

Consuming Asia: Culinary Tourism, soft power and mediation of Peranakan TV

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of East Asian pop culture flows in boosting the soft power of Asian nations. Specifically, it explores the role of television dramas and pop culture in promoting heritage culinary heritage tourism. While much has been discussed on the globalizing appeal of Korean pop culture in boosting Korean tourism and cultural consumption, little has been studied within the context of Southeast Asian countries' indigenous cultures such as the Peranakan culture in Singapore. This study examines the nostalgic and culinary appeal of *The Little Nyonya* <小娘惹>, a regionally successful locally-produced Peranakan TV drama from Singapore, and suggests that if media and tourism policies were better integrated, Singapore's unique, multicultural heritage and culture could be a source of soft power and tourism attraction, attracting both viewers and visitors to Singapore.

Key words: Culinary tourism, Ethnic identity, Film tourism, Peranakan, Popular culture

Introduction

Situated within the rise of an East Asian Pop culture wave since the 1980s, several Asian cities – namely Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, have emerged not only as economic miracles, but also as cultural and culinary hubs for the region. Particularly, their pop culture products are successfully exported overseas, creating a boomerang effect or catalyst for in-bound and regional tourism. Through the circulation of such pop culture products, the exporting nations not only exert soft power on receiving nations (Chua, 2016), but also create unique pull factors as desirable tourist destinations (Kim, Long & Robinson, 2009; Mansson, 2011; Yen & Croy, 2016). Of these pop culture products, food that is packaged as culinary and cultural experiences in various media channels – from print to television, is one of the easiest means to export Asian cultural goods and services overseas.

As highlighted by Mansson (2011), pervasive media platforms in societies today have a significant influence on how audiences perceive places and people; whereby “places portrayed in media and the place of consumption are connected...through peoples’ involvement with the media products” (p.1654). There are thus significant opportunities for creating film-induced and culinary tourism attractions by harnessing the benefits of extended media consumption and experiences. A destination’s culinary heritage can be a valuable cultural resource to be transformed into tourism products, contributing to its unique character, local ethnic identity and sense of place (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Horng & Tsai, 2012a; Rand & Heath, 2006). Food culture and heritage has the potential to be a marketable tourism commodity, providing competitive differentiation in destination marketing and branding (Henderson, 2004; Horng & Tsai, 2012b).

While there has been research focusing on the role of culinary and film tourism in showcasing destinations’ local heritage and popular culture, there has been no significant research in which a locally-produced, ethnic-centric television drama has been leveraged and packaged for culinary heritage tourism and destination branding in South East Asia. This study examines the role of a popular locally-produced television series, *The Little Nyonya* <小娘惹> as a destination pull factor in culinary and heritage tourism. Specifically, it explores the role of television dramas and pop culture in promoting and heritage culinary heritage tourism in Singapore within the dimensions of (1) destination imagery, (2) cultural landscapes, (3) celebrity appeal, (4) heritage revitalization, and (5) food culture trends. Thus, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Investigate the role of popular locally-produced television dramas in promoting culinary and heritage tourism;
2. Determine the attributes extant in ethnic-centric television dramas that can be packaged for tourism consumption and destination branding;
3. Suggest strategies for destinations to leverage and transform renewed audience and visitor interests in indigenous culture for culinary and heritage tourism.

Literature Review

Tasting culture: Culinary tourism, cultural heritage and the consumption of places

Food and gastronomy can be a tourism attraction and powerful motivator for travel. As a growing segment in destination development, culinary tourism offers destinations a competitive advantage and brand appeal through creating positive links between food and its unique local character (Henderson, 2009; Horng & Tsai, 2012b). Visitors’ food choices and preferences can be strong antecedent factors influencing tourism demand for food; and consequently, the destination’s gastronomic and culinary heritage landscape (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Mak, Lumbers & Eves, 2012). Beyond biological and hedonistic needs, local cuisines and indigenous foodways can serve social and psychological meanings as a way to taste the local culture and engage with its people, places and unique identities (Chaney & Ryan, 2012; Henderson, 2004; Horng & Tsai, 2012a). As highlighted by Tan, Ngah and Abdullah (2015), people and societies organize their foodways within structures reflective of their cultural, social and ethnic identities; and consequently, create symbolic meanings in the way they connect with each other emotionally, spiritually and physically. As a tourism attraction and resource, a destination’s food offerings and

culinary experiences can have a considerable impact on the overall visit experience. An ambiguous or bland gastronomic identity can have an unfavorable effect on destination development and tourism success (Henderson, 2009).

