Making Singapore Home: A Study of Isan Migrants in Singapore and their Food

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My father was an anthropologist who dedicated his career in Singapore to raising awareness of the living conditions of Thai migrant workers in Singapore. He published articles and books to shed light on their struggle to adjust to harsh working conditions and the cultural and language differences that are not easily overcome. I grew up watching him go to Golden Mile Complex (GMC) Sunday, to teach English and share meals with these migrant workers on their only off-day. However, I realized that there was a disparity between how Thai migrants are seen in the eyes of Singaporeans and how Thai migrants actually lead their lives in Singapore. Therefore, I wanted my research to enlarge the voices of Isan migrants and unpack their lifestyles from a different lens.

The aims of my research project are to understand how food contributes to cultural identity of Isan people and how different food practices of Thai migrants and relate it to their place in Singapore society. Thirdly, I wanted to determine the various ways in which food practices of Isan migrants are manifested in different spaces in Singapore. The Isan migrants in Singapore are Thai-Lao people who originate from Northeastern Thailand (Isan) and make up the largest proportion of Thai migrants working in Singapore. They are blue collar workers who mainly work on construction sites. Some Singaporeans and even Thai white-collar professionals deem their jobs to be dirty, dangerous and demeaning. However, from what I have observed after living in Singapore for over a decade, the lives of Isan migrants are more nuanced. On Sundays, they participate in soccer matches, drinking, singing luuk tung songs and enjoying food that reminds them of their homelands. They

are also active in remitting their wages home and donating to temples in their respective provinces. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 Migrant workers collecting donations



Figure 2 Small, cramped dormitories

Of all these activities, I chose to focus on their food practices because the type of food they consume and where they consume it play a role in influencing their sense of belonging to Singapore. As a Singaporean Geographer, Brenda Yeoh, argues, "Place identity is evocative of a sense of belonging." Through the food practices of the migrant workers in different spaces of Singapore, I wanted to see if they were able recreate the sense of belonging they have to their hometowns in Singapore.

I conducted semi structured interviews with several Isan migrants and an ethnography in GMC. I also took note of some of their Facebook posts that capture moments that are beyond my means. The notes I have taken allowed me to understand their food practices in three spaces; dormitories, construction sites, forested areas and GMC.

The first case study that I would like to analyze is the dormitories and construction sites (Figure 2). From Monday to Saturday, the migrant workers are mainly confined to their construction sites and dormitories. They either eat catered food or forced to buy food from cheap food courts nearby. They often dub the food they consume during weekdays as “Chinese food”, or economy rice which comprises of rice, some fried or stir-fried meat and vegetables. Within their dormitories, there are strict regulations that prevent them from cooking. To make the most of the cramped rooms and to avoid getting caught, they resort to using small rice cookers to cook their Isan meals.

To understand the significance of the food practices of Isan migrants, I contrasted the food Isan migrants like to cook and buy from GMC to the food they have to eat during their working days. In particular, glutinous rice or *kaao niao* is a staple in many Isan households. It is grown by many families to generate an income and for personal consumption. More importantly, *kaao niao* is representative of the spirit of the village. According to Montree, one of the Isan migrants I interviewed, their bodies are more receptive to *kaao niao* than white rice or *kaao jaao*. Glutinous rice provides them with energy needed to work even harder.

However, from the perspective of the more affluent provinces like Bangkok, kaao niao can be used to reinforce negative stereotypes associated with Isan people. This is because kaao niao may be associated with the poverty that is largely prevalent in Isan today. Even in Singapore, their place as the lowest paid workers in the workforce

is reinforced by systematic factors that limit their access to Isan food. From their inability to cook in their dormitories and having to eat within their means during the work week, their food practices in Singapore have become a form of social marginalization that evokes a sense of displacement from Singaporean society (Figure 3).



Figure 3 $7.50 lunch without drinks



Figure 4 Wild Vegetables from foreted areas

The second case study is the forested areas where Isan migrants can hunt and gather their food. These natural areas contain many edible plants, mushrooms, greens and fishes. They are located in Chua Chu Kang, Yishun or near certain dormitories. While Singaporeans generally regard these spaces as dangerous forbidden zones, Isan migrants liken these areas to the forests back home. These forested

areas allow them to return to nature, as the provider of food, to satisfy their needs and longing for the comfort of home. They are also able to exemplify the hunting and gathering skills that their community has equipped them with (Figure 4). As such, their food practices are means to escape the regulations that they are forced to abide by daily as blue-collar workers.

Thirdly, GMC is known is 'Little Thailand' to Thai migrants and Singaporeans alike. In contrast to shopping malls of similar sizes, GMC is messy, dirty and poorly maintained. However, it functions well as a space for Thai migrant workers to meet, remit money and most importantly, exercise their freedom to eat whatever they long for. To Isan migrants, place identification stems from their ability to demarcate GMC as their space through various food practices. For example, while Singaporeans may choose to sit in the Thai restaurants, many migrants



Figure 5 Circular clusters of migrants sharing food on a Sunday

take away packets of food from the restaurants and gather in circles on the floor to share the food (Figure 5). Doing so allows them to recreate the meals they had with their families in Thailand.

Moreover, Thai migrants feel the need to maintain their claim over GMC, even when this space is contested by other foreign migrants. According to Saksit, Singaporeans see it as 'Golden Mao' and associate GMC with fighting. But this reputation is unjustified because it is not the Thais that are fighting but the Mon people. This implies that other foreign workers are not welcome and should not be allowed to claim GMC as their space. However, the boundaries of GMC may be relaxed to welcome female domestic workers. Migrant workers who stay in Singapore for extended periods of time may develop intimate relationships with Filipino or Indonesian domestic workers. The women are a welcome addition to their circle of Isan food and alcohol. The dishes shared within their circles have become more diverse, due to the addition of Filipino and Indonesian home cooked food. This also reinforces the masculine Character of GMC. From the Isan-based cultural practices to the selectivity of their social circle, the Isan migrants seek to preserve the Isan character of their space by creating an atmosphere that they can find comfort in.

As the work week begins and their freedom to carry out their native food practices is eroded once more, they are forced to compromise and adapt to their living conditions. This reinforces their status as migrants in transit. Moreover, it highlights spaces like forested areas and GMC as spaces worth safeguarding because they allow them to assert their Isan identity and find strength in remembering the home and community they come from.