

**THE STINKY KING
A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE DURIAN**

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I wish to dedicate this study to Mia Morandi.

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Summary:

This thesis explores the attitudes towards the durian, a fruit which famously arouses emotions as divergent as enticement and revulsion. The main argument is that such feelings are historical phenomena: they are not innate, but take shape and develop under specific sociocultural circumstances. In the Preface, I present my subject and reflect upon the importance, in writing the histories of food, of borrowing frameworks and methodologies from the social sciences. By looking at the accounts of the fruit left by early travellers and settlers, chapter 2 explores the attitudes towards the durian which emerged during the early colonial era. I suggest that for understanding the Western colonial attitudes towards the fruit, we have to go beyond the Western fascination with the Southeast Asian environment, and look at the social and cultural contexts where Westerners found themselves in direct contact with the durian. Chapter 3 follows the development of Western attitudes into the 19th and 20th centuries. By focussing on the context of British Malaya, I highlight two simultaneous processes: the diversion of the durian from the public sphere of the colonial elite; and the emergence of patterns of private consumption. I argue that different social and cultural meanings of the places where the durian was encountered influenced significantly the sensory responses recorded in the colonial accounts. The fourth chapter turns to the specific context of colonial Singapore, a growing urban centre where the durian ‘fever’ presented significant environmental problems, namely nuisances related to littering, traffic, and irregular hawking. Governmental attempts at regulating the trade through strategies such as licensing and relocation of stalls are also explored. In the last chapter, I look at contemporary durian consumption in Singapore. I analyse changes that occurred in the last three decades which are still occurring today. I argue that since the 1980s the durian has undergone a process of ‘commoditisation’, that is, it has become a full commodity, today commonly available in Singapore throughout the year, and consumed in a more controlled way as well as with less disruptive impact on the urban environment. I suggest that simultaneously the durian started undergoing what I describe as a process of refinement of taste, a process whereby further knowledge is attached to its

consumption and the durian enters into the gastronomic discourse. The last part attempts to explain this latter process by framing it as an instance of 'singularisation', i.e. the effort by cultures of remaking unique what economies have commoditised.

1. Preface

This thesis explores and analyses the attitudes towards one tropical fruit native to Southeast Asia: the durian. Today the durian grows sparsely in other parts of the globe, such as the Caribbean and Hawaii, and can be easily found in Asian groceries in Western cities, wherever there are considerable Southeast Asian communities. However, the durian remains a strictly and distinctively Southeast Asian fruit, deeply inscribed into the food culture of the region. In this region, and especially in Malaysia and Thailand, it is extensively cultivated, commercialised, and consumed. And there it is prized, and often priced, as ‘the king of fruits’.

Attitudes towards the durian are today contradictory. Most - although not all and not exclusively - Westerners strongly dislike the fruit. On the contrary, most Southeast Asians regard it as a treat and a delicacy. As the commonplace saying goes, ‘you either love it or hate it’.

When I first decided to focus my study on this fruit, I was puzzled and fascinated by the possibility that the same food could be seen as delicious by some, while disgusting by others. In the same way, I could not easily come to terms with the fact that to some the durian was gifted with such an insupportable smell. Some readings exposed me to the idea that tastes are historical phenomena, that is, they emerge, develop, and change under precise historical circumstances. Fragrant and foul smells and food likes and dislikes, as with any other kind of cultural tastes, are culturally and socially constructed. The ‘durian contradiction’, I set up, would have been explainable in terms of the social and cultural context in which it emerged: colonialism.

Chapters 2 and 3 were initially conceived as an historical analysis of the dislike for the durian in the colonial era. As I scrutinised archival materials, however, I realised that the colonial attitudes towards the fruit were by no means homogeneously negative. The early accounts, roughly until the late 18th century, show no or few signs of a Western revulsion towards the fruit. On the contrary, almost no mention was made of the later ill-famed smell, and the durian was praised and saluted by most colonials as ‘the king of fruits’. Chapter 2 portrays this early phase of ‘serene coexistence’ between colonials and the durian.

Chapter 3 traces the emergence of a dislike for the fruit, which is to be found in the social and cultural *milieu* of the British expansion in Malaya. It was then, I argue, that the durian became a sort of sociocultural boundary-marker, signalling the distance between the ‘civilised’ and the ‘uncivilised’. Sentiments of disgust towards it arose. The taste for the fruit continued to be acquired and appreciated by colonials, but the durian was diverted from the public sphere of the colonial elite and enjoyed only in carefully controlled sociocultural contexts.

In chapter 4 I turn to the context of Singapore. As a growing urban centre with a plural society, colonial Singapore presented an environment where the impact of the durian, with its seasonal booms and uncontrolled patterns of consumption, was to create practical problems. The chapter reconstructs these problems and the strategies by which both the authorities, both in the colonial and postcolonial era, attempted to and eventually succeeded control them.

Chapter 5 covers the last three decades of durian consumption in Singapore, when the taste for the fruit evolved in forms of aesthetic appreciation

and refinement. I highlight the simultaneous occurrence of two processes. The first is the extensive commoditisation of the durian, which resulted in availability of the fruit throughout the year and more ‘controlled’ forms of consumption. The second is a process of refinement of taste, which I document through contemporary ‘durian narratives’. In the conclusion, I argue that the latter process is not class-based, as similar processes have classically been described. Rather, it occurs in conjunction with and as a reaction to commoditisation, and can be thus seen as an instance of what Igor Kopytoff calls ‘singularisation’.

As it can be seen, the thesis follows the fruit from several perspectives and through the whole history of its complex relationship to modernity. However, there are certainly limitations to my approach.

The first and foremost is the exclusion of textual materials not available in the English language. With the exceptions of early accounts in Latin or Romance languages, I had to limit my scope to Anglophone sources. This has affected at least two parts of my analysis. First, colonial Dutch sources would have offered an interesting parallel with the mostly British-Malayan attitudes dealt with in chapter 3. Secondly, contemporary ‘durian narratives’ in Chinese and Malay languages are likely to be fertile grounds for further documentation of the process of refinement described in chapter 5. For language limitations, unavailability of translations, and time constraints, I had to omit them.

Another problem is represented by the lack of quantitative data on contemporary consumption. Conducting a survey among consumers proved to be infeasible because of time constraints, as well as my unfamiliarity with

quantitative methodologies. Also, the qualitative data I employed in chapter 5 are not extensive, and in no way can the sample I used be maintained as representative of Singapore population. Notwithstanding this limitation, the data from the few open interviews I conducted are significant and consistent with what emerged from the textual analysis of newspapers, magazines, and online materials on contemporary consumption.

In introducing this thesis, I have also to recognise that there is a certain degree of disciplinary ambiguity. It was conceived as a social history of the durian, and it benefited from approaches to cultural history, hence the subheading. However, along the way, I have increasingly made use of frameworks from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and historical sociology. This is not only because I am convinced that the study of food cultures lies at the intersection of history and the social sciences. It is also because while I was collecting pieces of evidence, I realised that without placing them into solid theoretical frameworks, they would have remained totally silent. There is *not* a history of the durian, or of anything else, until one writes it. And in writing it, one arranges evidence according to certain theoretical structures, measuring their resilience, at times even modifying them. Such structures allow a scholar to place subjects of study in a broader mechanics, to confront it with other subjects, to see how it is imbued with significance. To me, only in this way the subject is enabled to tell something significant about human agency.

The structures that I used most extensively were shaped by sociologists and anthropologists. Without Elias' *Civilizing process* (2000) most of chapters 2

and 3 would have been written very differently and perhaps, not at all. Elias' idea that social figurations shape the individuals deep into their emotional structures has been of fundamental value for this thesis. It meant for me that attitudes such as disgust and delight towards the durian developed in specific sociocultural contexts. The idea that historical processes have their origin in the social structure of a society focussed my attention on the particular dynamics at work at different stages of that century-long social figuration which is colonialism. Finally, Elias' emphasis on social interdependence suggested that in the colonial context different degrees and spheres of interactions with the local gave rise to different emotional responses to the durian.

The other framework within which I have tried to position my arguments, especially in chapter 5, has been Bourdieu's theory of distinction (1985). This has been more problematic, for I realised that the logics of distinction could not exhaustively 'support' the process of refinement of durian taste as I understand it. Nonetheless, Bourdieu provided me with the linguistic and theoretical terminology for talking about taste. His idea of good taste and connoisseurship as social weapons of the dominant classes, as well as his analysis of the dynamics of social emulation have greatly helped me in framing the concept of refinement. Although in conclusion of chapter 5 I propose an alternative to class-based processes of refinement, without *Distinction*, it would have been hard to even think of everyday practices such as eating as arenas of social contest and possible sites of taste refinement.

Other books have been very important, and they will be appropriately

referred to during the analysis. Appadurai's work on *The social life of things*, and in particular Igor Kopytoff's essay on singularisation (1986) were crucial readings, for they made me understand the cultural implication of commoditisation, a concept fundamental for the conclusive chapter of this thesis. Without these theoretical structures borrowed from the social sciences, I would have hardly been able to say something, hopefully significant, about the durian.

Notwithstanding all this, I call this thesis a history of the durian, because it deals with the historical development of tastes for and attitudes towards the fruit. The problem is that the histories of taste and attitudes cannot be described as, say, series of political events. They are not, strictly speaking, historical facts. Rather, they shape facts, which is why they are worth studying. Tastes and attitudes permeate words, artefacts, practises, and behaviours, and writing their histories means attempting to discern their traces underneath these historical facts. In order to do so, the historian must borrow from the social scientist, because those traces, *per se*, are barely significant. They must be inscribed in a theoretical system that gives them significance and direction. It is only then that they acquire full significance, to the extent that the whole system may turn out to be in need of adjustment or even revision. Above all, theoretical systems are not ideologies.

Philip Abrams' contention that "in terms of their fundamental preoccupations, history and sociology are and have always been the same thing" (1982: x) is perhaps provoking, but it points to the inescapable fact that human agency results from the compenetration, *in time*, of 'particular' actions (i.e. historical 'facts') and 'universal' structure (i.e. sociological 'laws'). Action and

structure live in a symbiotic and dialectical relationship. Human agency does exist and does shape structural circumstances. But such circumstances in turn shape human agency. The precise terms of this dialectics are not a crucial point, although it is worth recalling Leibniz's somewhat pessimistic estimate: "we are automatons in three-quarters of what we do" (as quoted in Rancière 2004: 166).

This continuous interpenetration of action and structure is the most profound and authentic sense in which history should be regarded as a process. To me, it suggests that food and eating, as historical facts, deserve to be looked at by historians only if it is able to tell something about social facts and human culture. In what I have tried to do, I asked the durian to be a historical 'fact' and tell something about the societies and cultures in which it has been experienced. If I had not done so, the durian would have remained to me a delightful and incomprehensible fruit. And, if the history of food fails to question its subject about societies and cultures, it risks becoming a relatively useless scholarly gastronomy.

2. Early Accounts of an Unimaginable Fruit

The durian was one out of many new things that the Europeans encountered in Southeast Asia in the age of exploration. By looking at the accounts of the fruit left by early travellers and settlers, this chapter explores the attitudes towards the durian which emerged from that encounter. In the first part, I suggest that for understanding the Western attitudes towards the fruit, we have to go beyond the Western fascination with the Southeast Asian environment. Attitudes took shape also on more material grounds, that is, in the actual and contextual relationship with the fruit. In the second part, I look at the first context where Westerners found themselves in this direct contact with the durian, Portuguese Malacca. In this early phase, what could be termed the ‘durian contradiction’, that is, the coexistence of drastically conflicting sensory responses to the fruit, was not yet present: the attitude towards the durian was unmistakably positive. In the last part, I trace the transitional phase in which a negative attitude began to emerge.

Beyond fascination

The world eastwards of the Mediterranean Sea excited Western imaginations well before Europeans fully realised exactly what there was to be found there. The vast historiography and the immense cultural fortunes of Alexander the Great well into the Middle Ages do not need recall. His extraordinary mission was a political utopia deemed to fall apart; but it represented also an impressive cultural breakthrough which brought Antiquity onto the left bank of the Beas River, whence it was possible to imagine further. The whole history of the Roman

Empire has been recently reread as the “story of a fascination for the East, a fascination which amounted to an obsession” (Ball 2001: 1). Military conquests, political expansions, and economic relationships followed and nourished this fascination. In AD 166 a Roman mission allegedly reached the Chinese Han court, possibly passing by the Malay Peninsula (Suárez 1999: 61) which Ptolemy had just put on his world map. Caravans and ships laden with silk, spices, and other riches from the East were incessantly loaded and unloaded in the Mediterranean port-cities until well into the 4th century when Rome began to collapse and most of its economic ties with Asia were severed.

What was not severed, and paradoxically grew stronger, was the imagination of and fascination with the East. To medieval Europe, even to that of the so-called ‘dark ages’, there were to be found “the environs of Paradise, the place of the original Garden but also of the original Sin” (Suárez 1999: 66). Marvellous riches, luxurious Edens, unseen peoples and things, monsters, and mythical figures were located there. To be sure, Asia, let alone Southeast Asia, was to many, even to cartographers, a rather obscure geographical object. But its evocative power was immense: the Alexandrine literature and the legends of Prester John and Saint Thomas in India are among the many testimonies to this power. But the real quest for knowledge and trade was resumed only in the 13th century. Merchants and pilgrims were amongst those who began the journey towards the East. Marco Polo’s travels “encased the region in romance and wonder” (Savage 1984: 147); and the Latin translation of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* in 1406 made it thinkable to realise the vision of going eastwards. Less than two

decades later, Portuguese carracks were sailing southwards off the West African coast and by 1488, Dias had circumvented the Cape of Good Hope. In 1498 da Gama continued northwards until Malindi, and then set sail towards India.

It is significant that Prince Henry the Navigator, the visionary patron behind the Portuguese pioneering phase of the age of exploration was interested in developing trade as much as in finding Prester John, the legendary Christian ruler of the East (Russell 2001: 307-309). The hope of finding Prester John, or the Garden of Eden, soon disappeared. However fascination with the unknown remained a fundamental drive of the colonial enterprise. Indeed it grew with colonial expansion when adventurers and envoys of kings were substituted with bourgeois travellers, naturalists, and *amateur* orientalists. The fascination with the East is a primary push in European 'discovery'. It was at the origin of the demands for exotica 'back home' in Europe which marked the beginning of proto-modern European consumption habits. It has been convincingly proposed that this demand for luxury is at its core a social and cultural fact, originating in the courtly lifestyle emerging in late Medieval Europe. This demand, "far from being a *result* of the industrial/technological revolution of the nineteenth century [...] was the *prerequisite* for the technological revolution of industrial capitalism" (Appadurai 1986: 37, author's emphases). Exploration thrived also because of this demand.

Capitalism, so to speak, is to some extent a product of culture, and its origins have been traced to well before the industrial revolution. Scholars have pointed to the "highly commoditized economy [which] exist[ed] independently from capitalism in any one of a number of sophisticated pre-modern societies" in

Europe as well as in Asia (Clunas 2004: 116-117). If we circumscribe our scope to Europe¹, it was from the 13th century courts that early forms of elite consumerism and demand for luxuries sprung forth. In order to meet this demand, Europe looked eastwards, to lands which ancient trade and a millennia-old imagination had pinpointed as places of mystery and richness. It was with this in mind that Europeans left Atlantic ports and Middle Eastern crossroads. They did find mysteries and riches. Their imaginations did become real. Among the realities they found was a new and strange fruit of unimagined pungency and fragrance.