The ethnographic richness of the Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) culture and their unique, hybrid ancestry afford opportunities for the packaging and promotion of this distinct ethnic flavor within the fabric of Singapore's cultural tourism landscape (Henderson, 2003). Singapore is a multiracial melting pot of diverse cultures, religions and identities, and its culinary heritage and legacies are equally vibrant living traditions. Consequently, its food heritage and cuisine is an amalgam of localized, borrowed and unique fusion of tastes and culinary delights (Duruz, 2011) reflecting the complex flavors of its multiethnic Asian ethnology. Culturally, Singapore's deep pre-, colonial and post-colonial historical links within the larger Malay archipelago gave rise to a rich spectrum of indigenous cultures and identities that included the indigenous Orang Laut Malays and Javanese Malays, as well as those of immigrant Chinese men from Fujian China who married local Malay women, creating unique Chinese-Malay hybrid cultures known as the Peranakan culture that "developed hybridized culture that merges local rituals and colonial values whilst retaining fundamental elements of Chinese identity" (Tan, 2009, p.135). In the 19th century, there was also strong Indian influence in the Peranakan culture throughout the key Strait Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang (Lim C., 2008).

Multiple and hybrid ethnic identities have always co-existed in the Straits Settlements given the high level of trade and commerce that flourished in the region. During this period, among the indigenous cultures, the Peranakans were considered an elite social community, that was a source of power, contributing to philanthropy and educational initiatives in colonial Singapore and Malacca. They also acted as 'mandarins' to the colonial governments, and displayed their wealth through rich traditions in embroidery, Peranakan cooking and architectural feats that reflected their mixed cultural heritage. Conceptually, ex-colonial nation-states such as Singapore could have continued to exploit its Peranakan heritage to cultivate its 'soft power' in the region. However, since Singapore's independence in 1965, it gradually distanced itself from its colonial roots; while Peranakan culture has been associated with all four official ethnicities of the Malays, Chinese, Tamil and Eurasian/Other ethnic minorities, its cultural influence has weakened (Lam, 2009). Instead, Singapore's Peranakan Chinese culture has been culturally appropriated to promote local fashion, Singapore Airlines and local food cultures; while Singapore's dwindling Peranakan community actively supports Peranakan performing arts and cultural heritage through groups like the *Gunong Sayang Association*.

Experiencing culture: Film tourism and TV dramas in promoting destinations

With the current Asian pop culture wave, films and television dramas have been increasingly harnessed by destination marketing organizations and industry stakeholders as tourism marketing and destination branding strategies (Connell, 2012; Yen & Croy, 2016). For instance, in recent years, South Korea has developed from being a comparatively unknown tourism destination to becoming a popular destination for overseas tourists; whereby shooting locations of popular dramas are marketed as (and become) tourist destinations (Chua 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Lin & Huang, 2008). Kim *et al.* (2009) further posits that television dramas (unlike films)

can produce more loyal and enduring relationships with audiences, since the relationship is sustained and developed over a longer period of time in a serialized or episodic format where the viewer experience of cultures is mediated through consuming the dramatic construction of narratives, *mise-en-scene* and characterizations.

For example, the popularity of Korean television drama serials like *Jewel in the Palace* (*Dae Jang Geum*) created strong interest in Korean cuisine in Taipei after its telecast in 2005 (Lim, T. 2008). Its popularity has been extensively exploited for destination tourism (Lin & Huang, 2008; Wong & Lai, 2015) such as the *Dae Jang Geum* Theme Park in South Korea, as well as one-day *Dae Jang Geum* tours which include learning the “secrets of Korean cooking and medicine” (OneDayKorea.com, 2017), fantasy heritage tours; in addition to revitalizing interest in national cultures and locations. Hence, popular television drama series can also contribute to changing the destination image of the town where the series was filmed (Skinner, 2016). Tourists may desire to experience and gaze upon these mediatized images as they are localized within the context of the place, influenced by the narratives and depictions being portrayed (Mansson, 2011). This offers significant opportunities to explore the relational dimensions of popular television production, pop culture consumption and culinary heritage tourism within a destination marking perspective.

