

THE POWER OF GASTRONOMY: CHANGING URBAN FOODSCAPES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Panel Abstract

Across the urban landscapes of Southeast Asia, eating and drinking options seem broader than ever. In an increasingly globalised world, it is still possible to enjoy traditional basic fare but also, Western fast-food options amid landscapes that further feature upmarket restaurants, wine bars and coffee shops. At the same time, traditional markets in urban settings are often displaced to the periphery and/or replaced by outlets offering organic food, pre-packaged options, online deliveries and so on. Eating habits themselves are also changing as consumers may decry the loss of traditional eateries around them but embrace new eating places and seek to make traditional dishes into healthier options.

Scholars have recognised increasingly that gastronomic habits and choices are enlightening for understanding attitudes towards consumption, class, authenticity and urban imagination, heritage, performativity of identity, as well as literal representations of changing urban settings. Here, we interrogate the literal changing urban landscape of Southeast Asia through gastronomic practices. Contributions from any discipline that speak to any of these themes are welcome.

Titles and proposed panellist details

Please note that all speakers are confirmed

Arve Hansen - University of Oslo - Demeatifying Vietnam? Vegetarian food practices and foodscapes in Hanoi's meat boom

Diets in Vietnam have been undergoing a rapid process of 'meatification' in recent decades. Through changes in everyday food practices and in systems of provision for food, the average Vietnamese consumer eats significantly more meat than in the past. While these processes have been well documented in Hanoi, little attention has been given to its counterpart. In the middle of the meat boom, a trend of cutting back on meat consumption has emerged among both young and old Hanoians, and many young, middle-class urbanites have even adopted vegetarian diets, often to the dismay of their families. These meat-reducing trends were in turn strengthened by two recent crises. First, the African swine fever led to the death and culling of one quarter of all pigs in the country, then the Covid-19 pandemic led to a drastic decrease in the prevalence of eating out as well as an increased skepticism towards animal-sourced products. Based on food ethnography and household interviews before and during the pandemic, this paper analyses gastronomic practices in Hanoi, giving particular

attention to how meatification and demeatification unfold in and through everyday geographies of consumption.

Magda Biran-Taylor – SOAS – “Downing your mojito as Barong yet again defeats Rangda’: an exploration of the significance of the cocktail in the cultural cuisine of Ubud”

‘Heritage’ and ‘Culture’ are two of the buzz terms used to attract a certain class of tourist to Southeast Asia. In many ways, they have superseded ‘exotic’ in the post ‘Orientalism’ world of Tourism studies of the area and certainly in high end tourist promotions and advertising. One of the premier destinations marketed thus is Ubud, the much vaunted ‘cultural capital’ of Bali. Famously, ‘Tourism’ arrived in Bali during the 1920s and ‘30s, inspired by the lyrical ethnographic work of academics such as Walter Spies and Miguel Covarrubias that tantalisingly described the unique and apparently theatrical mix of Hindu and animism that permeated the culture. From this base, tourism in Ubud has evolved along several lines: almost all of them promoting the town’s unique ‘heritage’ and ‘culture’. Not least among these is the promotion of specifically Balinese food across a wide spectrum of restaurants from high end hotels to roadside warungs (street food stalls) What this paper examines is the apparent dichotomy of this emphasis on an authentic Balinese menu against a drinks list which invariably features a small number of international cocktails. The intention is to instigate a discussion as to the reasons for this apparent anomaly and whether or not it can be seen as to be part of a dynamic giving the Balinese agency to manipulate the concept of ‘heritage and culture’ to their own advantage where tourism is concerned while leaving the what are in fact cultural essentials untainted.

**Mareike Pampus – Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Social Anthropology–
“Mansions and Manners: Afternoon Tea as a Local Heritage Practice in Penang (Malaysia)”**

Putative British colonial heritage has been neglected as a topic in the narrative of Malaysia’s national heritage since independence through the attempt to strengthen an ‘authentic’ and uniform national identity. This causes problems for a port city like George Town that suddenly had to fit into a nation state with which it shares little history. In fact, the diverse heritages of Penang are manifestations of the port city’s historical, economic, and political connections not only to the Malayan mainland but across the Indian Ocean World.

Using three dissimilar mansions as entry points, this paper investigates these houses as sites of consumption. As all three were built at different times and follow diverse building styles, the paper offers insights into the wide-ranging eclecticism that was dominant in George Town and thus widens the perception of supposedly ‘colonial’ buildings. Simultaneously, the chapter discusses ‘colonial’ style as a certain aesthetic connected to emic perspectives on an (imagined) past. By using the example of drinking afternoon tea, the paper demonstrates how an allegedly British colonial habit has been localised as an aspect of local heritage.

For over two centuries George Town has been a place where new heritages emerged, in which the influences of Western elements were salient and incorporated. As the

examples of mansions and afternoon tea demonstrate, not only the architecture but also the resulting habits and manners are manifestations of such remarkably resilient connections. With regard to the dynamics of this port city, I maintain that for the port city inhabitants, colonial heritage is not a foreign heritage. In light of my ethnographic data, productions of 'colonial chic' are also consumed by local people as part of their own heritage. Through mimetic strategies, some aspects of supposedly Western cultures became inherent elements of the port city's 'connected heritage'. Through this (re)composition, such elements are made into something new, different, enduring, and most of all their own. Yet, having afternoon tea is not merely the practice of local habits but simultaneously serve as markers of distinction, as well as being deployed to recover prestige and a sense of self-confidence.

Petra Desatova – Nordic Institute of Asian Studies – “Authoritarian Legitimation, Soft Power and Food Promotion in Thailand”

Key words: Thailand, authoritarian legitimation, food promotion, nation branding.

Phill Wilcox – Bielefeld University – “Doing coffee in Luang Prabang: fusion and making heritage space through coffee culture in an iconic world heritage town”

Luang Prabang has assumed the status of an iconic city and one of Southeast Asia's must-visit destinations, largely since its recognition by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1995. Scholarship on Luang Prabang recognises the complexities and contradictions of heritage making, how these have transformed space in central Luang Prabang and how these celebrate the aesthetics of colonialism. This paper argues that these dynamics are also visible through the consumption of coffee. Like the city's prized architecture, coffee has its roots in colonialism. Moreover, its production in Northern Laos, around Luang Prabang, is recent. Coffee is available in several of the town's protected heritage buildings but served in a style with which many Lao are unfamiliar and at a price they cannot afford. Consequently, coffee shops are apparently public spaces, but inaccessible to much of the local population. Researched through ethnographic fieldwork, this paper argues that coffee practices in Luang Prabang reflect wider discourses of heritage and allow visitors and locals to participate in the making of this space to particular agendas of heritage. Thinking with and through coffee allows a deeper understanding of a spatialized culinary geography in Luang Prabang and its relationship to the process of heritage-making.