Certainly the durian was not a commodity in demand by the European upper classes such as silk and pepper, but it nonetheless occupied a prominent role in the Western construction of Southeast Asian ‘mythology’. It was and perhaps still is “a fruit that encapsulates the Western romance with the East, the aesthetic fascination with plenitude of tropical nature alongside the awe of divine providence” (Savage 1984: 214-215). This ‘romance’, however, was by no means always idyllic. Savage presents several accounts of the ill-famed smell of the fruit and suggests that “in [Western] stereotype view of the tropical East, even the disgusting smell of the durian seemed an exotically fragrant stink”. In other words, fascination for the East allowed “those who ventured to eat the luscious fruit” to turn “the revolting, nauseating smell ... into an intoxicating scent”. Although some may dispute Savage’s view that the durian represents and symbolises the Westerners’ “most intimate relationship with tropical nature” (1984: 212-213), it is clear that the fascination with the East was an important

¹ It is among Clunas’ main claims that Ming China offers “sometimes striking prefigurations of and parallels with early modern Europe” (2004: 3). For the focus on Europe, which naturally antedated and made necessary works such as Clunas’, I draw from Mukerjee (1983).

drive behind the quest for actual bodily and sensory experience of Southeast Asian environs, colours, sounds, tastes, and smells. But if we do not venture beyond this fascination, we would only share and perpetuate Western stereotypes about the East. There is hence a need to ground the sensory experience of the durian in the contexts where it originated, developed, and changed.

Our contemporary viewpoint has an advantage on those forged in the past. It remains true that ‘the past is a foreign country’, and that the concept of historical truth is a problematic one. Nonetheless, in trying to understand historical phenomena, our viewpoint allows us to place historical actors in the sociocultural contexts where they were moving; to analyse their individual moves within the social and cultural configurations in which they were entangled; in a word, to try to understand their roles. In this way we can see attitudes as expressions of social, historical, and cultural processes; and, in the present study, we can see how the social figurations of colonialism shaped attitudes and sensory discourses on the durian.

The point is to develop nuanced understandings of the durian from a sociocultural perspective, rather than the sentimental or mythopoetic standpoint of the observers who were obsessed merely with the smell and taste of the fruit. Fascination, whether ranging from enticement to revulsion, is not the only modality through which men and women from the afar West encountered, related to, and recorded the durian as the unknown Other. Westerners were not only looking for the first time at an unfamiliar, mysterious, and charming natural world, of which the durian was a prominent part; they were also coping with new

sociocultural worlds in which they were to play a role and radically transform. Thus, we now turn to the responses to the durian by looking at the changing contexts of the colonial social world.

The Lusitanian idyll

The first context where we find Europeans in some direct and constant contact with the durian is Portuguese Malacca. Here not only did the durian become the object of a remarkable scientific interest, but also, as we shall see, the taste for the fruit was acquired and incorporated by the Portuguese. However, well before de Albuquerque conquered the Malay trading centre in 1511, the fruit might have already had some circulation in the Western imaginations of the East. The humanist Poggio Bracciolini had in fact included as the fourth book of his monumental *De varietate fortunae* (c. 1448) the relations of Nicolò de' Conti, an Italian merchant who travelled extensively from Venice to Champa during the second quarter of the 15th century². De' Conti told Bracciolini about “*duriano*”, a green fruit which grows on the island of “Sciamuthera [Sumatra]”, where he stayed “one year”. It is “of the size of a cucumber. When opened, five fruits are found within, resembling oblong oranges. The taste varies, like that of cheese” (Major 1857: 35). The ‘bareness’ of this first account might be explained by the

² Book IV of *De varietate fortunae* (‘On the vicissitudes of fortune’) was completed by Bracciolini in 1448, soon after de' Conti returned to Italy. According to the tradition, de' Conti was ordered to narrate his travel to Bracciolini, then papal secretary, by Pope Eugene IV, as a penance for having approached the Muslim faith in the early years of his journey (Suárez 1999: 79). This has been argued to be an apocryphal story introduced by subsequent translators (Crivat 2003: 10). At any rate, de' Conti did not write anything about his travels, and the earliest version of his memories remains Bracciolini's 1448 manuscript, based on notes taken at the meeting with de' Conti in Florence in 1439. This manuscript was first published in the original Latin in 1492 in Milan, with the title *India Recognita*. I quote from a collection of 15th century travel accounts translated in English by John Winter Jones and edited by R. H. Major (1857).

fact that de' Conti was recounting from memory and many details might have been “clouded by the passage of time – as long as a quarter century after some of the events took place” (Breazeale 2004: 102)³. The reference to cheese, however, may not be a moot point, for in Italian Renaissance cuisine not only dairy products hold a prominent position; but cheese was also undergoing since the late Middle Age “a process of *ennoblement*”⁴, from peasant delicacy to “indisputable presence” on the seigniorial tables (Montanari and Capatti 2003: 88-90). By associating the durian with cheese, de' Conti was by no means trivialising the fruit.

De Conti's account had a remarkable circulation in 15th century Europe. Information given by the Italian traveller modified the cartographic works produced in the 1450s and 1460s, adding knowledge, for instance, of Java, the Irrawaddy region, the legendary Spice Islands, and Sumatra (Suárez 1999: 79). Translations of Bracciolini's fourth book appeared soon after the Latin printed edition of 1492. This volume was indeed printed by one Cristoforo da Bollate, Senator of the Duke of Milan, “as a handbook for Pero Caro”, Senator of the Duke of Savoy, “who was preparing to travel to India, and presumably Caro carried a copy with him” (104). It is therefore not unlikely that the Portuguese edition published in Lisbon in 1502 worked also as a handbook, a ‘guide’ for the Portuguese leaving for Calicut, where da Gama had arrived in 1498 and whence

³ Breazeale dates de' Conti's passages in Southeast Asia from between late 1420s and early 1430s.

⁴ The main reason of this was the fact that Catholic churchgoers were allowed to eat cheese (“a true nutritional paradox”) even in the periods of abstinence established by the Catholic calendar. Also, dairying techniques were improving and new products were obtained by mixing goat milk with cow milk. In 1459, cheese deserved a scientific treatise in Latin, the *Summa laticiniorum* (‘Summary of dairy products’) by Pantaleone da Confienza (Montanari and Capatti 2003: 90).

the Portuguese were to leave for seizing Goa in 1510. And it is equally possible that when de Albuquerque reached Malacca the following year, Portuguese moving throughout the Indian ocean were acquainted with de' Conti's account, and some of those sailing to the Malay peninsula could expect to find a strange green fruit whose taste varied, like that of cheese.

The durian had most probably already won the favour of many Southeast Asians. According to Matsuyama, it featured as a privileged food item among the elites of the Indianised kingdoms of Southeast Asia: indeed, the fruit appears in a relief of the Borobudur temple in Java (2003: 135). However, it was in Portuguese Malacca that it became universally recognised as 'the king of fruit'. That kingly title, which later on was to assume some ironical nuance too, was incorporated in the colonial imagination by the Western travellers to Malaya. It was there that after 1511 Europeans, not exclusively Portuguese, made the acquaintance with the fruit. About half a century after de' Conti's departure from Italy, the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires sojourned between 1512 and 1515 in the recently acquired Malay *entrepôt*. On durians, he was far less mild than de' Conti. In his *Suma Oriental* ('Summary of the Orient')⁵ he prizes the "*duryōes*" not only as tasty, flavourful ("*gustosos*"), but also as charming, handsome ("*fremosos*"), and, to put it plainly, "*a melhor fruíta q ha no mundo*", the best fruit in the world (Pires 1944: 464, 489). Interestingly enough, the durian entered Western *imagerie* not simply as a rich and exotic taste, but also as a lovely, 'handsome' thus aesthetically

⁵ This encyclopaedic work, which constitutes the earliest and one of the most extensive accounts of the Portuguese East, was accomplished by Pires during his sojourns in India and Malacca. The *Suma* was unpublished until 1944, when Armando Cortesão edited the manuscript and translated it in to English. I quote from the Portuguese original text reprinted in Cortesão's edition.

pleasant fruit. Also Garcia de Orta, the great naturalist and a pioneer of tropical medicine who settled in Portuguese Goa in the 1530s, praised “*los doriones de Malaca*” as the most excellent fruit in the Orient, “*las mas excelente frutas de la India oriental*” (de Orta 1891: 300)⁶.

Strikingly, in these earliest accounts there is no mention of the smell which will later create much ‘debate’. Apparently, it was not at all concern of the early observers. Other entries support the idea of this early, ‘odourless’ Lusitanian phase. “*Duriões*” feature in the *Decada II* of the monumental *Decadas Da Asia* (Decades of Asia)⁷, which the Portuguese historian João da Barros compiled in Brazil in 1550-1553 by collecting accounts from merchants and travellers who had visited the Portuguese East. Again, we find that, beyond the taste, the durian possesses a more subtle, almost bodily charm. The durian “*fruita muito mimosa*” (very lovely, darling), is much relished by “*os mercadores de Malaca*”, an international merchant community which of course did not include exclusively Portuguese. They compare it to the Malayan dark-skinned maidens (“*moças malaias*”; de Barros 1777: 8). And in the 1570s the naturalist Cristóvão da Costa did not hesitate to praise both the flavour and the odour (“*saporis & odoris*”) of the fruit, whose taste is said to be so much as sweeter and more scented than blancmange⁸: “*gusto suaviore odoratioreque quam sit condimentu illud ab*

⁶ De Orta’s most important work was the *Coloquies dos simples e drogas da India*, first published in Goa in 1563. I quote here from an edition reprinted in 1891. De Orta was also the first to give a botanical description of the durian tree, the first step of a fascinating taxonomic history of the durian. Brown has documented this history with extreme precision (1997: 2-22).

⁷ The *Da Asia* final version, constituting of 13 *Decadas* in 14 volumes, was published in Lisbon between 1778 and 1788, more than two centuries after de Barros wrote the first four *Decadas*. The other nine *decadas* were written by Diogo de Couto, a contemporary of de Barros. I quote from a 1777 Lisbon reprint of the *Decada II*.

⁸ Blancmange (Spanish: *blanco manjar*; Italian: *bianco mangiare*; French: *blanche manjer*) was

hispanis manjar blanco appellatum” (Acosta 1582: 290)⁹.

The Dutch merchant Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, one of many non-Portuguese Europeans who traded in the Portuguese East, spent most of the 1580s based in Goa. He dedicated a chapter of his *Itinerario* (‘travel account’)¹⁰ of 1596 to the “*Duriaoen*”. The durian is depicted as the king of fruit:

In Malacca there is a fruit so pleasant both for taste and smell, that it excelleth all other fruites both of India, & Malacca, although there are many both excellent and very good. This fruit is called in *Malayo* (which is the Prouince wherein it groweth) *Duriaoen* This fruit is hot and moist Such as neuer eate of it before, when they smell it at the first, thinke it senteth like a rotten Onyon, but hauing tasted it, they esteeme it aboue all other fruits, both for taste and savour. This fruite is also in such account with the learned Doctors, that they think a man can neuer be satisfied therewith, and therefore they giue this fruite an honourable name, and write certaine Epigrammes thereof Hereupon, and because they are so pleasant a taste, the common saying is, that men can neuer be satisfied with them.

a dish of medieval origin still much in vogue in early modern European courtly cuisines. Though the ingredients varied significantly and admit chicken, fish, and spices, the basis was milk, sugar, and some thickening agent such as gelatine (Mennell 1985: 49-54). It could well be considered an ‘ancestor’ of desserts such as the “rich butter-like custard highly flavoured with almonds” which suggested to Wallace the famous comparison with the durian three centuries later (1864: 57). Blancmange features prominently among the early analogies for the description of durian flavour.

⁹ Da Costa, a Portuguese born in Africa, first published in Spanish – hence the hispanicised name ‘Acosta’ – his *Tractado de las drogas y medicinas de las Indias Orientales* (‘Treatise of the drugs and medicines of the Oriental Indies’) in 1538. I quote from a Latin translation by C. Celsius published in Antwerp in 1582, where the name ‘Cristóbal Acosta’ is maintained.

¹⁰ Van Linschoten published in Dutch his account of the East Indies in 1596, once returned from Goa. Two years later it appeared the first translation into Early Modern English, whence I quote.

The smell makes here a timid appearance, but it does not deserve here much attention, and Linschoten goes on with the morphology of the tree, mostly derived from da Costa, the comparison between the “excellent meat” of the fruit and the Spanish “Mangiar Blanco”, and the favour which is accorded to the durian by “those which haue proued & fame” (van Linschoten 1598: 102-103). Who exactly these learned Doctors were, and how did those Epigrams sound, we unfortunately cannot know. But it emerges clearly that the durian already deserved a privileged position, and that at this stage, at the height of the Portuguese rule in Malacca, the fruit was widely held as a dainty and a delicacy by the cosmopolitan community of wealthy merchants.

Disagreeable to the unaccustomed (“*A ceux qui ne l’ont pas accoustumé il est mauvais*”), are the “*Darions*” which the French navigator François Pyrard describes in his *Voyage*, published soon after having spent from 1601 to 1611 in the Indian Ocean. But again the distaste is circumscribed to the olfactory descriptor of “*Oignons*” (not rotten); and once tasted, the fruit is “*bien plus excellent*”, far more excellent (Pyrard 1611: v. 3, 17-18). The excellence of the “*durion*” and the onion-ish descriptor feature also in the account of the fruit given by the Italian Jesuit Christoforo Borri, who travelled to Cochinchina via Goa and Malacca in the first two decades of the 17th century. More interestingly, he recalls an ‘initiation’ he personally attended in Malacca, while *en route* to Macau:

[A] prelate arrived at Malaca, and once there opened a *durion* before

him to gave him a taste; the prelate was so offended at that nauseous smell that came from it when broke, that he would not taste it by any means. Being afterwards set down a dinner, they gave the rest of the company *mangiare bianco*; but on this prelate's plate they laid the white substance of this fruit The prelate tasted it and thought it so much delicious ... that he ask'd, what cook dress's it so rarely? Then he that had invited him to dinner, smiling, told him It was no other cook but God himself, who had produc'd that fruit, which was the very *durion* he would not taste. The prelate was so astonished, that he thought he could never eat enough¹¹.

The prelate could at first not stand the smell, but what is more important is that he was offered the fruit. In Portuguese Malacca, visiting Jesuits were offered durian, and the fruit had penetrated the rulers' kitchens and dining rooms, featuring in this occasion in such a stronghold of European early modern cuisine as blancmange.

In all these accounts from the early phase of colonialism in Southeast Asia, we have found something quite different from the contradiction that was later to emerge. Our fruit was not only the object of curiosity and fascination, which soon took also the shape of scientific interest. It was also widely enjoyed by the European community, praised as a superior fruit and a true bodily pleasure, to the extent that it was compared to the local women. The durian was initially perceived and represented as excellent *both* in terms of smell and taste, and even

¹¹ Borri published in Italian his *Relatione* ('Account') in Rome in 1631. I quote from the recent annotated translation of Dror and Taylor (2006: 101). According to the chronology proposed by the two scholars, the episode should be dated at 1616-1617 (29-31).

sight, that is, it was conceptualised as an object of complete aesthetic pleasure. At any rate, there was no such thing as a more or less generalised Western revulsion towards the durian, which was neither avoided nor characterised as a difficultly, almost painfully acquirable taste, as will later be the case. We now see the earliest signs of this attitudinal turn.