Often transnationally-popular television drama series connect with audiences through representations of specific material cultures such as its use of culinary and food image, as well as unique settings or *mise-en-scene*. In the example of *Jewel in the Palace* displayed characters and their relationships through food preparation in either lavish Korean courts or everyday meals. The use of food imagery in this drama series served multiple purposes of meaning-making from enriching drama characterization to glorifying indigenous cultures (Rawsley, 2014). Furthermore, the Korean wave of transnational consumption of various Korean pop cultural products like its television dramas and pop music has also become a ‘cultural diplomacy’ tool to aid the South Korean government’s attempt to exert ‘soft power’ with its neighboring countries. For the case of South Korea, cultural (especially film, TV and music) and tourism policies support the development of the *Hallyu* brand to reduce state and popular anxieties of fraught North-South relations on the Korean Peninsula, as well as positively influence its cross-strait relations with China and Japan (Jang & Paik, 2012; Nye & Kim, 2013).

Bower (2004, p.1) notes that “filmmakers in all film genres turn to food to communicate important aspects of characters’ emotions, along with their personal and cultural identities”. Many films have also piqued audiences’ curiosity about food and cooking such as Taiwanese film *Eat Drink Man Woman* in 1994 which film director Ang Lee says was a way of representing and romanticizing Taipei culture through “tourist eyes” (Ball, cited in Ty, 1996, p.68). In another example, being able to taste foods of the good old [Hong Kong] days featured in Hong Kong films are strongly correlated to Korean film tourists who are film fans of 1980s Hong Kong action films (Kim & Kim, 2017). They further suggest that with increased internet access by Asian consumers, destination marketing efforts should include web strategies that use nostalgic popular film clips to attract potential visitors.

In the circulation of culture, Bourdieu (1984) uses the term 'cultural intermediaries' to refer to professionals that help to make specific cultures easier to consume for other 'classes' and have been variously understood as 'cultural ambassadors', or 'ethnic diplomats' (De Propriis & Mwaura, 2013, p.3). While cultural intermediaries may often be celebrities, or 'key ambassadorial personalities', they can also be any agents who "carry out the cultural intermediation tasks of educating customers" (p.5) at specific cultural events and moments. In the context of television dramas and culinary tourism, these can be the scriptwriters, director or celebrities who acted in the drama series as well as publishing media who can translate and educate audiences, and their personas are used in advertising or publicizing specific cultures. For this study of Peranakan television, cultural intermediaries for this indigenous culture (found amongst the previous Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang) in service of tourism are identified as the: (1) scriptwriter(s), (2) producers/production team, (3) actors, (4) Peranakan association, and (5) various published media and delivery platforms.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature reviewed, the following conceptual framework (Figure 1) is proposed, which posits that locally-produced television dramas and pop culture can play a role in promoting heritage and culinary tourism in Singapore, particularly in ethnic neighborhoods and heartlands. The conceptual model illustrates the key dimensions for experiencing culture and heritage during encounters *in situ* at the destination (visitor experiences), and on screen/other media platforms (viewer experiences). Consequently, these experiences will influence their consumption of cultural resources; in which visitors' activities and behavior at the destination are influenced by (1) the tourism resources available at the destination, and (2) the mediatized images being presented and contextualized within the context of the place. These ethnic representations and narratives shared are mediated by cultural intermediaries and interpretive messages being communicated. Finally, it reviews the destination and tourism attributes that should be considered when developing film-induced culinary tourism, within the dimensions of: (1) destination imagery, (2) cultural landscapes, (3) celebrity appeal, (4) heritage revitalization, and (5) food culture trends. Particular emphasis is placed on how these resources can be leveraged and harnessed by destination stakeholders, tourism organizations and the publicity complex as pull factors in marketing and promoting culinary heritage tourism.

