, Toronto has seen its fair share of spaces taken up by the Filipino culinary diaspora.

In the context of the Philippines, former military bases have now been transformed into tourist attractions, and boodle fighting forms part of such tourist pursuits, reflecting upon culinary militourism that the authors highlight. Furthermore, boodle fighting is also a platform through which a national menu is presented and appeals to both locals and tourists alike. Such a practice then lends resonance to the articulation and sustenance of the Philippines’ unity as an archipelagic country. The urban centers of migratory destinations of the Filipino diaspora such as Toronto and Qatar are where boodle fighting takes place in the form of providing an experience of a militarized nation through an array of sensory, gastronomic textures.

Where Bender and De Leon’s article showcases how the tradition of boodle fighting in both home and host locales shapes urban tourist experiences vis-à-vis the idea of nationhood and militarization, Alison Hulme’s paper on Asian foodscapes in London’s night markets draws attention to how such foodways rejuvenate run-down urban spaces through a range of Asian aesthetics that in concert invoke cosmopolitanism. A similar logic of experiencing a taste of the foreign other as expressed in Bender and De Leon’s paper surfaces in Hulme’s work. Following the approach of culinary tourism where unfamiliar foodways become the object of consumption, Hulme suggests that the notion of eating the Other needs to

be problematized in order to unpack the assumed dichotomy of home versus other gastronomic culture. As a corollary, the author ponders over the category of cosmopolitan food and how definitions of the category raise further queries revolving around issues of mobility and disparity.

Continuing the thread on diasporic foodways, the next paper by Camille Bégin and Jayeeta Sharma on Scarborough, a Canadian ethnoburb in Toronto, engages with the question of how an Asian culinary hub is established and functions as a locale of ethnic food enterprises. Using a combination of student coursework, a range of mapping and visualization methodologies together with historical antecedents, Bégin and Sharma make a case for how Asian migratory patterns to Scarborough since the 1960s have paved the way for the emergence of a predominantly Asian ethnoburb that has enacted social change. With this hub, foodways and culinary businesses have taken up an important role in how identities and livelihoods are expressed and reconfigured. For instance, given the necessity of automobile journeys to reach the big supermarkets in Scarborough, migrant actors have learnt to manage such car-culture in their grocery shopping habits, which differ markedly from their pre-migration food practices. In tandem, urban infrastructure such as the construction of highways that connected the inner suburbs also made access to Chinese malls and restaurants relatively easier. Such suburban structural changes, however, were not always met with open arms. This is because of the anti-mall rhetoric by older residents who were displeased with commercialism, as well as the intensity of weekend shoppers, which added negatively to race socialities. These examples richly underscore the important attention that the authors pay towards examining the outcome of structural design, consumer behavior, and local–foreign social ties that are influenced by ethnic food consumption patterns. The paper further offers insights on the recording and archiving of stories surrounding food, migration, and settlement across different generations. This approach thereby illustrates how food is good to think with (Bell and Valentine 1997; Levi-Strauss 1963) not only in terms of academic scholarship, but as a channel for experiential learning (cf. Counihan 2015) through co-investigation that is in line with pedagogical aims. Overall, the authors' notion of a culinary hub represents a designation that signals specific food cultures and their accompanying sensescapes.

From London and Toronto, we move next to China where Anna Greenspan deliberates upon the significance of street food in the context of Shanghai's famous snack alleys. Her core arguments surrounding Shanghai's food heritage are couched upon the broader narrative of urban restructuring and regulation that saw a "cleaning up" of street markets that would eliminate sensory transgressions in favor of urban modernization. The process is thus also conjoined with future aspirations of the city that find no immediate place for itinerant street vendors. On the basis of a project called "Moveable Feasts," which undertook a mapping of Shanghai's street food landscape, Greenspan examines the various factors that transform street food practices in the modern Chinese economy. Although Greenspan recognizes the incompatibility of street hawkers and modern city life in the case of Shanghai, she also notes that street markets and street foods are, elsewhere, expanding and celebrated by both the authorities and consumers alike. Despite urban bureaucratization and sanitary management—such as the introduction of formalized food trucks that come under the stringent control of a company—Greenspan tells us that such formalization of street food is, nevertheless, subverted by some truck owners who come with their own unlicensed trucks that bear a close similarity to those that are legal. Such a response to urban governance is

interpreted by the author as a semblance of a political theatre where the informal sneaks back into the formal sphere of gastronomy in the city. She concludes by pointing out that the Chinese government now has to strike a careful balance between the dynamic informal street food industry and the goals of state-sponsored capitalism in producing a millennial city.

The next paper by Krishnendu Ray also addresses the positioning of street food in urbanity and how livelihoods, class inequalities, and masculinity conjunctionally pan out. Echoing Greenspan's work on how the street food scene in Shanghai unfolds, Ray brings us to Kolkata, India. By adopting a biographical approach that traverses three episodes, the author sheds light on how gender and class identities bifurcate gastronomic cultures with the *paan* shop (betel nut snack) as an anchor-point. Providing some colorful sensory textures of the South Asian street—from salty, sour, and bitter, to pungent and sulfuric—Ray raises the connection between these taste sensations and the Indian middle classes. Where vendors in Greenspan's research challenge urban regulation through the use of fake carts, vendors in Ray's narrative employ fees and bribes paid to municipal workers and policemen in order to make their living on the streets. Through food, Ray contrasts the streetscape of India with Western interpretations of urban space. Streetscapes and their accompanying web of social relations across the different classes comprise a story of rights to livelihood and rights to the city (cf. Anjaria 2016) enmeshed within automobile conviviality.

Taro Futamura and Kazuaki Sugiyama trace the transformation of the *izakaya* (informal Japanese gastropubs) industry in Tokyo in their paper, reflecting interactions between urban spaces and the night-time economy. They contend that in the post-bubble economy, the industry has shifted from family-run *izakaya* towards corporate *izakaya* chains which operate on a larger scale and run on lower operation costs. This scenario, a reflection of an emergent neoliberal economic environment, in effect compels the exit of many traditional, family-run *izakaya* from Tokyo's urban night scene. As a result, the night-time economy and foodscape has gradually become homogenized as per eating and drinking practices, as chain *izakaya* dominate nightscapes in the wider context of economic globalization.

In returning to the three lines of theoretical inquiry posted at the onset, the papers collected here demonstrate how affective urban life and sensory scripts (cf. Anjaria 2016; Degen 2014; Rhys-Taylor 2017; Wise 2010) unfold in the midst of food practices at both the local and transnational levels. Food practices thus highlight the shifting nature of urban infrastructures, governance frameworks, and tensions that arise as an outcome of everyday urban encounters. Theorized through interdisciplinary lenses and multi-scalar analysis (Farrer 2017), the authors draw our attention to a range of analytical possibilities that together emphasize the pertinence of commensality—which comprises a spectrum of positive and negative social influences and outcomes—that confirms the gastronomic, symbolic, and structural significance of studying food and foodways.

Note

1. This special issue brings together papers that were first presented at a 2015 workshop on "Food and the Global Asian City," which we co-organized with the thematic group TG07 Senses and Society of the International Sociological Association. The workshop was funded by a grant from the NUS-ODPRT for which we record our appreciation. A subsequent call for papers was later announced, thereby adding articles by Alison Hulme, and Taro Futamura and Kazuaki Sugiyama to the original set. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable time and comments for papers in this collection.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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