A growing sense of nausea

Between the mid-17th and the early 19th century, some degree of nausea for the smell of the durian starts featuring in every travel account. It is in this period, which we can ideally date since the Dutch takeover of Malacca in 1641, that the pattern of taste acquisitions emerges: nausea becomes almost typically the first stage of a subsequent infatuation. However, this process of taste acquirement seems to be at this intermediate stage quite natural, and the evidence suggests that the unaccustomed was easily to overcome the sense of nausea. The intolerance of the newcomers to the smell of the fruit shown by Borri's travelling prelate soon attained a sort of scientific status in manuals on tropical medicine, such as the *Historia naturalis et medicae Indiae Orientalis* ('Natural and medical history of the East Indies')¹² by the Dutch physician Jacob de Bondt. A physician in 1620s Batavia, de Bondt praised the diuretic and digestive properties of durians but warned against their odour ("*foetorem*"): "*primum gustantibus*", for the first-time tasters, they are "*fastidiosi & nauseabondi*", sickening and nauseating. Moreover they may 'inflamm' blood and liver, as well as cause severe acne. Notwithstanding

¹² De Bondt's treatise was published posthumous in 1658 by the naturalist Walter Piso. Similar manuals of the 16th and 17th century, often largely copied from da Costa, are mentioned by Brown (1997: 4).

these inconveniences, however, de Bondt, arguably along with his indulging Batavian patients he writes among and of, maintained durians as “*saluberrimos*” (Piso 1658: 118).

Europeans might encounter the fruit also in the Spanish Philippines. Giovanni Francesco Gemelli-Careri, an Italian lawyer who accomplished a round-the-world trip in 1693-1698, encountered the “much celebrated *duriones*” near Manila. Writing in 1699¹³, he recalled “an ungrateful taste of onion to the nose”, after which the fruit, “when grown familiar, becomes most delicious to all strangers” (Churchill 1732: 438); and the Scottish privateer Alexander Hamilton, in Malacca between 17th and 18th century, presents “*Durean*” as an “excellent fruit, but offensive to some people’s nose, for it smells very like human excrements”. “[O]nce tasted,” however, “the smell vanishes”. We see again that the process of taste acquisition is almost casual. Also, it is worth noting that the scatological descriptor used by Hamilton did not bear the same markedly ‘strong’ value for a 17th century seaman as it does for our noses today¹⁴. Indeed, notwithstanding the association with excrements, Hamilton described the durian “as a custard, but richer”, and championed its ability to “fortify the stomach”, as well as “to increase the Wantonness” (Hamilton 1727: 80). Nausea, although

¹³ Gemelli-Careri published his *Giro intorno al mondo* (‘Journey around the world’) soon after he returned. I quote from the 1732 English translation by Awnsham Churchill.

¹⁴ In order to make sense of this, we have to imagine what the olfactory world of an early 19th century European was. According to Alain Corbin, who has traced the social role of odours in modern Europe, until well into the 19th century there was a “resistance to strategies of deodorization” and “to the policy of distancing man from human excrements”. He argues that this “loyalty to filth” was intra-class: the bourgeoisie were still convinced of “the therapeutic qualities of excrement”, while the masses “fascinat[ed] with decay”, in a sort of alignment with the “excremental status” which the elites ascribed to them (Corbin 1996: 212-214). Although this last point seems to me a little perilous, the overall idea that different urban structures and social behaviours made the odour of excrements far less insupportable than it is today seems to me tenable.

likely to arise at the first encounter with the durian, did not develop in revulsion, and it soon and smoothly disappeared.

Gemelli-Careri, probably the first ‘independent’ round-the-world traveller, and Hamilton, a sea captain who spent more than thirty years *between the Cape of Good Hope and island of Japan*, as the title of his account reads, were in substance adventurers. A different perspective was that of the British diplomats who travelled to Southeast Asia since the second half of the 18th century. Adventurers are not ‘classless’, but their position overseas is, at least relatively free within, if not outside of the social structures they temporarily, often *en passant* find themselves in. Not so of the diplomats, who were exponents of an establishing colonial elite. One of these latter was William Marsden, a pioneering orientalist and learned secretary to the government in the British garrison of Bencoolen in the 1770s. In the first edition (1783) of his *History of Sumatra*, he simply describes the “*Doorian*” as

the favourite of the natives, who live almost wholly upon it, during the time it continues in season. It is a rich fruit, but strong in the taste, offensive in the smell to those who are not accustomed to it, and of a very heating quality (Marsden 1783: 81).

Here we are still in the framework of a casual process of taste acquirement. But when Marsden republishes his work more than three decades later, the terms are slightly different:

The *durian* (*durio zibethinus*) ... is a rich fruit, but strong, and even offensive, in taste as well as smell, to those who are not accustomed to it ... yet the natives (and others who fall into their habits) are passionately addicted to it, and during the time of its continuing in season live almost wholly upon its luscious and cream-like pulp; whilst the rinds, thrown about in the bazaar, communicate their scent to the surrounding atmosphere (Marsden 1811: 98).

This might be seen as a turning point. Marsden did not return to Sumatra, so he updated his work in 1811 upon reflection, perhaps by collecting information from travellers who had recently visited the East Indies. At any rate, he at this point recognised that it was possible to ‘fall into the habits of the natives’. In this precise moment, the process of acquirement of taste is complicated and assumes new connotations, because it is placed in a social context where the habits, the degree to which ‘others go native’, become socioculturally visible and relevant. The ‘durian contradiction’ is now formed: the luscious fruit is offensive, and by indulging in it the newcomers dangerously assimilate themselves to the colonial’s Other.

Accounts by other exponents of this British colonial proto-elite support the hypothesis of this attitudinal change. Sir John Barrow, who partook in the first British embassy to the Chinese Qing court in 1792-1794, visited Java about a decade later, and took notes: of the “*Doorian*”, of its “extremely disgusting”

smell, as well as its “flavour somewhat like what one might suppose to be the taste of a custard seasoned with garlic”. Barrow was somehow doubtful about the process of taste acquirement, which in any case he did not undergo: “both the taste and smell *are said* naturally to lose their offensive qualities by frequent use” (Barrow 1806: 186, my emphasis). And Captain James Low, a British officer and member of the Royal Asiatic Society, informs us from 1826 Penang:

Curiosity, not taste, first prompts the newsettler to attempt this fruit. But although tasting it, as he generally does, with a prejudice against it, he not unfrequently [sic] ends in acquiring a strong relish for it. With the Malays, the desire for this fruit is a passion, to satisfy which they will perform toilsome journeys and brave dangers.

Nonetheless, Low ironically praises the European “who can eat and digest a *dorian*, and not find his liver stirred up by a host of blue imps” (Low 1836: 189-190). Here, the interesting point is that an odour, something at least believed to be chemical, purely natural, has surreptitiously become a prejudice, something eminently cultural, ‘expected’ from the colonial freshmen. The new-settler has acquired a more precise sociocultural physiognomy, among whose features there are both the prejudice against and the curiosity for the durian.

A sociocultural boundary had been erected, and only curiosity allowed the colonial to overstep it. Nausea towards the durian had grown and become a sort of emotional requirement for the Europeans approaching Southeast Asia. “[P]ar les

Européens nouvellement arrives”, writes Father Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, vicar apostolic in 1840s and 1850s Siam, “[1] *odeur du durion est extrêmement forte et rebutante*”, extremely strong and nauseating. And he considers puzzling (“*chose singulière*”) that later “*cette odeur se change en parfum délicieux*”, this odour change in delightful scent (Pallegoix 1854:131). As I have suggested, fascination alone is not sufficient to explain such attitudinal changes. This boundary did not exist in the context of Portuguese Malacca, and we have seen how a sense of nausea emerged only starting from the mid 17th century. Before putting forward an explanation for this *chose singulière*, the next chapter will follow the further development of the attitudes towards the durian in the 19th and early 20th century colonial Southeast Asia.

3. Colonial Attitudes towards the Durian

In the mid-19th century, the colonial enterprise entered its late phase, characterised by a growing political intervention and significant changes in the structure of colonial societies. By focussing on the context of British Malaya, this chapter follows the development of the attitudes towards the durian as they became more and more nuanced. In the first section, I highlight two simultaneous processes: the diversion of the durian from the public sphere of the colonial elite and the emergence of patterns of private consumption. The second section is concerned with the correlation between places and attitudes. Different social and cultural meanings of the places where the durian was encountered influenced significantly the sensory responses recorded in the colonial accounts. In the last part, I conclude the first two chapters, by proposing a sociocultural explanation of the contradictory attitudes towards the durian.

Diversions and concealments

This section focuses on two different but intertwined processes, for once removed from the colonial public sphere, the durian did not cease to exercise its appeal. Indeed, it became the object of a private and almost secret pleasure. Dining was perhaps the most important form of elite social life, lying at the very core of colonial lifestyle. Kitchens and dining rooms were among the main arenas where the colonials simultaneously attempted to reproduce ‘home-made’ class rituals, exercised mutual social control, and engaged with the colonial’s Other¹⁵. Tropical

¹⁵ A detailed analysis of British colonial cuisine and of its role in the imperial ideology cannot be

fruits played a central role on the colonial tables. It was from this public sphere of the colonial life that the durian was diverted.

John T. Thomson visited Malaya in the 1830s as a surveyor of the East India Company. In his *Glimpses of life in the Far East* he recounts a grand dinner-party, one “of many [he] had the honour to partake”, at the “pillared and verandahed mansion” of a British “merchant and planter” in Georgetown. These *soirées* reproduced almost perfectly social rituals typical of the Victorian bourgeoisie, with the proud introduction of carefully selected and adapted local tastes. However, from the *grand finale* of tropical fruits which typically featured in each and any of such feasts, the “inimitable durian is excluded” (Thomson 1869: 31-34). That is all that we are told. The readership is supposed to understand its exclusion; it would be inappropriate to even write about the durian in the account, let alone opening it among pineapples, cigars and sherry.

In fact, Thomson had already introduced ‘the king’ to the reader. Few pages before we read of his first encounter with the durian, which happened to be in Malacca, at the house of “an ‘East Indian’, or ‘country-born’ gentleman, [terms

covered properly here. Suffice it to say that even a casual reading of British-Malayan cookbooks makes clear that local tastes were approached, adapted, and finally incorporated in the colonial culinary tradition. This is true of ‘curries’, the most fortunate and versatile invention of British-Indian cuisine. Curries undoubtedly constituted an already-available culinary category for the British incorporation of Malay preparations. Curries, but also sambals, *belachan*, and ingredients such as turmeric, coconut milk, and tamarind infiltrated colonial kitchens and were largely incorporated, to the extent that they featured prominently in that class rituals which was Sunday Tiffin (see for instance Kinsey 1929, a cookery book for English house mistresses in Malaya; or Allix 1951, a handbook on menu planning with particular attention to Sunday brunches). For the context of British-Indian cookery, (of which British-Malayan food can be reasonably considered a subspecies) it has been argued that, given the “domestic character of English national identity”, “the domestication of curry” played a remarkable role in the ideological assimilation of the colonial British women, as agents of domestication, “incorporated Indian food, which functioned metonymically for India, into the national diet and made it culturally British” (Zlotnick 1996: 51-54).

which] are preferred to that of ‘half-caste’¹⁶”. The writer frets to clarify that his friend and host was “educated in Europe, in polite circles”. Thomson’s experience with the durian was a troubled one. After the usual fare of “[f]owl, ham, and sweet potatoes, wine and pale ale,” the fruit – “the cream of the banquet” – is served: “pumaloes [sic], oranges, plantains, and dukus”. Since we are at the table of a ‘country-born’ gentleman, the host proudly presents the durian as well, and Thomson explodes:

Shades of Cloacina! What is this? ... I look at the contents of the fruit dish, and learn that the atrociously foetid odours come from it. ... I would have held my nose did good breeding allow it, but I resigned myself to my fate, and looked on. My host proceeded to open up the disgusting entrails of the horrid-looking vegetable, and they send forth an odour of rotten eggs stirred up with decayed onions.

What is most appalling to Thomson is the pleasure with which his host and the whole family enjoy “such an abomination”: “Their attacks are vigorous, their relish is astonishing”, to the extent that the traveller “must admit that, for some little time, [his] new friends sank in [his] estimation”; “I could not have imagined such a thing of them” – he writes. Only two years later did Thomson “learn ... to perceive the piquant flavour, the unsurpassed delicacy, the fragrant richness of the

¹⁶ Here Thomson clearly makes, or wants to make, some confusion, for in British Malaya there was a neat distinction between the categories of ‘country-born gentleman’ (that is, a native educated in the West and in a relatively privileged social position) and ‘half-caste’ (a derogatory term for persons of mixed race and ethnicity).

durian” (Thomson 1869: 23-26). At this first stage the fruit created none the less than an issue of peerage. However dramatised, the anecdote tells clearly that Thomson’s friend, as a gentleman, *was not supposed* to enjoy a durian and that by doing so he jeopardised his status.

A couple of decades after Thomson, John Cameron left an interesting account on the ‘inimitable’. As Cameron was editor of the Straits Times in the 1860s and 1870s, his perspective is particularly representative of the British mainstream attitudes towards the durian.

The taste of the fruit is impossible to describe, but the smell of it, from which the flavour may be judged, is such that no gentleman in England would care about having one in his house; even in the Straits it is never set upon the table.

Then, there is the customary digression on the acquirement of the taste by Europeans, whose first attempt at the fruit “is generally made in bravado, and so singular is the fascination it possesses, that if the new arrival can overcome his repugnance sufficiently to swallow the coating of one or two seeds, he will in all probability become strongly attached to it”. Then Cameron comes close to my point, for he does not think, “however, that the most passionate lovers of durian are disposed to acknowledge their taste”; and he continues ominously:

There is something decidedly unclean about the fruit; a tacit

acknowledgement of this is, I think, to be gathered from the fact that it never appears on any gentleman's table, but is devoured in silence and solitude in some out-of-the-way part of the house, and a good bath indulged afterwards (Cameron 1854: 155-156).

Diverted from the gentlemanly tables, the durian now plays an ambivalent role. The process of taste acquirement is now an act of 'bravado', that is, courage, for overcoming the repugnance is a cultural hazard. Tasting the durian has become a sort of rite of passage through which the newcomer approaches the colonial's Other. But the risk of becoming the Other, the risk of hybridisation, is high. And so the durian has also become a sort of forbidden fruit. As a concealed pleasure or a secret temptation, Europeans could indulge in the durian only once they dismissed the clothes of the gentleman, in some dark recess of the house.

The cultural dynamics of diversion and concealment are visible in other accounts. Some twenty years later the botanist Frederick Burbidge was collecting plants in Borneo. He had stopped over in Singapore right in time for the durian season, when the "spiny skins lie about the streets in all directions". He regaled us with perhaps the most imaginative attempt at describing the flavour of the fruit:

[A] natural *macédoine* – one of Dame Nature's 'made dishes' – and if it is possible for you to imagine the flavour of a combination of corn flour and rotten cheese, nectarines, crushed filberts, a dash of pineapple, a spoonful of old dry sherry, thick cream, apricot-pulp, and

a *soupçon* of garlic, all reduced to the consistency of a rich custard,
you have a glimmering idea of the durian.

Niccolò de' Conti's earliest laconic sentence immediately comes to mind: The taste varies, like that of cheese. Four centuries and a half of interaction with the fruit had led Europeans to stretch their linguistic imagination and forge impossible recipes in order to capture the secret of the impossible durian taste. But it is equally important that the colonial durian eater is now deemed to be "surreptitious", and the passion for the fruit develops after "the very suggestion of eating such an 'unchaste fruit'". The botanist concludes by cautioning that "you may enjoy the durian, but you should never speak of it outside your dwelling" (Burbidge 1880: 307-309). Europeans do develop a strong taste for it, but they are bound to conceal it, for durian eating soon becomes a sin and a vice¹⁷. Indeed, in the same passage, Burbidge compares it to opium smoking.

The risks of 'going native' were increasingly pressing, and boundaries must be kept clearly fixed. Disgust towards 'native' uncivilised habits arose. The durian was diverted from the rulers' public sphere. An observer gifted with a colourful pen expresses his astonishment on the eve of the 1874 durian season:

I regard the man who can overcome its [the durian's] abominable
odor, and bravely attack it, as a hero worthy of the V.C. And yet I have
seen men and - oh, heavens! - fair women too, actually batten[ing], with

¹⁷ Also here it is worth remembering one of the first accounts, where de Barros uninhibitedly and nonchalantly compared the merchants' passion for the durian to their 'inclination' towards the Malayan mistresses (see above, p. 16).

intense and absorbing relish, on this huge and foul-smelling abomination.