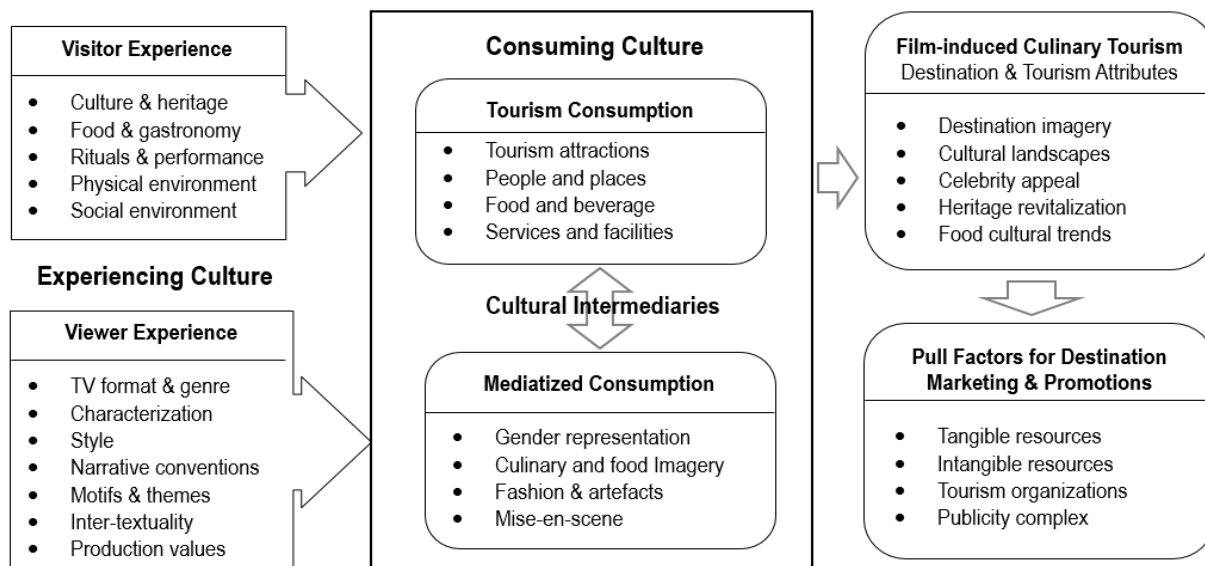


Figure 1: Conceptual model of film-induced culinary and heritage tourism

Methodology

This current study reviews the role of popular locally-produced television series as an antecedent motivational feature and pull factor in culinary and heritage tourism. The aim is to explore the inferences of causality with regards to the relationship between popular television dramas, pop culture consumption and culinary heritage tourism. It presents Singapore's articulation of its culinary and ethnic legacies in the television drama, *The Little Nyonya* <小娘惹>, and its multiplier effect of making Singapore's history and cultural journey more accessible to both locals and foreign visitors. Produced by MediaCorp (Singapore) and telecast in 2008 to 2009, *The Little Nyonya* <小娘惹>, a 34-part Chinese-drama series set against the backdrop of the Straits-born Chinese (Peranakan) culture, is its highest rated drama series to-date. Furthermore, from early 2017, it became available to global audiences on Netflix through a tie-up with MediaCorp (The Straits Times, 2016), which has a potential reach of 86 million subscribers in 190 countries, virtually extending the possibility of marketing Peranakan culture through the TV drama series to the world.

This study adopts an exploratory case study approach, utilizing netnographic research and web content and textual analysis, which enables an ethnographic investigation of consumer insights from online communities and resources (Kozinets, 2002). Data collection and analysis for the dimensions within the conceptual framework adopts different approaches and sources, each selected to represent the specific dimensions being investigated and availability of data. For the visitor perspective, online reviews posted on Tripadvisor (Tripadvisor, 2017) were evaluated to gather visitor feedback and opinions on the *Joo Chiat/Katong* area – the traditional heartlands of the Peranakan and Eurasian communities, and an ethnic neighborhood well regarded for its rich Peranakan heritage, quintessential ornate pre-war Peranakan architecture and nostalgic and authentic tastes of Nyonya cuisine (Duruz, 2011; Tripadvisor, 2017). Tripadvisor is chosen because it is recognized as the world's leading online travel community for visitors to share and seek information about destinations, and rate service experiences globally (Jeacle & Carter,

2011). For the purpose of this study, only reviews in English were analyzed ($n=45$), and the reviews available were posted between 2011 and 2017.

For the media and cultural intermediaries perspective, web content analysis of news and/or media coverage and online reviews on *The Little Nyonya* and its related inter-textual extensions to culinary or food, fashion and language cultures were analyzed to gather audiences' engagement, involvement and attachment to the TV series, its characters and narratives about Peranakan culture. These included: (1) media coverage, (2) published interviews with cultural intermediaries and community stakeholders, (3) media and corporate websites, (4) online reviews from SPCNet (Asian Movies and TV Series Reviews, Photos and News) ($n =57$), (5) Online Forums such as SGForum ($n=527$) and TheSmartLocal ($n=11$), (6) the show's Official Facebook Page ($n =681$), (7) The Singapore Tourism Board, and (8) other blogs. In particular, emphasis is placed on the influencing role of these cultural intermediaries in their promotion of Peranakan Culture through the TV series; as well as their receptivity and support for using film- and culinary-tourism as a means to promote and revitalize the local Singaporean and Peranakan culture.