And, reflecting on the prevailing table *etiquette* of “our bazaar”, he regrets having contemplated “with awe those astonishing Celestials devouring these things with an unctuous relish, not only evident in the beatific expression of their faces while so engaged, but in which their palates, gullets, stomachs, and entire body visibly participated”¹⁸. It seems to me fairly clear that the object of disgust is not the durian itself, but rather an uncivilised appetite, that is, what was perceived as a passionate, unrestrained and licentious habit.

Had the British publicly fallen into such habits, perhaps they would have not committed “social suicide”¹⁹, but surely they would have seriously endangered the very basis of their rule: prestige. It was on prestige that the sociocultural distance between them and the ruled was based, and prestige was maintained also by everyday practice such as eating. This did not prevent many of them to satisfy privately the taste for durian. At safe distance from the colonial public sphere many colonials acquired the taste and some became even fond of the fruit. Out of season, or once repatriated, some Britons were even guilty of missing the fruit. In 1903 one of these is teased by an imaginative correspondent who came out with a wonderful “recipe for the manufacture of artificial durians”:

Take a peel of garlic, crush it well, rub the juice in a wine glass with

¹⁸ *Straits Times*, 23 April 1874, p. 3.

¹⁹ The expression is used by Butcher in reference to the social consequences of publicly exposed concubinage in British Malaya (Butcher 1979: 222). See below, note 33.

good thick cream with a pinch of sugar (loaf), then ... think of
Durians and eat it,

as reported in an article from 1903. The article is something of an irony, as the talented writer suggests “the addition of half a thoroughly ripened hen-egg, preferably the egg of a fish eating hen”²⁰. Nonetheless, the ‘recipe’ did appear on the *Pinang Gazette* and the *Straits Times* and indeed was in reply to a specific enquire of an obviously anonymous *aficionado*.

Curiosity too was a private matter, concealed from the public sphere. Only in the solitude of his verandah did Clifton Wright, officer in the FMS from 1912 to 1924, dare to approach the alleged “Rajah of Fruits”. Cautiously deploying what Elias would call ‘civilising tools’ – a handkerchief held to the nose and a spoon –, Wright “took some of the pulpy custard mess”. On recalling the bravado, he felt “*bound to confess* that it did taste like strawberry and cream” (Wright 1972: 113-114, my emphasis).

Diversion characterised consumption in colonial Singapore. In the 1930s, the ‘divorce’ between public diversion and private consumption had perhaps become an institutionalised tract of many employees’ lifestyle. Somewhat worried by the approaching of the season, an observer not short of humour proposes his “Infallible Durian Detector”. It “will fill a long-felt need in Malayan offices” and its purpose is “to facilitate disciplinary measures against the indiscriminate and inconsiderate consumption of durians”. Once detected, “the employee suspected

²⁰ *Straits Times*, 11 September 1903, p. 4.

of durianising” will “be sacked”²¹. The good season of 1937 even compelled an officer impressed by the “nocturnal orgies” of durians in Chinatown to confess: “Some of us envy the coolie and his orgies and would indulge in them ourselves if we had not to work in an office the next day”²². Certainly, officers and clerks could not feast on durians as coolies did.

The durian was diverted from the office, another central arena of the colonial social life. But the officers, clerks, and other exponents of an embryonic middle class had largely acquired the taste. They had done so in the privacy of their houses, perhaps, as Cameron suggests, only in certain parts of them. In these accounts I see quite distinctively the diversion of the durian from the colonial public sphere. Perhaps more interestingly, I find a form of concealed consumption, as if the removal of the durian from elite’s public spaces, where the smell threatened prestige, resulted in a privatisation of the taste, in what might be termed ‘inconspicuous consumption’²³. Revulsion and subsequently avoidance and diversion were social necessities. As we shall see, in certain, culturally carefully defined circumstances, social necessities could be suspended.

Place matters: jungles and dining rooms

The dynamics of diversion and concealment, that is, the intertwined patterns of removal from the public sphere and private indulgence, lie at the very core of the

²¹ *Straits Times*, 28 May 1935, p. 10.

²² *Straits Times*, 28 July 1937, p. 10.

²³ The reference, of course, is to Thorstein Veblen’s (2005) famous concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’. While in his analysis ‘public’ expenditure on luxuries was crucial to the prestige of the ‘leisure class’, in our context it is also through the concealment of durian consumption that prestige is maintained.

‘durian contradiction’. It worked according to an elementary sociocultural logic: the durian was inappropriate, hence nauseating, in civilised places. By the same token, the durian was appropriate, hence delicious, in uncivilised places. By place, of course, I mean the social and cultural circumstances associated with space. The physical place is inseparable from the functions, values and meanings with which it is charged. Two such places deserve particular attention here: the jungle and the dining room. These two contexts were among the main tropes of the late colonial imagination. Between them the colonials negotiated part of their relationship with their Other, as the jungle and the dining room represented, respectively, the uncivilised and civilised.

The best way to capture the importance of these two cultural and ideological poles is to quote a passage from the great Victorian traveller Isabella Lucy Bird, who in *The Golden Chersonese and the way thither* recorded the adventures of an exploration journey in Malaya in the late 1870s. Bird recounts a very singular dinner she partook at a jungle mansion on the Kangsar River, where she was hosted by the Resident of Perak Hugh Low.

The table is set with “linen, china, crystal, flowers ... all alike exquisite”. Around, instead of a typical colonial mansion, “the glorious coco-palms, the bright green slopes, the sunset gold and the lake-like river”. It was in this locale, the jungle reconfigured as a dining room, that

dinner proceeded with great stateliness. The apes had their curry, chutney, pine-apple, eggs, and bananas on porcelain plates, and so had

I. The chief difference was that, whereas I waited to be helped, the big ape was impolite enough occasionally to snatch something from a dish as the butler passed round the table, and that the small one before very long migrated from the chair to the table, and, sitting by my plate, helped himself daintily from it.

“What a grotesque dinner!” the amused traveller concludes, “What a delightful one!” (Bird 1883: 306-307). The two poles, the jungle and the dining room, here collide. Beyond the grotesque and the exaggeration of the scene, we understand the colonial tenet of domesticating the wild and adapting it to that ultimate stronghold of civilisation which was the Victorian table.

As a wild fruit, the durian offered itself as the edible quintessence of the jungle. Into the wild of the jungle, neither the durian was to be diverted, nor concealed. Parted from civilisation, it lost its ‘uncivilising’ potential. Sir Alfred Wallace’s much quoted panegyric of “the rich butter-like custard highly flavoured with almonds”, which was “worth a travel to the East”, should be placed in the context where the romance between the fruit and the British naturalist blossomed. It was “in Borneo” that he “found a ripe fruit on the ground, and, eating it out of doors, [he] at once became a confirmed Durian eater”. It had not been love at first sight: Wallace “first tried it in Malacca”, where a durian was “brought into a house”, and the smell was then “so offensive that [he could not] bear to taste it” (Wallace 1869: 57).

The fact that the intense and pungent smell of the durian was (and is) more

perceivable in a closed environment than *en plein air* is self-evident. Rather, the point here is that the varying intensity of the smell is not sufficient to satisfyingly explain the radical contradiction between emotions such as disgust and delight. For what was heightened, in this case, from the Malaccan household and the Borneo jungle, was not only the intensity of the smell, but also the thresholds of repugnance of the smeller. To put it plainly, Sir Wallace's nose did not work in the jungle in the same way as it had done in the household. Some more examples will serve the point.

In early 1844, a reader of the *Singapore Free Press* made a trip “along the West Coast of Borneo” and sent his notes to the editor. Regardless of the fact that “many of [his] readers [might] show disgust”, he admittedly feasted on durians. He maintained it as “the choicest of tropical fruits for delicacy and softness of taste”, to the point that between “bread and durians – in foot travelling” he would have preferred “being destitute of the former”²⁴. Even such a declared enemy of the durian as Sir Frank Swettenham “persuaded [him]self to eat a durian” in one “only occasion”: during a trip into the wild of Selangor jungle, in 1872 (Swettenham 1967: 172).

In some cases, the removal from civilisation was the only possible explanation for the development of a “habit so difficult of acquisition and so morbid”. This was the position of Sir Herbert White, Lieutenant Governor of Burma from 1905 to 1910, who never acquired a taste for this “dreadful fruit” whose “taste is worse than the smell”. He could explain the fact that “many Europeans regard[ed] this fruit as a delicacy” only by elaborating a “theory”: “the

²⁴ *Singapore Free Press*, 30 May 1844, p. 2.

taste was painfully acquired by officers stationed in remote places where durians grow and where there is nothing to do” (White 1913: 62).

The “insupportable odour” – “[i]magine to have under your nose a heap of rotten onions” – of the durian did not prevent Giovanni Battista Cerruti, an Italian planter in Perak in the 1890s, to become fond of the fruit. Cerruti confesses that he “never tasted anything more delicious” (Cerruti 1908: 64-65). A quick comparison with an account from an ‘urban’ context may come illustrative. To an “old Scottish lady in Batavia in the ‘sixties”²⁵ who was warning a “newly-arrived fellow-countryman”, the durian was anathema: “a maist [sic] unchaste fruit” (Lockhart 1936: 196), she reprehended. Individual tastes, of course; but *behind* them, different functioning of individuals in different sociocultural circumstances. Cerruti, in the plantations of the recently acquired and sparsely populated Perak, was far less concerned with sociocultural boundaries than the old Scottish lady. The latter, moving in the context of the post-VOC colonial city, felt more strongly the threat of the uncivilised. Her olfactory alertness had become a matter of maintenance of class status.

In the jungles of Perak, Selangor, and Borneo, as well as in White’s remote Burmese posts, the durian was ‘conceivable’, at times even relished. The smell was strong and pungent, but it did not provoke disgust and revulsion as it did in more civilised premises. Although the forests of Borneo the durian might well be worth a voyage to the East, at the ‘good tables’ of the colonial urbanites this could not be the case. At such tables social preoccupations and pressures were enhanced

²⁵ The anecdote is firstly reported by Cameron (1854: 156-157). Thus, Lockhart’s casual reference to the 1860s seems not too inaccurate. Also Burbidge, writing in the 1870s quoted the same expression, without acknowledging the source (see above, p. 31).

and subsequently the thresholds of olfactory tolerance were lowered.

Anna Forbes provides an explicit example of the ‘inappropriateness’ of the durian in certain places. She refers directly to Wallace’s enthusiastic description of the durian. The Victorian wife travelling and writing in *Insulinde* comes close to my idea when she, having encountered the durian in the Dutch Batavia of the late 1870s, disagrees with the authoritative naturalist. “But”, she thoughtfully concedes,

We are not in a position to judge from his standpoint: we did not meet it fresh fallen in the forest ... and in circumstances in which most gastronomic comforts are necessarily denied. Perhaps in his place I also should be inclined to say that it is unsurpassed as a food of the most exquisite flavour.

In Batavia²⁶, however, the durian “is not allowed a place at tables in hotels or civilised households”. It might be consumed “without nausea”, nonetheless, “at some distance from the house ... and with some claret or a little brandy over it” (Forbes 1887: 111-112). The further the durian was from the colonial cultural

²⁶ Since here we are dealing with examples from the context of the Dutch East Indies, while this section draws most of its material from British Malaya, it is timely to make some brief considerations on the Batavian society. In Dutch Java, where the European presence was more than two centuries old, a colonial elite was already firmly established. The nature and composition of that elite radically changed in the 19th century. The Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), which had been the backbone of the Dutch involvement in the archipelago, was dissolved in 1800. When the British returned Java to the Netherlands in 1816, the Batavian elite’s decline became irreversible. The Eurasian class which had flourished since the early 17th century was politically, socially and culturally marginalised by the Dutch metropole. Following the example of London, Amsterdam was now interested in transplanting European civility and erasing the Mestizo culture. Taylor does not hesitate to conclude that “the old VOC culture and type were destroyed in the nineteenth century and a new colonial character formed” (2009: 134). Anna Forbes, as arguably the old Scottish lady, were observing and indeed representing this new colonial character.

stronghold of the house, or even the more disguised it was with familiar tastes, the less disgusting it tasted and smelled.

It is important to stress again that what matters is not the physical place in itself, but the sociocultural power which it is charged with. Therefore, dining rooms were very flexible places in the colonial scenario. They were also the sites of gastronomic, thus cultural confrontations between the British elite and other dominant segments of colonial society. In these elite contests, the durian featured as the *pièce de résistance*.

When Sir John Bowring reached Siam on his 1855 embassy to King Mongkut, he “heard” the smell of the fruit being “compared to the stink of carrion and onions mingled”; during the mission, however, he developed a taste for the fruit, and in a delighted account of an “excellent dinner” at the court of Prince Krom Wangsa, he recalled “the soup highly spiced; birds’ nests, sharks’ fins, and sea slugs ... roasted pig, game, delicious fruits, the most remarkable of which was the durian”; it was “prepared with cocoa-nut, which even the impugners of the durian [among which he does not count himself: “I am not one”] declared unexceptionably excellent” (Bowring 1857: 59, 328). Such culinary reinventions were not deemed to succeed on every colonial dining table. In 1931 a durian ice-cream was served during a “dinner at the house of a wealthy Chinese at Penang”, but the outcome was an “ordeal” for the taster, whose “reserves of politeness [had] never undergone a greater strain”²⁷.

We have two formal dinners where the durian features as a dessert, thus attaining a certain degree of comprehensibility in the Western gastronomic

²⁷ *Straits Times*, 14 October 1931, p. 18.

‘grammar’. Nonetheless, the outcomes are remarkably different. Individual tastes, again, might explain this divergence of reactions only to a limited extent, and on the rather flat grounds that *de gustibus non est disputandum*, which does not need to be conceded here. But the two pictures within which the tasters were moving presented significant differences.

At the Bowring’s dinner in 1855, there were no rulers and ruled. There was little room for that clear-cut tool for making and keeping distances which is revulsion. Hence, the durian dessert was easier to incorporate among the likes, for it did not represent any cultural threat. The dinner in 1931 in Penang was a different social context. Such ‘intra-elite’ dinners which gathered members of the Chinese mercantile class as well as prominent figures of the British administration were relatively common in the Straits²⁸. The function of this inter-dining was also one of confrontation among different segments of the upper-classes. There were rulers and ruled, as well as the need of maintaining the distance between the two. Accordingly, the British diner reluctantly accepted the offer. Through his repugnance and even more by resorting to his “reserve of politeness”, he eventually maintained the distance. This distance was essential to him and the class he represented, much more than to Bowring and his colleagues. As I shall propose in the next section, the difference of sensory responses can be explained as a difference of social and cultural circumstance.

Nostrils, taste buds, and society

²⁸ One is documented as early as 1831, when “a wealthy capitalist in Singapore ... celebrated his forty-fourth birthday by giving a grandiose dinner to all the influential residents in the island, including many Europeans. European dishes and Chinese luxury were served” (Yen 1987: 424).

This comparison between the two dinners featuring the durian provides us with a template through which it is possible to read the whole history of the attitudes towards the durian: negative attitudes such as repugnance and disgust emerge whenever the sociocultural circumstances make them necessary.