To enable the triangulation of data, the narratives and opinions gathered from the fans, media and cultural intermediaries were reviewed vis-à-vis the visit experiences, reflections and perceptions of the visitors (based on the analysis of the reviews Tripadvisor); in order to identify emergent themes, relational patterns, and commonalities or disparities. Figure 2 below illustrates some aspects of the above dimensions applied to the conceptual model (Figure 1) to the study of the Peranakan television drama *The Little Nyonya* in boosting heritage culinary tourism.

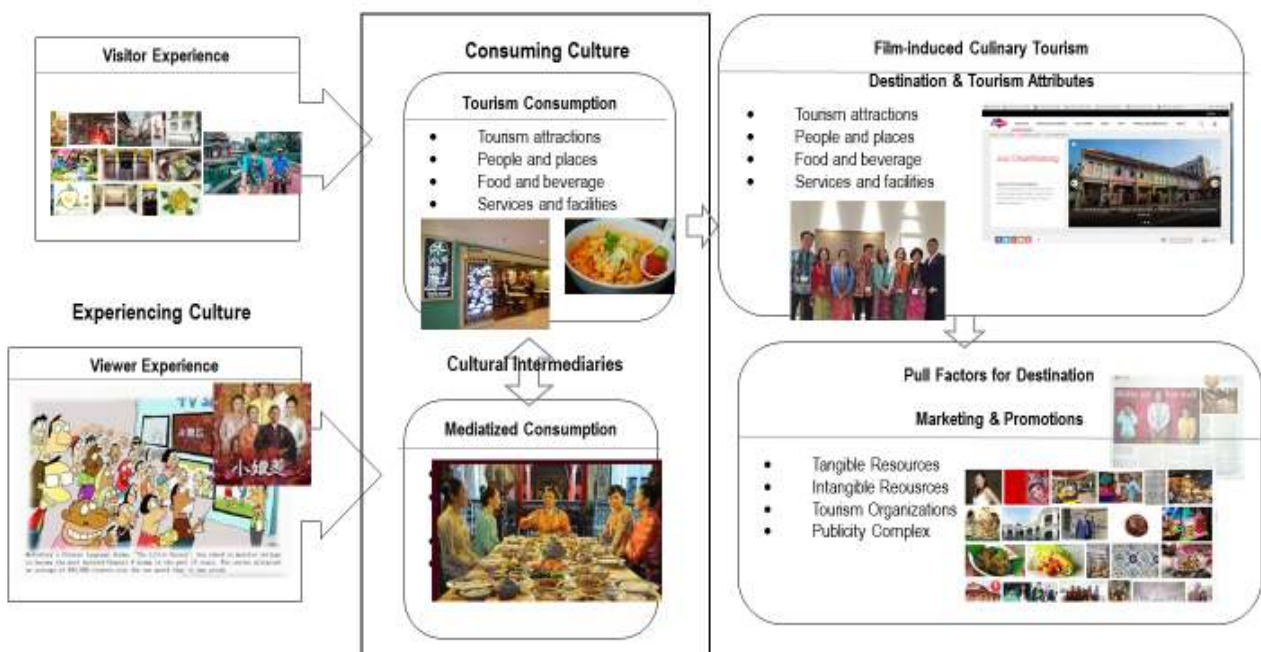


Figure 2: Applying conceptual framework to *The Little Nyonya* and Peranakan-centric heritage and culinary tourism in Singapore.

Findings and Discussion

Peranakan Food and Culture: Representing the Singapore Hybrid Identity

The Joo Chiat/Katong area – the traditional heartlands of the Peranakan and Eurasian communities in Singapore, is an ethnic neighborhood well regarded for its vibrant Peranakan heritage, flamboyant Peranakan architecture, alleyways of vanishing trades and traditional tastes of authentic Nyonya culinary delights showcasing a melting pot of Singapore's eclectic identity (Duruz, 2011; Shaw & Ismail, 2006). The 45 visitor reviews on Tripadvisor (2017) were studied and analyzed to determine the experiential aspects of their visit that resonated with them most. These experiences were broadly categorized into: (1) culture and heritage, (2) food and gastronomy, (3) rituals and cultural performances, (4) the physical environment, and (5) the social environment. A review of the narratives shared by visitors revealed that activities and experiences related to food and gastronomy were most frequently mentioned by the majority of visitors (73%, $n=33$); followed by comments about the neighborhood's physical environment (64%, $n=29$), social environment (60%, $n=27$), and culture and heritage (55%, $n=25$). Interestingly, only a small number of reviews (11%, $n=5$) had articulated experiences related to rituals, traditions and cultural performances.