In Portuguese Malacca the circumstances did not result in the formation of negative attitudes, thus it occurred what I have called the idyllic phase. There, the durian could boast a stainless reputation as the most delicious of fruits. The Portuguese praised its fragrant smell, and compared it to European desserts and the charming Malayan maids. The latter note is not trivial, when we recall that in Portuguese Malacca concubinage was prevalent and brought in a richest and most durable Eurasian culture. Indeed, it seems today a fact agreed upon by scholars of the first seaborne Empire that Portuguese settlements hosted a fairly high degree of social interaction between the rulers and the ruled²⁹. The nostrils and taste-buds of this early variety of colonials were ‘wide open’ because the sociocultural scenario in which they operated was flexible. This is not because the Portuguese were more well-disposed, welcoming or ‘better’ in any particular sense. The very loose structure of their Empire required them to mix, to absorb and to be absorbed, in short, to erase boundaries. Their ‘idyll’, that is, their unquestioned preference for the durian was the logic sensory and gastronomic result of the figuration which characterised the *Estado da Índia*: one in which the trade

²⁹ Intermarriage was widely practised, and miscegenation “deliberately encouraged” since the earliest times of de Albuquerque. The replacement of the Sultan and his entourage with a Portuguese ruling class “made little change in the social structure and the economic life of the city” (Villiers 1986:49). The Lusitans, though recognised as political leaders, “were regarded as yet one more group with commercial interests in what were polyglot, multiethnic, and polycultural societies” (Russell-Wood 1998: 191). According to Anthony Disney, “[i]nteractions between Portuguese and natives through sexual and domestic relationships ... became a quintessential part of the expansion process” (1998: 306).

remained the first and foremost interest, the social structure was relatively porous, and economic, social and cultural power was still quite unbalanced.

The Portuguese case was in nature not different from that of figures which here I have addressed as ‘adventurers’. Figures such as de’ Conti, Linschoten, Gemelli-Careri, Hamilton, and others were not, strictly speaking, members of a colonial class proper. Consequently, they had a more open and adaptable emotional structure. By this notion, Elias (2000) meant the socially controlled thresholds of tolerance which result in social behaviours: that is, the points at which one is inclined to feel disgust, rage, piety, even love. These adventurers’ noses were ‘regulated’ so that disgust towards the smell of the durian was not necessary in their ‘emotional palette’³⁰. This is primarily not because they were ‘naturally’ more curious individuals or more daring tasters. Perhaps they were. But even so, this was because they remained almost untouched by the social pressures experienced by later colonials proper. The accounts from the 17th and 18th century attest also to the presence of a process of taste acquirement, a pattern of overcoming a growing nausea which is totally absent in the text from the Portuguese era.

In the 19th century, this process became increasingly difficult, and the acquirement of a durian taste grew more and more problematic. The circumstances in which the durian could be encountered changed along with the

³⁰ One has to read Jonathan D. Spence to figure out how little space could disgust and revulsion have in the structure of emotions of Europeans, not only Portuguese, reaching the East by sea until well into the 17th century. The voyage was a dangerous, often violent, and always terribly uncomfortable experience. If we limit our scope to smells, the ‘olfactory life’ on board must have been unbearable for later standards: overcrowded cabins, lack of facilities, rotting foodstuff and materials, spreading diseases, and the sort (Spence 1984: 64-92).

British economic and political penetration in Malaya. In the century or so between the acquisition of Penang (1786) and the Pangkor Treaty (1874), British political interest and intervention in the region grew steadily³¹. This was not without social and cultural implications. These are easily recognisable. The European population, however incomparable to the other migrant groups, increased³². This elite was small but economically, politically, and socially extremely powerful. Members of this group developed peculiar forms of social life which were to represent and reproduce the sociocultural position of its members, that is, their status. This elite was also internally stratified and the upper segments were preoccupied with the maintenance of prestige, the foundational ground of British rule in Malaya³³. The chief sociocultural implication of this latter phase of colonialism is then the formation of a plural society³⁴. In this plural society, upper

³¹ The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 not only formalised the partition of the Malay world, but also set the foundations for the political involvement of the British in the region. In 1826 the Straits Settlements were formed, and in 1858 the British East India Company, under whose auspices the Settlements had been created and run, was dissolved. Trade obviously remained thriving and maintained its prominent role. However, it was increasingly accompanied by politics. Less than ten years later, the Settlements acquired the status of Crown Colony. In 1874 the Pangkor Treaty legitimised the British rule in Perak, and in two decades the Federated Malay States were formed.

³² For instance, in Singapore the European population numbered approximately 92 in 1830 and 360 in 1850 (Trocki 2006: 42). The 1871 Census reported 1,946 Europeans, and sixty years later the figure was 8,082 (Yeoh 2003: 317). In peninsular Malaya, evidence suggests that there were “no more than one hundred” Europeans in 1881; the 1891 counted a population of 719, which was “almost doubled” by 1901 (Butcher 1979: 28).

³³ See Butcher (1979) and Stoler (1989). For instance, the British despised, and actually took trouble to repatriate impoverished or unemployed Europeans, for “destitute whites were believed to pose a great threat to British prestige”. And although concubinage was to some extent tolerated, an exponent of the class who “wished to appear openly with an Asian woman and to treat her as he would a European woman ... was indeed committing ‘social suicide’” (Butcher 1979: 222-223). The situation was in nature not different in the post-VOC Dutch East Indies (see above, note 26).

³⁴ The model has been famously described by John Furnivall as plural society (1956: 303-312). It is characterised by a juxtaposition of different sections which live separately within the same political unit. There are different sectors that do live together but do not combine. The result is a sort of caste system which lacks a religious basis. The only interaction among the different strata (typically Natives, European, Chinese, and Indians) is economic in nature, and occurs in the marketplace. In the Malay world, this society was not a totally *ex novo* creation, and it has been argued that a form of proto-plural society had already naturally developed in many of the *entrepôts* which constituted the constellation of the Southeast Asian maritime pre-colonial world.

segments practised cultural choices and adopted behavioural schemes congruent with the social exigency of maintaining their privileged position.

It is in this context that the dynamics of diversion and concealment of the durian assumes significances. The colonial elite was increasingly compelled to fix and interested in maintain boundaries between the civilised and the uncivilised. The durian, falling in the latter category, ‘became’ foul-smelling and disgusting, and was then removed from the public sphere. In particular, it was banned from the dining rooms as sanctuaries of British-Malayan social life. Repugnance ‘became’ available in the colonial emotional repertory, for disgust is a fairly efficient tool in erecting sociocultural barriers. It is precisely for this reason that when such boundaries were not necessary the accounts show little trace of repugnance. The durian ‘became’ such a delicacy to be worth travelling to the East. We have seen this in the ‘inconspicuous consumption’, as well as in the positive attitudes towards the durian in the jungle.

The concealment of the durian was a form of private, marginal, and ‘safe’ practice of creolisation. Hybridisation was undoubtedly perceived as a threat, a fear of being assimilated by the colonial’s Other. At the same time, the Other was also the object of a desire, or fantasy of assimilation. The ‘cultural management’ of the durian in the late colonial period perfectly epitomizes this ambivalence. The variability of the sensory responses given to the fruit under different circumstances shows how the standard of repugnance was not homogeneous. It

Nonetheless, the arrival of the British and the installation of a politically and economically enormously strong upper-class had the effect of redefining and reinforcing social boundaries. This was particularly true of the Straits Settlements, which have been described as “quintessential examples of the plural society” (Trocki 2006: 39).

moved and complied with the sociocultural coordinates of the smeller or taster.

Colonials' emotional structure was subject to adaptation and change as anyone else's. Under different social circumstances, they reacted differently to the same stimulus: the durian. The fruit was either incorporated in or rejected from the colonial sensory framework. As the need to fix boundaries grew higher, thresholds of repugnance were raised, the durian became more and more disgusting. But when the concern with the maintenance of colonial class status was low, colonial nostrils were more tolerant, and the possibilities of developing the taste for the fruit were higher. This is ultimately due to what Elias has called "the malleability of the psychic economy of humans" (Elias 2000: 135): emotions such as repugnance and disgust vary and change because they are shaped after human relationships. They vary and change because societies vary and change. They differ within the same society because the sociocultural positions of individuals within the same society differ, all the more so in the context of colonialism. Nostrils and taste-buds are regulated accordingly. The 'durian contradiction' can thus be explained as a sensory ambivalence rooted in the sociocultural terrain over which they originated and developed.

4. Durians in Town

In the context of colonial Singapore, a growing urban centre with a plural social structure, where different habits and practices coexisted in the same limited space, the durian was a difficult fruit to manage. This chapter aims at understanding durian consumption in Singapore by looking at the impact of the durian season and relevant patterns of consumption on the urban environment. The first part addresses the issue of the durian ‘fever’. The ‘naturalism’ and the seasonality of the fruit entailed particular patterns of consumption characterised by sudden availability of large quantities of the fruit, an extraordinary dietary preference, rowdy ‘durian feasts’, and overeating. In the second section I move to the effects of the durian ‘fever’ on the urban environment. I focus on the ‘olfactory pollution’ and the practical problems of littering and obstruction of traffic. In the last session I analyse the strategies whereby the authorities attempted at solving the problems created by hawking in general and durian hawking in particular, both in the colonial and post-colonial era.

The durian fever

The durian ‘fever’ may be defined as a consumptive dimension characterised by widespread appetite and desire for the fruit, its sudden availability in huge quantities at the booming of the season, and the consequent patterns of chaotic trade and consumption. Before looking at these patterns and at the problems they created in the context of a growing colonial urban centre such as 19th and early 20th century Singapore, it is necessary to make sense of the nature and extent of

the peculiar appetite for durian.

In nutritional terms, the durian is one of the most energetic, complete and valuable fruits. Though estimates for its constituents vary³⁵, all analyses indicate that the fruit is rich in proteins, vitamins, minerals, and, unusually for a fruit, especially in raw fats and carbohydrates, which today makes it a recommended item in vegetarian and raw food dietetics³⁶. Aroma also casts the durian outside the olfactory spectrum of fruits. Chemical analyses published in 1995 and 1998³⁷ found respectively 63 and 108 different volatile compounds responsible for the aroma of the fruit. The divergence between the two studies should not be surprising, for the aroma of the fruit markedly varies with clone and degree of ripeness, to begin with. What food chemistry confirms, however, are “the wonderful complexities of the smell and taste of durians” (Brown 1997: 50).

Nutritional richness and aromatic complexity alone would perhaps suffice to explain the appetite for the durian and to grant it the privileged position which it arguably has always had in Southeast Asian dietary cultures. In fact, by featuring these qualities the durian immediately achieves what has been called the “naturalism of luxuries”, that is, their “ability to provide universal satisfaction” (Berry 1991: 31). The fruit’s dietary completeness and complex flavour, in other words, justify its claim to enthronement as the king of fruits. They embody it with the faculty of satisfying the universal need for food by providing bodily pleasure.

³⁵ See Brown (1997: 36-45), who reports the results of different analyses. Even if we take the lowest estimates per 100g, the durian contains, for instance, almost three times the kilo-calories of the pineapple, twice its carbohydrates, twenty times its fats, and so on.

³⁶ See for instance Boutenko (2001). As for the nutritional importance of durian, it was, and perhaps still is “the second most important source of carbohydrates” for several tribal groups of peninsular Malaysia (Rambo 1988: 279).

³⁷ Wong and Tie (1995), and Jiang *et al.* (1998).

While this helps to explain the eligibility of the durian as the king of fruit, it does not fully account either for the attainment of that status, or for the desirability which ignites the ‘fever’. Seasonality is the other very important characteristic for making sense of these aspects. Durian has always been desired not only because it is rich and flavoursome, but also because it is, or at least it was not easily available. Singapore, where since the 1980s the durian has become increasingly available throughout the whole year, is in this case an exception, and the effects of this extended availability will be dealt with later on.

Seasonality played a major role in the definition of the status of the durian, in Singapore as everywhere. Appadurai lists, among the “attributes” of commodities which are in what he describes as the special “register” of luxury consumption, the “complexity of acquisition, which may or may not be a function of real ‘scarcity’” (1986: 38). In the case of the durian, seasonality made it available only for circumscribed periods of time, few months a year. Though these periods vary throughout Southeast Asia³⁸, the perishable and wild nature of the fruit, as well as the state of transportation made impossible any form of trade which would have guaranteed a significant supply out of season.

Seasonality, paired with what I have referred to as the ‘naturalism’ of the durian, that is, its natural appeal, must have always favoured forms of periodical, almost ritual consumption which accompanied the yearly arrival of the fruit. Durian consumption was associated with various aboriginal groups in Malaya in early accounts of ‘native life’. As with many other aspects of aboriginal culture, this seasonal durian feasts are mostly lost to us. However, early ethnographic

³⁸ See Brown (1997: 70-71).

efforts recorded something of them. Logan, describing the customs of the Binuas of Johor, for whom “[t]he durian feast is the most joyous season of the year”, portrays them travelling for days in the forest, building temporary shelters and huts, and feasting there on durian for several weeks (1847: 262). Favre observed the same consumptive pattern in 1847. In a study of the Jakuns of peninsular Malaysia, he reports that, when the fruit is in season, “families leave their houses”, reach the durian trees in the forest, “clear the ground in order to find more easily the fruit ... and, dwelling in the small house of leaves, prepare themselves to enjoy the treat which nature presents to them”. Then the fruits start falling down, and “for six weeks or two months, they eat nothing but durians”. Once the trees do not yield fruits anymore, “the place is abandoned until the next year” (1848: 259-261).

These seasonal *in loco* feasts still occurred one century later and somewhat clashed with the exigencies of colonial capitalism. In 1930s Kelantan, where Sakai people were employed as tappers, the durian season had the power of revealing their ‘native’ nature.

[T]hey have proved good workers; but the nomad instinct comes out.

One day the lot of them decamp without any explanation: they have heard, perhaps that there is a durian tree fruiting in the jungle some miles away and they have gone off to there to live in their native fashion in the vicinity until the fruit crop is finished. Then they move

on elsewhere³⁹.

The calling of the durian had also leisurely connotations, as the account of a “*dusun* [a durian orchard] picnic” in 1940s Malaya informs us. Such expeditions were “no ordinary picnics”, made with the sole purpose of having “one’s fill of the choicest durians”. A durian tree, or even the entire *dusun*, was hired for the whole season. Watching towers called *dangaus* were erected to prevent incursions of poachers (evidently a quite common fact). The picnic lasted “a number of days”, during which durian was consumed “for breakfast, tiffin, tea and dinner, and in between meals”⁴⁰. But feasts were possible also without going directly to the source. At the beginning of the 1891 season, the press challenged European readers “to perambulate the streets between 10 and 11 pm”, for “they would witness auction sales, where heaps of these fruits are being sold”⁴¹.

Informants offered lively anecdotes of gargantuan durian banquets, with a nostalgia which is characteristic of gastronomic discourse⁴². One, for instance, recalls: “before the war [World War II] we used to buy durian by the whole heap ... once my brother had so much of the fruit that his nose started bleeding [because of the ‘heating’ quality of the durian]”⁴³. Another one reported that his father also used to buy the fruit by heaps of “30 or 40 good ones” and that durian was eaten “all day long”, and after few days the left “meat” was cooked with rice⁴⁴. Great

³⁹ *Singapore Free Press*, 13 June 1935, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Singapore Free Press*, 13 June 1935, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Straits Times*, 23 June 1891, p. 2.

⁴² In dealing with the emergence of the gastronomic genre, Mennell numbers “the nostalgic evocation of memorable meals” (1985: 271) among the component of the literature.

⁴³ Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010.

⁴⁴ Conversation with consumer, 27 July 2010.

excitement and overeating characterised the durian season. In 1981, food writer Margaret Chan recalled her childhood *kampung* memories, “When it fell in the dead of the night”:

Then came the real business. Led by Father, we would count the babies that did not fall too soon. We marked where the hung and licked our lips in anticipation. Father bought a special torchlight. It was called a hunter lantern and could take 12 batteries. This was vital equipment since the durians had a way of falling from the tree late at night. The ground would literally shake from the impact when a durian came hurtling down. Father would jump out of bed and train his torch beam on the fallen durian while the children would be out in force to make a mad dash for the fallen treasure⁴⁵.

A sense of suspense and the felicity are palpable. Of course, in the colonial era, the rulers’ eyes tended to look at the ‘mad dash’ from another perspective.

The ‘fever’ which spread in Malaya every year in the months of June to August was portrayed with mixed feelings of awe and paternal condescension by European observers. Emily Innes, wife to the magistrate appointed at Langat, Selangor, in the early 1870s, recorded that

the durian seasons were considered by many Malays to be the great events of the year ... and most of our boatmen, police, and servants,

⁴⁵ *Sunday Nation*, 21 June 1981, p. 11.

used to make themselves ill by indulging to excess in the luscious fruit. A carpenter in the middle of a job once asked Mr Innes' permission to knock off work and go home for three days to eat durian in his father's garden, and Mr Innes knew the country and the people too well to refuse.

But even if Mr Innes knew "that a refusal would be considered so unreasonable", to Mrs Innes that appetite remained an irrational phenomenon, as she wondered "what he [the Malay carpenter] thought of an English carpenter who begged to be allowed three days' holiday to eat cherries and gooseberries" (Innes 1885: 2v. 36). The durian, of course, was no cherries and gooseberries. In the words of a *mem*⁴⁶ in 1948 Singapore, it was for the locals a private "gastronomic dream". Less empathetically than Mrs Innes, she had to awake her cook-maid from one of such dreams, as the servant was "raptly gazing at a large durian tree on which the fruit was just ripening"⁴⁷.

Outsiders were conscious of the exceptional aura the fruit boasted among what they categorised as 'natives'. Many accounts from the first part have already made this clear. I suggested that the durian represented to the colonials threats of cultural contagion and consequently, if indulged in, loss of prestige. An "occasional Correspondent" from Malacca wrote to the *Straits Times* of a ceremony held there in July 1874: a Junk, "symbol of some Chinese deity", was to be "laden with miniature chests of Opium, and also with a small quantity of the

⁴⁶ The term is a contraction of *memsahib*, a respectful nomination for European white female in British India. It was used also in British Malaya.

⁴⁷ *Straits Times*, 10 August 1948, p. 9.

various articles which constitute the principal products of the Settlement”, then “burnt in the evening”. The author “presume[d] that no part of the cargo will consist of the fragrant Durian” nor other prized items such as “*caviare*” and gold⁴⁸. At the very least, it was “surprising to see a native giving away more than a day’s wage for half a durian ... this bad smelling and ... unpalatable fruit”⁴⁹. Such excesses driven by fondness of the fruit impressed the colonials.

There are the stories of the Burmese kings who demanded durians to be “sent nearly a thousand miles by sea every year by relays of swift boat from Peninsular Burma to the royal city of Ava”⁵⁰. Sir Arthur Phayre, Chief Commissioner in British Burma in the 1860s, is reported to have arranged for the delivery of 250 durians to King Mindon, in an attempt at maintaining relaxed diplomatic relationships after minor revolts in Rangoon (Myint-U 2001: 126). Sir White, who we have already encountered elaborating theories for making sense of the existence of Western durian lovers, could not but be puzzled at the response of one Burmese minister whom was informed that the British were planning to build a railway to Mandalay. “Excellent”, the Burmese politician rejoiced, “then we shall be able to get our durians fresh” (White 1913: 62). If the kings’ efforts were portrayed as extravagant, down the social ladder the fondness of the fruit was perceived as even more paradoxical. “If durians are expensive luxuries”, mocked one observer in 1911 Singapore, “all we can say is that the Chinese coolie is a

⁴⁸ *Straits Times*, 1 August 1874, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Straits Times*, 26 August 1899, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Straits Times*, 2 March 1939, p. 10. A similar story was reported by Thomson (1869: 25), and appears also in White: “In the King’s time, every year as the season came around, His Majesty used to charter a steamer solely to bring up a cargo of durians” (White 1913; 62).

wealthy man”⁵¹.

Elsewhere, the desire for the fruit was perceived to linger on craze rather than extravagance. The press amusedly reported throughout the decades several cases of crimes associated with durians: thefts, but also brawls between sellers and buyers⁵². This association had its own fortune within the literary tireless production of ‘native’ stereotypes. In a remarkable piece of colonial machismo, deservedly if perhaps immodestly entitled *Jungle Beasts I Have Captured*, the American game hunter Charles Mayer informs us that “[d]esperate fights over the ownership of durian trees are of yearly occurrence” in the forests of Malaya. He passed by a village along the Terengganu River where one of such brawls had just left five people dead. The thing was not uncommon, as “[s]ometimes, when a tree has been found near a border-line, entire villages have been wiped out in the struggle to possess it”. On a lighter note, Mayer explains that “both animals and men are animated by a desire for the durian that amount to a lust”. Then, before boasting his successes in using durians as baits for jungle game, he delightfully conjectures on the “amorous effect” of the fruit: “[i]t is not due to coincidence that durian-eating animals – love-driven – fill the jungle with their desperate fights for the desired mate” (Mayer 1924: 4-11). The point, of course, is not to establish the veracity of Mayer’s words. More objective studies suggest that ‘durian disputes’ were serious issues among jungle villagers. For instance, T. B. Wilson, an agricultural economist writing in 1954, states that

⁵¹ *Singapore Free Press*, 31 August 1911, p. 139.

⁵² For instance, *Straits Times*, 11 July 1874, p. 2; 11 August 1886, p. 3; 25 July 1907, p. 7; 2 August 1911, p. 8; 5 January 1925, p. 10 (where one reads of two policemen arrested for stealing durians on Orchard Road); 26 January 1950, p. 8.

[c]ustomary rights of durian and firewood collection from the jungle and *tanah mati* (abandoned land) were recognised in the traditional land laws of most [Malayan] States (Wilson 1954: 211).

At the least, Mayer's account is a biased dramatisation, but it seems clear that aboriginal culture invested the durian with a remarkable importance. Besides, the hunter's bragging shows us once again how the appetite for the durian and the seasonal 'fever' were conceptualised as threats of sociocultural pollution, in that they constituted moves backwards along the chain of civilisation.

"[W]as I man or beast?" asked (himself) Frederic Knocker, an Englishman resident in Malaya in the 1920s, upon reflection on the taste he was surreptitiously acquiring. For he had been seeing "half-clad, heathenish-looking Chinese coolies squatting on the ground ravenously devouring a pile of durian placed in their midst", "Malays armed with murderous *krisses*, hesitating on the brink of homicide for the sake of their national fruit, and burly Sikhs ready to barter their souls for the possession of one". In a demotion from the civilised (himself) to uncivilised (the 'natives'), then to the animal, Knocker recalled also "the otherwise slothful and indolent bear"; "a tiger, the king of flesh-eater"; "monkeys half mad"; "a domestic cat and a wild civet quarrel[ling]"; "ill-natured growls and snarls" from the verandah; devouring dogs and contending "fowls, ducks, and geese"; and, *trait d'union* between the human and the beast, "a mischievously minded coolie ... squatting down tantalisingly eating ... in front of baby monkey"

(Knocker 1924: 11) – all these creatures fevered with the craving for the luscious durian.

Regardless of the degree of dramatisation, which in these accounts may be fairly high, we see here once more how the acquisition of the taste for durians represented in the late colonial psychic world a sliding down towards uncivilised habits. It jeopardised the prestige which constituted the distance between rulers and ruled. But at the same time, it enabled the colonials to culturally adapt to the new environment. More importantly, we see how the booming of the durian season and the desire for the fruit therefore spreading – what I term the ‘fever’ – featured as a lively, momentous event in the life of British Malaya. In the momentum, Asian excitement provoked British contempt, suspicion, but also amazement. In the urban context of colonial Singapore the rulers attempted at implementing their environmental ideologies and civilising the uncivilised, at least as far as the use of common space was concerned. In this context, the durian momentum proved to be not easily manageable and was to generate some practical problems.

Smell and the city

These practical problems were of two kinds. Firstly, there was an issue of what I shall refer to as ‘olfactory pollution’, by which I mean the perception of a foul smelling urban environment. This was by no means a mere intolerance of disagreeable smells. In fact, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, odours were largely believed to be vehicles of health disease and contagion. Secondly,

the seasonal and unpredictable nature of the durian trade represented a problem for the free and effective movement of people and things, which was an infeasible tenet of the British urban ideology. Put it simply, large quantities of durians suddenly flowing into town meant the mushrooming of busy vendors and an enormous amount of vegetable refuse, both of which contributed to the congestion of the urban traffic.

If a social history of smells is possible, it cannot abstract from the spatial dimension of human relationships, for it is mainly through the structuring, management, and negotiation of space that societies give material form to the social networks which constitute them. In this process of spatial production smells become relevant when they enter the realm of social materiality, that is, when they become attached with social meaning and perceived as social emanations. In Elias' terms, this situation occurs only when a certain degree of interdependence among different groups is attained. No context allows such a high degree of interdependence as the urban environment. Only in the city, “[a]bhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power”, and the foul “appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability” (Corbin 1996: 5). Thus, by implementing policies of sanitisation and deodorisation, dominant groups exercise what Michel Foucault (1995) meant by ‘disciplinary power’, that is, the pervasive power of controlling aspects of individual everyday life, among which is the ‘correct’ use of space. By the same token, the dominated groups attempt at resisting the dominant

power by not complying with those policies and using space ‘incorrectly’⁵³. In light of this contest of space, I want to look at the impact of the durian on the olfactory world of colonial Singapore.

By the early 20th century, Singapore had grown from the already bustling *entrepôt* of the early years to the busiest port-city of Southeast Asia. The population had increased from 97,111 in 1871 to 228,555 thirty years later, and was to double in the next three decades. As a colonial society, Singapore was largely made up of immigrants, the vast majority of whom came from China as coolies. Immigration patterns and the plural structure of Singaporean society entailed that newcomers immediately attached themselves to their relevant racial and even dialect group. This resulted already in the late 19th century in the intensification of racial segregation and the overcrowding of certain areas, especially those where the Chinese communities crystallized⁵⁴. The picture we are presented with, then, is one where “the Asian districts were complicated mosaics of specialized trade areas, bazaars, densely packed tenements housing, and concentrations of eating houses, theatres, and brothels ‘as close together as the teeth of a comb’” (Yeoh 2003: 48)⁵⁵.

⁵³ The validity of this model for the context of colonial Singapore has been proposed by Brenda Yeoh. Her study on the contest of space in the colony has documented how “[t]rough the interplay of [British] strategies and [Asian] counter-strategies, negotiation over the control of sanitary aspects of the urban environment played a key role in describing the relationship of power between rulers and the ruled” (Yeoh 2003: 82).

⁵⁴ By 1901, more than 80% of the population was housed within the Municipal limits. The highest density was in Asian districts such as the old Chinese settlement on the Singapore River, where up to 179,900 persons were lodged per square mile. What Raffles had initially conceived as the former ‘European town’ had also become predominantly Chinese. There the concentration reached 89,900 persons per square mile and up to 13 occupants per house. The original European residential enclave had been moved in the Tanglin and Bukit Timah areas. Data are taken from Yeoh (2003: 35-48 and Appendices, 317-322).

⁵⁵ The inner quotation is from Li Chung Chu, whose *Description of Singapore in 1887* is referenced by Yeoh (2003: 72).

This material and human labyrinth was the spatial consequence of the commercial flourishing of what stayed long into the 20th century a port-city. The more trade thrived, the more people Singapore attracted, the more the streets became the sites of a number of everyday practices. These ranged from storing myriad goods to hawking and eating, from discharging refuse to moving things and persons, from resting to bargaining and selling – uses of space which created a specific olfactory world. In the rulers’ perspective, thus, Singapore was foul-smelling because her urban environment was for its largest part chaotic, unhealthy, and intrinsically pathogenic. Odours revealed disorder and danger. Diseases were indeed rampant, and “contamination, filth, and a dangerous disregard for dirt were ... symptomatic of Asian domestic practices” (Yeoh 2003: 93).

Surveys and studies commissioned by the Municipal Commission⁵⁶ confirmed that overcrowding and insanitary habits went hand in hand. A ‘proper’, by which the municipal authorities meant a municipalised, metered, European-like system of ‘pure’ water supply, was created only in the 1910s, and in the 1920s the city still lacked an effective sewerage system. For all this, the European public opinion blamed Asian practices, invoking “a failure of their civilisation, a view which only served to confirm racial prejudices” (205). Filth was perceived as inscribed into Asian civilisation and invested with deep social and cultural meanings. In such a situation, the rulers’ noses worked as instruments of threat-detection and tools of sociocultural distancing. It is against this background that

⁵⁶ For instance, the *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Singapore* compiled by Simpson (1907), and the *Housing Difficulties Report* of 1918.

we can attempt to imagine the olfactory world of colonial Singapore, that ‘smell-scape’ of which the durian was such a distinctive feature.

In a tropical city with problems of overcrowding and refuse disposal, smell soon became a source of public concern by the rulers. The issue is perhaps most exhaustively summarised by an occasional correspondent of the *Free Press*, who in 1910 set “to analyse the various odours that pervaded Singapore Town”. He reluctantly reviewed “blachan [sic], ma-mi stall, Municipal cabbage bin, the incinerator, vegetable gardens, stale corps, and so on”. He noted that the smells

not only vary according to the time of the day, the heat of the sun, the day of the week (Sunday is a remarkably strong day, because then the Municipal Conservancy rests from its labours ...) and the fruit month, but they also vary inversely as the square of the distance from the source of the flavour.

He also recalled “perambulating garbage carts, and perambulating ‘sati’ stalls, with their skewers of spiced cats-meat awaiting the charcoal. Chinese foods, stalls, boiled, fried, and roast. Copra sheds with the flavour one associates with rancid bacon. The abattoir with the peculiar flavour of fresh blood. Oily and irony flavours from the engineers ... [and] the smell of coffin-woods”. Human emanations also feature: “The oily Kling, the bawang-puteh Chinese, the alcoholic beach comber, the sour rikisha puller [sic]”. The smeller, recalling that “Cologne is said to be the city of 4776 stinks”, is ready to conclude that Singapore

“would give Cologne three figures and a beating”⁵⁷. What is here portrayed with a racially biased irony, resulted in often unsuccessful municipal policies of deodorisation, for instance in the attempts at creating a more effective system of night-soil disposal⁵⁸.

The role played by the durian in this problematic olfactory scenario was prominent. There were even advocates of “Malayan Fragrances”. One in 1933 was ready to “champion Malayan smells”, but had to declare himself “aware ... of our lorry loads of native rubber, our river and our durians”. In the end, he could find solace only in the fact that these “[were] not ubiquitous”⁵⁹. But the odour of the durian was not only disagreeable. It was dangerous. As early as 1855, the local press called for

a clean sweep of the numerous durian stalls in South Bridge-Road, upper Circular Road, and elsewhere. The mess of durian skins in the places indicated is a most filthy and deadly nuisance⁶⁰.

The association of filth and death may not be simply a rhetorical device, for foul odour was well into the 19th century believed to be the vehicle of malaise. Alain Corbin has documented that since mid-18th century what was then termed ‘pneumatic chemistry’ spread among European scientific, and bourgeois circles. Findings on the corrupting property of ‘airs’ changed the way people smelled, as

⁵⁷ *Singapore Free Press*, 16 June 1910, p. 1. The article, by a pseudonym “Nosey”, reads the title ‘Follow your nose’.

⁵⁸ The issue is widely dealt with by Yeoh (2003: 190-204).

⁵⁹ *Singapore Free Press*, 20 May 1931, p.1.

⁶⁰ *Straits Times*, 31 July 1855, p. 4.