Overall, visitors' visit experiences in Joo Chiat/Katong were positive, and reviewers on the Tripadvisor community rated the destination an average of four out of five, with the majority (74%) rating it as either excellent or very good (Tripadvisor, 2017). Visitors felt that Joo Chiat/Katong was a destination that was unique and stimulating, describing the area as: "*the home of the Peranakans*", "*an interesting heritage area to explore*", "*a step into the past*", "*a fun walkabout*", "*very charming*", "*a quaint part of Singapore*", "*a dose of culture and architecture*" and "*a unique Singapore neighborhood*". For example, T40, a tourist from the UK (Tripadvisor, June 2013), expressed that it was "*nice to see a preserved area of the past*", where the unique Singapore culture and heritage are conserved. Echoing this, T27, a tourist from Bulgaria (Tripadvisor, September 2015) said, this "*Peranakan enclave...(is) interesting for those who want to immerse (themselves) into the local culture and life*".

Within the context of Peranakan heritage, food and culture in presenting Singapore's unique indigenous/ethnic hybrid identity, there was particular interest in the sights, tastes and smells offered by the area's attractions and establishments. These included features such as: (1) local old-style eateries (e.g., coffee shops, cafes and hawker stalls), (2) traditional cuisines or signature dishes (e.g., Nyonya laksa, frog porridge, chicken rice and chilli/black pepper crab), (3) Peranakan restaurants and shops – selling "authentic" and 'home-styled" Peranakan snacks, *Nyonya kuehs* and confectioneries, (4) vanishing trades and local products on offer (e.g., herbal shops, antique furniture shops, *pohpiah* skin makers, and shops selling Peranakan fashion and curios), and (5) Peranakan-themed museums, places of worship and other cultural places of interest. Additionally, the area's Peranakan pre-war shophouses and colorful, ornate architectural features were also enthusiastically articulated by visitors; offering them the opportunity to "*walk down memory lane*" in a unique neighborhood strongly juxtaposed from tother areas in this modernized cosmopolitan city-state. As shared by T14, an American tourist (Tripadvisor, September 2016): The "*blocks of old heritage (is)... worth a stop for the contrasting*

colors of old Singapore". T17, a Malaysian tourist (Tripadvisor, August 2016) also felt that "for those who love history and architecture, the well-preserved rows of Peranakan shophouses entertain the eyes".

Based on the reviews and opinions shared by visitors, it is evident that there is positive interest by visitors in experiencing and consuming ethnic heritage, culture and cuisines in this district. It is a pity that the destination is not better leveraged, embedded and articulated into Singapore's overall tourism brand messages and product offerings. As an ethnic neighborhood and heartlands of the local community, away from the usual touristic areas or districts, this is an area not commonly frequented by tourists. However, there can be unique opportunities to utilize exceptional indigenous and ethnic representations as a tourism resource. As Henderson (2003) suggests, tourism and ethnicity can be closely connected, and tourism can be a "means of highlighting and assisting in the preservation of threatened minority heritages" (p. 27). In fact, T24, a local visitor (Tripadvisor, January 2016) to Joo Chiat has asked: "Why isn't this area in guidebooks?", and felt that it was an "interesting little enclave neighborhood" and "must-see" destination in Singapore.

TV as a Cultural Gateway: Leveraging TV Dramas for Destination Brand Equity

The intensified intra-Asia cultural flows of television dramas series and films often trigger tourist flows to places associated because of their emotional attachment to the plot or characters, and frequent exposure to information of particular cultures and places (Chang, 2015). In the analysis of fan reviews and publicity generated by cultural intermediaries, they reflected how viewers positively responded to the recurring Peranakan motifs and themes fulfilling a nostalgic use of television and implicitly appreciating these cultures and locations. As shared by S6 (SPCNet reviewer, January 2009): "Remember what you are.... your roots. You know, after seeing *Little Nyonya*. I had an unsuppressed urge to relearn my Chinese once again...like in remembering your roots." Similarly, in *The Peranakan Magazine* (2009, Issue 1 p.26), it was noted that:

"The Little Nyonya was rated among the best serials on local TV in the past fifteen years. We know of many non-Chinese speaking Nyonyas and Babas who just had to tune in to the serial every night from compulsion.... Amidst the fuss, it is clear that The Little Nyonya has stoked interest in Baba culture to a fever pitch. The serial's debut was followed by hits to The Peranakan Association's website more than tripling, while Peranakan businesses saw their takings increase markedly. The Chan family museum in Malacca that was used as one of the primary shooting locations chalked up a huge increase in visits by Singaporeans, not to mention Singapore's own Peranakan Museum."