“olfactory vigilance not only aimed to detect the threat, the risk of infection, but also entailed a permanent monitoring of the dissolution of individuals and the self”. By ‘dissolution of individuals’ Corbin means the micro-processes of decomposition which not only involved corpses, but also unhealthy living bodies. Rotting matter became capable to rot, and foul odours became the vehicles whereby noxious corpuscles moved throughout the air. Stench was now dangerous, for the composition of air determined its properties and effects on human health: “foul-smelling miasma provoked panic” (1996: 11-21). There is no reason to doubt that these conceptions were exported to the tropics along with all the other aspects of Western civilisation and ideology.

The 19th century British sense of smell was regulated according to this vision and the perishable durians along with their rotting skins thus represented a threat of miasma and spreading disease. Pasteur’s discovery of ‘odourless’ germs called for a radical review of the link between smells and contagion, but bourgeois noses continued well into the late 19th century to work as fine instruments of detection. Still in 1869, a reader of the *Straits Times* contended:

Whatever doubts exist about bad smell being injurious to health or not, could easily be solved by any medical man; although in my humble opinion, the very circumstance of their turning one’s stomach is sufficient to proof that the must be a good deal of harm to health, if continued for any time: not to mention the necessity of using scented handkerchiefs to one’s nose, in passing many of our roads.

And he blamed “[t]he bad smell arising from assafoetida [sic], durian skins, or other medical materials”⁶¹. In early August 1881, when in conjunction with the durian season a number of cases of cholera were reported in Bangkok, the press manifested the general anxiety:

With so many steamers running between this port and Bangkok, it is not at all unlikely [that] the disease may be imported here The present fruit season is peculiarly favourable for its development. The air is laden with the odours of durian ... and extra attention to the cleansing and scavenging [sic] of the town might not be amiss”⁶².

Few years later, other cases of ‘fevers’ were reported abroad, and the authorities warned:

We have not heard of any cases in Singapore, but too much care cannot be exercised by fruit eaters at this particular season, and it is worth while to eschew all fruits not thoroughly ripe, especially the durian⁶³.

It is worth stressing that cholera belonged to the category which epidemiologists of the time referred to as ‘zymotic diseases’. According to the 19th century

⁶¹ *Straits Times*, 7 August 1869, p. 2.

⁶² *Straits Times Overland Journal*, 4 August 1881, p. 3.

⁶³ *Straits Times*, 9 July 1884, p. 2.

scientifically recognised aetiology of these ‘fevers’, “disease sprang from filthy habits and insanitary environments” (Yeoh 2003: 90). The durian season, with its patterns of consumption and subsequent littering, represented thus a sheer peak of health risk.

Someone proposed a sort of conciliatory vision, somewhat in line with the paternalistic nature of the British imperial *ethos*. In a reported conversation between one Mr. Smoothbore and one Mr. Johnson concerning “the smells of Singapore”, the latter champions the cause of Asian habits. Although admitting “a certain pungency in our atmosphere”, Mr. Johnson asks:

Is not the Chinaman a man and a brother? Shall he not be fed according to his appetites? Well then, we must have thousands of pigs and millions of ducks, and tons of highly manured [sic] vegetables, and to pay for this our yellow-skinned brother must run tanneries, dye works, sago factories, brick yards, and lime kilns, besides trading in durians, jack fruit, garlic, native tobacco, opium, salt fish, *blachan* [sic], or any mortal thing which will raise a deadly smell⁶⁴.

But when it came to the huge quantities of refuse which the durian season brought into the narrow streets of the Asian quarters, little room was left for philanthropic acceptance. For the durian represented a threat not only by smelling bad and thus spreading dangerous effluvia, but also by leaving behind tons of rotting, contaminating refuse.

⁶⁴ *Straits Times*, 10 August 1889, p. 3.

In early September 1894, contemplating the last blows of the season, an alarmed observer complained that “durian skins [were] scattered about the town in great profusion to the danger of public health”⁶⁵. In early July 1907 a Municipal Commissioner, commenting on two recent cases of cholera, warned that “garbage would appear to accumulate more rapidly than it can be dealt with”, and that this was “likely to be more felt when the Durian Season [would be] in full swing”⁶⁶. The vicious association among the durian, foul smells, filth, and danger to public health resurfaced at every booming of the season.

The thorny issue of durian skins brings us to the other problem which the durian ‘fever’ presented the Municipality with: the obstruction of urban traffic. Asian practices and uses of space, under which rubric the seasonal durian trade must be placed, were perceived as natural obstacles to the realisation of the urban ideals. Mr Johnson was also in this case relatively contented with the fact that his “Chinese friends” “like[d] durian skins and other debris which are gifted with a loud smell ... and they don’t like the trouble of removing this rubbish any great distance from their doors”⁶⁷. But such Fabian condescension was, again, not the rule. In August 1869 a reader of the *Straits Times* lamented again “the disgraceful state of five-foot pathways, where one has “to walk through a large quantity of durian ... skins”⁶⁸. In July 1899, “the fruit crop was ... so enormous that the scavenging department had practically broken down, and the carts had been

⁶⁵ *Daily Advertiser*, 8 September 1894, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Municipal Commissioners*, 5 July 1907.

⁶⁷ See above, note 64.

⁶⁸ *Straits Times*, 21 August 1869, p. 2.

utterly unable to deal with the quantity of refuse”⁶⁹, and about a decade later, the picture was quite similar:

Dozens of durian and mangosteen sellers take their stands, and about midnight the heaps of skins suggest the strain put upon the Municipal incinerators in the fruit season⁷⁰.

Still in the 1920s, exceptional flows of durians resulted in cramping the system of refuse disposal. In June 1926, once “the amount of reed refuse had ... increased sixty percent ... due to the fruit season”, notwithstanding “[e]very effort to keep the town free from refuse, the instant the tubs were emptied they were refilled”, with the result that “[w]hole streets were strewn with durian and others skins”⁷¹. The following year one disgusted observer praised “the Sanitary Board coolies as they slowly pick up the skins”, but complained that “the aftermath of durian feasts by the roadside presents quite a horrid spectacle on the morning after”⁷². The problem had already been grasped with some intellectual honesty by an Inspector General of Police in summer 1872, when “[t]he streets [were] particularly dirty ... from the refuse of durians”. He resignedly remarked that “during the durian and mangosteen season no system of markets would ever suffice to accommodate the sellers or satisfy the native public”⁷³.

Given the lack of a sewage system and the inefficiencies concerning the

⁶⁹ *Straits Times*, 20 July 1899, p. 3.

⁷⁰ See above, note 57.

⁷¹ *Straits Times*, 17 June 1926, p. 9.

⁷² *Straits Times*, 4 June 1927, p. 12.

⁷³ *Straits Times*, 3 August 1872, p. 2.

collection and disposal of rubbish in overcrowded areas, the quantity of refuse produced during the boom of the season was seen as a cause of further traffic congestion. As early as 1855, we hear the preoccupation with the danger represented by durian skins.

[H]undreds of the durian skins ... scattered over the public roads are alike dangerous to horsemen and pedestrians, particularly at night”⁷⁴.

The viability of the streets, and especially of the five-foot pathways, was a main concern of the British public opinion, which demanded them to be kept cleared and accessible. For the Asian communities, on the contrary, passageways constituted “space capable of accommodating more than one legitimate use at any one time” (Yeoh 2003: 247). Durian stalls mushrooming as soon as the season boomed were thus cleared as randomly and unsuccessfully⁷⁵ as the other ‘obstructions’ of the public passages. However, the problem of durian stalls obstructing traffic was to become more serious with the advent of motor vehicles.

Since the early 20th century, motor traffic represented a disappointing trouble. By 1919, traffic in Singapore was “increasing rapidly”, and approximately “1,000 motor cars [and] upwards of 100 motor lorries” were already sharing the streets with thousands of rickshaws and other carriages

⁷⁴ See above, note 60.

⁷⁵ According to Yeoh, “recourse to the legal process to effect the clearance of the verandahs was tedious and ultimately ineffective”. Besides the problems of corruption and the involvement of illegal organisations, fines were remarkably low and “hardly sufficient as a deterrent”. Thus, obstructions reappeared soon later they had been removed (2003: 256-257).

amounting to “a total of say, 15,900 vehicles”⁷⁶. Our fruit had already proved to be a woeful presence for the freshly motorised urbanite. As early as 1911, we are informed that

the pungent palatable durian is held responsible for so much that it is not surprising to learn that motor car drivers have a grievance against it Complaints are being heard of the damage occasioned to tyres by durian skins lying on the roads⁷⁷.

Similarly, concern for the 1932 season and the “ill wind that blows nobody any good” was paired with “the numerous durian skins lying about the roads”, which “must damage to motor tyres”⁷⁸. The durian season continued to have impact on the urban environment. In the 1940s and 1950s the press regularly reported the frantic scenes that were to be seen at the beginning of the season. In 1947 it boomed at the beginning of July: “they [the durians] arrived at dawn. Many thousands of them were brought by lorry from Tampin, Muar, Batu Pahat and Rengam. Buyers snapped them up almost as quickly as they were unloaded”⁷⁹. The season had indeed boomed “three weeks late on account of the recent heavy rains. Eager buyers ... bought the fruits as quickly as they were unloaded”⁸⁰. In January 1950, during the usually minor winter season, durian is widely traded in “back streets off South Bridge Road, in Kampong Java, in dockland near Keppel

⁷⁶ *Straits Times*, 8 May 1919, p. 7.

⁷⁷ *Straits Times*, 10 July 1911, p. 6.

⁷⁸ *Straits Times*, 24 June 1932, p. 18.

⁷⁹ *Straits Times*, 1 July 1947, p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Straits Times*, 6 July 1947, p. 7.

Road, and along Jalan Besar”, but “scores of stalls have also appeared in other parts of the town, and it is estimated that nearly 100 stalls are busily selling”. “The stalls”, we are told, “are temporary, often nothing more than wheeled barrows ... the durian sellers work well after midnight”⁸¹. The season of 1956 was very much awaited, due to the “absence of the fruit from the stalls in Singapore for the past 10 months”⁸²; and so it must have been the following year, when the beginning of the season resulted in a “durian rush”, and made “the stretch between North Bridge Road and Beach Road almost impassable”⁸³.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when independence and economic growth demanded novel and more effective uses of the public space, the friction between the unregulated and seasonal durian trade and the movement of motor vehicles aggravated. The disappearance of the British from the political scene did not result in the vanishing of anxieties for the state of the streets. On the contrary, the post-colonial government inherited very much of the sanitary *ethos* of the former rulers. For instance, in December 1972, the Minister of the Environment Lim Kim San gained a fair degree of unpopularity by proposing a “\$1 duty on each durian fruit imported into Singapore, to cover the high disposing fruit of the skins”. In that winter season refuse were amounting to “200 tons each day”⁸⁴. The ‘durian issue’ outlived the collapse of the Empire, but scenes such as the above mentioned ‘aftermaths’ of ‘durian orgies’ fitted also in the picture of the independent garden

⁸¹ *Straits Times*, 29 January 1950, p. 3.

⁸² *Straits Times*, 7 June 1956, p. 4.

⁸³ *Straits Times*, 15 July 1957, p. 6.

⁸⁴ *Straits Times*, 18 December 1972, p. 8. The infelicitous proposal was dismissed as “a revenue-raising gimmick”. Commentators called instead for “more policy, more fines for littering”, on the grounds that “the durian skins is mostly the responsibility of the hawkers and not the customers” (*Straits Times*, 21 December 1972, p. 11).

city, well beyond her early years.

In an increasingly developed city the major problem created by the durian season was that it further congested the street traffic. In June 1974 “young touts” were reported to run throughout the traffic selling durians in Beach Road, and “drivers”, the article lamented, “cooperate[d] in creating disorder”. Four days later, the press reported the decision of employing “more cops to end the durian chaos” in the same area⁸⁵. In June 1978 a “frustrated resident” of Temple Street, in Chinatown, complained about the occupation by durian hawkers of parking lots, which had made “an already congested street ... even worse”⁸⁶. “Accidents happen too”, reported an article in June 1982. The “durian season menace” of that year resulted in “fruit stalls sprout[ing] along Adam Road to do a brisk trade in durians”; “motorists could not resist the temptation to stop”, and a car braked “abruptly to avoid hitting a durian lover who had drawn up by the kerb suddenly”⁸⁷. Obstructions of the traffic in the same area were reported also the following year, and 14 stalls were relocated⁸⁸. In the increasingly congested area of Chinatown, the season was likely to create a “durian jam” well into the 1980s. In the minor winter season of 1985 the streets were still “inundated with durians and crowds ... there for the fruit”. The roads were “jammed with cars, people, and of course durians”⁸⁹.

Olfactory pollution and obstruction to traffic, two distinct problems connected by the littering of durian skins, were the main practical problems which

⁸⁵ *Straits Times*, 24 June 1974, p. 9; and 28 June 1974, p. 9.

⁸⁶ *Straits Times*, 3 June 1978, p. 17.

⁸⁷ *Straits Times*, 10 June 1982, p. 9.

⁸⁸ *Straits Times*, 15 May 1983, p. 18; and 27 June 1983, p. 9.

⁸⁹ *Straits Times*, 24 December 1985, p. 18.

the Municipality, and to an extent later the independent government, faced approximately every June. Tonnes of durians were imported, traded, and consumed mostly in the narrow and already congested streets. Undoubtedly, at the level of attitudes, these problems also contributed to the very particular aura and the symbolic charge with which the fruit is still today invested. However, for the authorities in charge of the urban environment, the durian chaos had to be controlled. We now turn to the strategies through which both the municipal authority and the post-colonial government attempt to regulate the durian.

Controlling the durian

Neither the colonial administration, nor the post-independence government ever implemented anything like a precise policy to deal with the ‘durian problem’. However, the 1988 ban of the fruit from the subway does have antecedents. These are traceable in the narratives previously explored⁹⁰, but there are more specific entries. For instance, there are the lamentations by travellers of “the first-class coach of the mail train” in Beaufort District, British Borneo. In 1916 it was complained that being “[t]he durian season ... in full swing”, the journey “necessitate[d] the use of respirators”⁹¹. In August 1929, the durian sowed dissension between “Asiatics and infuriated rubber farmers”, as “Chinese passengers ... brought durians into first-class railway compartments, thus forcing

⁹⁰ In fact, the fruit was (and is) outlawed from MRT stations as a “nuisance”, a category, as we have seen, which had a long history in the colonial administration. The durian was banned under the MRT Corporation’s Regulation No. 7: “No person shall bring into or upon the railway premises any luggage, article, or thing which cannot be carried or otherwise accommodated on the railways without risk of damage to railway property, or cause a nuisance or inconvenience to other persons using the railways”.

⁹¹ *Straits Times*, 10 October 1916, p. 6.

fellow-passengers to hold their noses for hours at a stretch”⁹². However these accounts do remind us of the diversion of the durian from the public scene – first-class compartments are in this sense no different from hotel halls –, the fact is that they never resulted in an ‘anti-durian’ policy. Problems posed by the durian season were coped with through the same strategies whereby both the colonial and then post-colonial administration dealt with the ‘hawker question’. Therefore, it is at the difficult relationship between the colonial administration and the loose category of street food sellers that we have to turn.

Traces of the ‘hawker problem’ in Singapore are to be found in the very infancy of the colony. As early as 1822 Raffles decreed that verandahs, covered passages which soon became a distinctive spatial feature of Singapore, should be kept free of encumbrances and allowed the movement of people⁹³. Hawking was indeed a by-product of the socio-economic structure of many Asian colonial cities, with rising low-income population, high density, and rising mobility. Verandahs and streets afforded the most natural infrastructure for a form of retail like hawking. Street hawking has been described as characterised by “small maximum range of a commodity” (that is, the retailer must be located the nearest to the customers, because of demand vagrancies and limited transport); and “large minimum range of a commodity” (that is, there is high demand density, because of population density and low-income levels)⁹⁴. These two features make hawking

⁹² *Straits Times*, 21 August 1929, p. 10.