Unlike South Korea, Singapore is situated in a different geopolitical and cultural context. In addition to being a small nation-state, as discussed earlier, its culture is located within a larger regional base of Malay cultures for which it was and is still a natural Southeast Asian trading hub. As Chua (2013) has argued, Singapore is a natural site for consumption all kinds of East Asian pop culture – Chinese, Malay, Indian, Peranakan and many more – as it is geographically located at the intersection of cross-cultural flows in Southeast and East Asia. This means that Singapore TV programming schedules should reflect a rich diversity of indigenous and foreign

cultures, including uniquely Peranakan culture and heritage, which has occurred through its cultural policy of providing TV channels in the major four 'official' languages identified by the state as part of Singaporean cultural roots – namely, English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

Ironically however, Peranakan programming is rare on local TV channels, found mostly on English-language channels in food-related programs such as the defunct Arts Central/TV12 channel's long-running drama/food shows like (1) *The Ways of the Matriarch* in 2003-2004 (Johan, 2004), (2) *The Cook, His Food, and the Dishy Nyonyas* (2003/4), and (3) a six-part documentary series on the Peranakans entitled *On the Trail of the Phoenix* (2002). It was partly the problematic of using the Peranakan dialect – a mix of Hokkien and Malay in non-English Channels, which posed a barrier for producing Peranakan-themed drama series. However, in 2008, highly regarded MediaCorp scriptwriter Ang Eng Tee actively promoted the idea for a Chinese-language drama series focused on Peranakan culture, which met with skepticism from the TV bosses, entitled *The Little Nyonya*, which later became one of MediaCorp's highest rated dramas of all time (Yip, 2017). The television drama series was also later circulated successfully into China and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the drama's sets and costumes were part of the Singapore Media Showcase at the Singapore Pavilion during the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (ACN Newswire, 2010). As the story mostly centered on the intrigues and love lives of characters from a Peranakan household from the early 20th century to modern Singapore, and focused on the culinary talents of its female protagonists, journeying along the Straits Settlements of Malacca and Singapore, the Peranakan TV drama series was exotic to both local and foreign viewers. Since then, there has not been a similar, follow-up Peranakan-themed Chinese-language dramas. Viewers TSL7 (*TheSmartLocal*) and TSL11 had shared:

TSL7: "This has to be one of my favorite dramas of all time. This drama adequately showcases the unique culture of the Peranakans in a subtle way without making the viewers bored. Peranakan delicacies were introduced on the drama, and through this I came to understand more and appreciate the Peranakan culture. I enjoyed every single episode of the drama because the story is extremely exciting, with twists unravelling now and then"

TSL11: "I have never been very interested in the dramas that Singapore produced as I think that they are not really interesting and do not seem to have any meaning in the dramas that are produced. The Little Nyonya attracts my attention and I like the drama after watching it as it is different from the other dramas shown in Singapore"

Lim *et al.* (2016) observes that the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) had seen how international interest in *The Little Nyonya* in China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Vietnam and the US (MediaCorp News, 2009) had stimulated renewed interest in Nyonya cuisine, culture and heritage, and proceeded to commission a few micro-movies to showcase key attractions in Singapore. Emulating Korean agencies' use of K-Pop, Singapore's tourism agencies used regionally popular celebrities such as Taiwanese Ariel Lin, Jimmy Lin and Chinese actress Tian Yuan to star in romantic short films, set against Singapore's multicultural backdrop from the Gardens by the Bay, to local cuisine such as chilli crab and Peranakan heritage, in an effort to entice Mainland Chinese tourists. However, the use of short films is not as effective as

leveraging upon longer-form serialized media content, as the 'soft power' of East Asian Pop cultural products such as serialized dramas lie in their sustained emotional appeal linked to heavy consumption of branded, popularly circulated products, to boost tourism. As anecdotally shared on *The Little Nyonya's* Facebook page by F121 (September 2010): "Wonderful drama, I went to see (the) original in Malacca and Singapore on March 2010, so sweet (sic) culture".

Conclusion and Implications

When exploring the role of food in tourism at a destination, it is not adequate to merely focus on its cuisine or the act of eating. The meanings and familiarity and/or emotive attachments to the cuisine and its cultural heritage must also be considered. As observed from the narratives shared above, culinary tourists to a destination desire a satisfying and memorable gastronomic experience that connects them physically, emotionally and spiritually to a place. To achieve this, authentic culinary heritage experiences must be augmented with effective interpretive experiences, practical information and heart-warming stories that enhance the flavors and reinforce notions of Asian virtues. *The Little Nyonya* narrates a poignant 70-year journey in the struggles, life and loves of a deaf-mute Peranakan Chinese beauty in an epic drama. This not only showcased and popularized the Peranakan culture, but also the uniqueness of their hybrid Chinese-Malay identity constructed around their wealth, intricate and fine handicraft, architecture, and particularly their acclaimed fusion cuisine and indigenous foodways.

Within the context of culinary and heritage tourism in Singapore, the promotion of the Peranakan culture as part of its unique cultural and gastronomic tourism experience to other Asian countries enabled the city-state to take advantage of the larger East Asian pop culture wave that is gaining momentum. While this type of cuisine is somewhat familiar to audiences in Southeast Asia, it was very alien to other audiences (e.g., in China) or the uninitiated. *The Little Nyonya* proved to be not only highly successful in Singapore, but also found a huge audience following in China and other parts of Southeast Asia. Consequently, due partly to the popularity of this series, there has been a revitalization of Peranakan cuisine and culture in Singapore and Malaysia; whilst overseas (e.g., in China) a new trend in Nyonya cuisine has been making waves in the restaurant circuit. Correspondingly, there is renewed interest in promoting Peranakan food and cultural heritage in recent years as part of Singapore's culinary identity, heritage and gastronomic tourism experience – particularly in ethnic neighborhoods and heartlands such as Joo Chiat and Katong. Simultaneously, food writing in the form of food blogs, magazines, and cookbooks are flourishing in Singapore's publishing scene, reflecting the centrality of taste to expressions of Singapore culture and heritage (Brien, 2014).

Forces of media globalization and localization have reshaped how East Asian television industries operate (Goonasekera, Servaes, & Wang, 2000; Jin & Yoon 2014). Popular Asian television dramas form a key part of the intensified intra-Asian and contraflows of popular culture. Chua (2004) argues that as they are produced and consumed domestically and transnationally, these cultural products can more easily cross multiple national borders, and is part of a larger, commercially-driven East Asian Pop Culture. This regional cultural economy comprises music, television, film, fiction, stars, new media and fashion, amongst other forms of cultural products (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). This circulation of popular culture is easily extended

to attractive representations of authentic food on the small screen. This study has shown that television is a strong socializing force that has become symbolic resource for audiences to interpret and experience culture and heritage in mediated forms through watching television content and making conceptual and emotional connections to imagined peoples, practices and places of nostalgia. As a source of nostalgia, TV dramas are used by audiences to relive and revive the past, and experience traditions and cultures in rapidly changing information societies today.

Asian countries like Singapore, with its unique blend of East-West, multicultural, multiethnic elements, can emulate Korea's successful use of Korean pop cultural products such as its TV drama series and films, strong state financial assistance to promoting South Korean culture businesses; from its US\$1 billion investment fund to support Kpop in 2005, to its marketing of Korea as a destination offering attractive fashion, beauty and food to visitors (Wong, 2016). The Singapore government has attempted to create a uniquely Singapore media content development strategy through its two big media sector plans - Media21 and Singapore Media Fusion Plan (MCI, 2012), as part of the wider cultural development plans under its Creative Industries Development Strategy that was launched in 2003. However, these media development plans were not closely integrated with film tourism policies, except through the short-lived \$6.3 million 'Film in Singapore' scheme in the 2000s that provided tax breaks to encourage overseas films from Bollywood to Hollywood to use Singapore scenery for location shooting. A more integrated approach towards developing a strong local television content strategy – perhaps by capitalizing on the international success of its Chinese-language Peranakan TV drama series format – to become part of the publicity complex machinery and destination marketing and promotions that could help strengthen Singapore's own unique brand of entertainment culture and increase its soft power in Asia.

This study revealed that ethnic foods and cuisine styles showcased on TV and the media have the capability to not only spotlight and represent the unique features of a destination, its peoples and cultures; it can also be ideal avenues for creating a unique sense of place or *genius loci* promising unique and interesting visitor experiences. With its rich multicultural heritage, Singapore's indigenous ethnic cultures and cuisines can offer (and should be leveraged as) distinctive competitive advantage and untapped potential for destination branding and development. Elegantly crafted narratives about local indigenous foodways and delicious flavors can provide mouth-watering stories and explicit emotive connections between the culinary tourist, the film enthusiast and the destination. The practical integration of film-induced cultural and food-related destination imagery and ethnic flavors of the Peranakans can serve to spice up Singaporean life and identity as novel and exotic, framed within its distinctive and eclectic food culture and heritage.

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