⁹³ Raffles’ decree, dated 4 November 1822, is reproduced in Buckley (1984: 84).

⁹⁴ The model was proposed by James H. Stine (as reported by McGee 1980: 7-11) in reference to Asian ‘underdeveloped’ economies (in his study, Korea). Although dated, Stine’s study may still offer some insight in understanding socio-economic aspects of hawking in colonial and immediately post-colonial contexts.

somewhat 'endemic' to colonial capitals.

The Municipal administration and at least some segments of the public opinion understood the crucial function that the hawkers played for the survival and reproduction of the working class. For instance, in a 1898 article concerning what already was a "perennial question", an exponent of the British community recognises that since hawkers' "*raison d'être* is the refreshment of the public with the least possible trouble for the latter", it would have been "more considerate" to deal with them by licensing and providing them with "ranks similar to the hackney carriage [i.e. rickshaws] ranks"⁹⁵. But even though elimination was never an option, hawkers represented to the colonial authority obstructionists of the public space, agents of unsanitary habits, and threats to public order.

The history of the unfair and vain tug-of-war between hawkers and colonial administrators in Singapore has been amply documented by Brenda Yeoh (2003: 243-280). She explores this history from the early tensions which culminated in the 'verandah riots' of 1888, to the first serious attempts at controlling the phenomenon by means of licensing, in the 1900s and 1910s; from the 1922 prohibition of hawking in the Esplanade area, to the construction in the 1920s of the first 'Municipal shelters', the antecedents of nowadays hawker centres. We may indeed take up whence Yeoh has left off, that is, in 1929, with 5,513 hawkers newly licensed by the Health Department. Still, there were "as many [hawkers] without as with licenses", streets were "rendered impassable", and the whole effort to date having appeared "a vain hope"⁹⁶.

⁹⁵ *Singapore Free Press*, 4 July 1898, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Excerpts quoted in Yeoh (2003: 266).

The number of unlicensed hawkers increased significantly in the 1930s, both because of the natural population growth of Singapore and as a side-effect of the economic crisis, for hawking undoubtedly represented a ‘refuge’ profession for unemployed coolies. Following a sterile precedent in 1924, in 1931 a Committee to deal with the problem was appointed. The mainstream position, championed by colonial hygienists, was to suppress the hawker trade. The inconsequential plan dated 1924 had unrealistically set to accomplish the task “in two years’ time”⁹⁷. Such position is represented for instance by the residents of River Valley Road, who lamented the “hawkers’ tyranny” as “a most damnable nuisance [which] deserve[s] abolition”⁹⁸.

But the issue was more complicated, because influential segments of the public opinion advocated the cause of the street vendors. Sympathies towards the hawkers were expressed by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and not only on philanthropic grounds. Mr Lee Kim Soo, a merchant questioned by the 1931 Committee defended the hawkers as key parts of the Chinese trading system, for they were “the medium through which small traders carry on their advertising, clearance, and cheap sale”⁹⁹. Another object of the Chinese community’s contempt was constituted by the unfair methods of police officers in enforcing a law which for many had simply the effect of oppressing those who were already disadvantaged. The durian features in this testimony given by Dr Chen Su Lan, a prominent physician consulted by the Committee:

⁹⁷ *Administrative Reports of the Singapore Municipality*, 1925.

⁹⁸ *Singapore Free Press*, 19 September 1931, p. 10.

⁹⁹ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question* (1932), p. 41.

[o]ne day I saw a hawker of durians, carrying two baskets containing about 30 durians, arrested by the police. I don't know what for. When that hawker reappeared from the police station after his arrest, I saw him come out with empty baskets.

To the question of Mr Black, Chairman of the Committee, on “what [did he] suggest the policemen should have done?” Dr Chen promptly replied that “he should have been arrested, but his durians should not have been touched”¹⁰⁰. Hawkers were backed also by other conspicuous groups, such as the Clerical Association as well as large sectors of the working class, as clerks and coolies found the services provided by hawkers essential. For them, as part of “too a large population who [did] no cooking in the houses in which they live[d], the cooked food hawkers serve[d] an undoubted need”¹⁰¹.

Notwithstanding these arguments, and the general acceptance of the idea that abolition was not a solution, the Committee recommended a gradual limitation of the licenses issued. From the 12,000 issued in that 1931, the number of new licenses should have been reduced to no more than 6,000 by 1938. The widespread crisis of the 1930s inflated the number of illegal hawkers, and so did the wartime shortage, with Japanese unsuccessful attempts at restricting hawking and an increasing number of impoverished for who selling food “was the only way to make a living” (Wong 2009: 41). Clearly, the policy of reducing the number of hawker had failed. With the growth of the black market in the post-war

¹⁰⁰ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question* (1932), pp. 46-47.

¹⁰¹ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question* (1932), p.3.

years, the re-established Municipality felt compelled to appoint in 1948 a new Hawker Inquiry Commission. The Commission published its results in 1950, and called for a significant change in policy. In the words of the Chairman, T. H. Silcock:

It is our view that policy should not be directed towards eliminating hawking entirely, even as a long-term policy. Many of the underlying causes favouring hawking in Singapore are likely to persist.¹⁰²

Therefore, the Commissioners advised among others that “licenses should be issued to all those who wish to hawk” and that “no licensed hawker should be summarily arrested, even if he is breaking the law”. The Commission also suggested that “in the future planning of the Town of Singapore, provision of proper shelters should be made”¹⁰³. Again, this was not a uniform point of view. In noting that there were “on the streets about 20,000 unlicensed hawkers”, B. J. Doherty, Superintendent of the Town Cleansing Department, remonstrated about what he saw as a hopeless situation. “The primary object of licensing street hawkers was undoubtedly to establish some control over them”. But,

the exact opposite result is being achieved, because it is utterly impossible to lay down any regulations to control street hawkers, whether they be licensed or otherwise One has only to look at the

¹⁰² *Report of the Hawker Inquiry Commission* (1950), p. 25.

¹⁰³ *Report of the Hawker Inquiry Commission* (1950), pp. 28-31.

chaotic conditions of the street today in the slum and heavily populated areas of the town ... to realise that licensing or raiding hawkers have defeated the object of controlling them, and is simply a waste of energy and valuable time.

It is striking how this sense of the ineffectiveness of hawker policies is similar to the one expressed by a Police Inspector almost 80 years before¹⁰⁴. Mr Doherty continued remarking that hawkers “have absolutely no respect for law and order. They not only completely obstruct the streets with their paraphernalia and stock-in-trade ... but litter the streets with decomposed foodstuff and refuse of all sorts”¹⁰⁵.

Perhaps also because of this kind of resistances, no consistent policy of large-scale licensing was pursued in the 1950s. The newly independent Government found itself coping with the same problem in 1966. Early that year, the Minister for Health Yong Nyuk Lin drew up a ‘Hawkers Code’ which represented a significant step in the effort of controlling hawking. The premise of the Code was that “[i]n view of the serious unemployment prevailing in Singapore, the Ministry of Health accepts the situation that our unemployed should not be prevented from hawking as a way out to earn an honest livelihood”. Large scale-licensing had to be accompanied by strict control of the hawkers, and “indiscriminate hawking ... should not be tolerated, if it results in being a menace

¹⁰⁴ See above, p. 67.

¹⁰⁵ These and the previous quotation are from a *Memorandum from Mr B.J. Doherty, Superintendent, Town Cleansing Department*, attached to the *Report of the Hawker Inquiry Commission* (1950), pp. 45-48.

either to Public Health, Traffic, or Law and Order". Hawkers were required to pay minimal fees, to dispose properly their refuse, to pass medical tests, and to avoid prohibited areas¹⁰⁶.

In nature, the Hawkers code did not introduce anything particularly new. Nonetheless it can be considered an important step towards a successful hawkers policy. This is due first of all¹⁰⁷ to the fact that it was not a series of pieces of advice provided by an appointed Commission, but a document issued by the Ministry for Health. In other words, the policy was conceived by the same political authority which was to implement it. Secondly, the 'hawker problem' in 1966 ceased to be the exclusive responsibility of the Ministry of Health (which in 1973 handed it over to the Ministry of Environment), and became shared with the Housing and Development Board. This meant that hawker policy was implemented in conjunction with housing policy, in a successful attempt at dealing with the historical connection between hawking and overcrowded areas of own. Thirdly, in the words of Mr Yong, the policy was to be carried on with "fairness and yet firmness"¹⁰⁸. This was perhaps something more than political rhetoric. What had eventually been rebalanced was the incompatibility between the rulers' ideology of space and its uses by the ruled. Hawkers were to be a feature of the urban environment. Despite the fact that independent Government inherited many techniques of control from the colonial Municipality, the idea of

¹⁰⁶ *Singapore Government Press Statement*, 14 February 1966, pp.6-7.

¹⁰⁷ There are certainly structural reasons for the solution of the 'hawkers problem' in Singapore. To begin with, changes in immigration patterns and in the professional structure of the society. Since here I am merely sketching a picture in order to contextualise durian trade, I will not cover this issue. A number of relevant observations, as well as a comparison between different demographic patterns in Singapore and other Asian cities which experience a 'hawker problem' is made by McGee (1970).

¹⁰⁸ *Singapore Government Press Statement*, 14 February 1966, p. 5.

suppressing hawking was eventually abandoned.

A fourth and most important reason makes of the 1966 the first effective step towards putting hawking under control, that is, the fact that licensing was accompanied by a policy of relocation. The issuing of licence was in most cases the first part of a process which involved balloting for and allotting of fixed pitches and market stalls¹⁰⁹. Building of ‘hawker shelters’ called for since at least the 1931 Report, was since now launched on a large scale. By December 1966, 17,000 hawkers were licensed. Although there were still about 30,000 unlicensed street vendors, the Minister for Health could report to the Parliament that “one-third of the hawkers’ problem [was] in hand” and that he was “confident that the problem could be resolved in a couple of years”¹¹⁰. This was perhaps too optimistic. In 1968, for instance, of the 8,495 authorised fixed pitches sited in the streets, less than 5,000 were officially occupied¹¹¹. Nonetheless, in 1970 a report on “hawkers in selected Asian cities” could notice the relative effectiveness of the policies implemented in Singapore (McGee 1970). The work carried on in the 1970s and 1980s by the Hawker Department, since 1973 under the Ministry of Environment, can fairly be considered one of the most remarkable achievements which made up the ‘Singapore miracle’. In 1965, right before the ‘Hawkers Code’ was implemented, the Ministry of Health had reported:

The hawker problem continues to be complicated and delicate;

¹⁰⁹ To be clear, this was not a smooth and perfectly peaceful process: for instance, in May 1966, 200 *pasar malam* hawkers went on strike in Tanjong Katong Road because they were unsatisfied with the government-run balloting for pitches (*Straits Times*, 16 May 1966, p. 5).

¹¹⁰ *Straits Times*, 19 December 1966, p. 13.

¹¹¹ Data reported by McGee (1970: 70).

there being an estimated total of about 50,000 licensed and unlicensed hawkers. Of this, 5,622 are licensed, giving an approximate ratio of 1 to 10 of licensed to unlicensed hawkers¹¹².

By 1976, 16 hawker centres were completed, and 19 were under construction or active planning. The number of licensed hawkers was contained to about 28,000 food vendors, and it was to decrease. Relocation and stabilisation had been implemented on a massive scale, and there were now 16,954 “indoor” *vis-à-vis* 11,215 “outdoor”, or “still on the streets” hawkers. Illegal hawking, although still present, was a circumscribed phenomenon, and in that year 3,185 cases of illegal hawking were dealt with by the Subordinate Courts. Ten years later, although illegal hawking still occurred, all the 25,449 hawkers of Singapore were operating from indoor stalls. The Ministry could claim that “[t]here [were] no more licensed street hawkers on the streets”¹¹³. Itinerant hawkers, the most troublesome and uncontrollable category of food vendors, had disappeared. Policies of licensing, in addition to massive relocation and stabilisation in the long-called-for ‘hawkers shelters’, had eventually succeeded¹¹⁴.

What was the position of the durian in this history? In terms of possible

¹¹² *Annual Report for the Ministry of Health* (1965), p. 99.

¹¹³ *Annual Report[s] of the Ministry of Environment* (1976 and 1986).

¹¹⁴ This does not mean that hawking was completely under control. Other issues emerged throughout the years, such as hygienic standards for food handlers, standards of service, courtesy, and even a “Speak Mandarin [not dialects] Campaign” in 1980 (*Annual Reports for the Ministry of Environment*, 1980). In addition illegal hawking continued. In 1984, noting “a significant increase in the number of unlicensed hawkers”, from 3,023 summonses in 1984 to 3,550 in 1985, the Hawker Department remarked that “continuous enforcement had to be taken against them to prevent them from getting out of control. Furthermore, they posed danger to public health and caused littering, pollution and obstruction to cleansing work” (*Report for the Ministry of Environment*, 1984).

control over it, durian trade occupied a sort of grey area, in more than one sense. The seasonal nature of the fruit and the unpredictability of the crops made of durian hawking a typically temporary occupation. Consequently, durian sellers were a particularly elusive category of hawkers. This column from 1950 well encapsulates some characteristics of durian trade in Singapore before policies of licensing and relocation were implemented:

The durian seller is a man of mystery. He sets up his temporary stall at the entrance of a coffee shop. For less than two months business is brisk. Then the durian season finishes; and the great prehistoric fruits vanish from the Singapore street scene. With them goes the durian seller¹¹⁵.

If the imports of fines are of any indications, Municipal concern grew stronger between the 1930s and the 1950s: in 1933 “the durian season was responsible for a number of hawkers ... being charged with hawking without a license” and fined “20 cents each”, while in 1951 the ticket issued to hawkers without licence amounted to 15 dollars¹¹⁶, which is far beyond inflation.

The illegality of durian trade was to some extent a function of the lack of policies designed specifically for seasonal hawking. As far as I have been able to discern, until the ‘large-scale licensing’ policy was adopted in 1966, the licenses issued did not suit the temporary needs of durian sellers. In 1969, the category of

¹¹⁵ *Straits Times*, 9 March 1950, p. 11.

¹¹⁶ *Straits Times*, 19 July 1933, p. 18 and 10 February 1951, p. 7.

“temporary hawker”, being “any person licensed to sell or to expose for sale ... in an authorised temporary hawker pitch designated as such”¹¹⁷, was first introduced. Subsection 15 of section 40 of the 1969 Environmental Public Health Act enabled the Hawker Department, “from time to time”, to

issue temporary permits subject to such conditions as he may think fit for the erection of stalls, tables and showboards for the sale of food, drink or goods in any place specified in such permits during the continuance of any temporary fair, fête, wayang, gala or other special occasion and ... it shall not be an offence to erect a stall, table or showboard in accordance with any such permit¹¹⁸.

Although the fruit season was certainly one and a foremost ‘special occasion’, it is not addressed directly. Indeed, the booming of the season, with the arrival of loads of fruits, the haphazard erection of roadside stalls, and the refusal of ton of skins, represented a fairly more critical moment than temporary fairs, at least in terms of the implementation of the new policy.

In 1973, specific permits to sell durian between June and September were first issued¹¹⁹. The following year, 269 seasonal fruit hawkers were given these permits. The season was directly dealt with:

¹¹⁷ *The Environmental Public Health (Hawkers) Regulations*, 1969.

¹¹⁸ *The Environmental Public Health Act*, 1969.

¹¹⁹ *Straits Times*, 27 June 1983, p. 15. The article states that “[i]n 1982 99 permits were issued. Permits were first issued in 1973”, although I have not been able to find material for confirming this.

to eliminate health nuisance, traffic obstruction and enforcement problems, the seasonal sale of durians, mangosteens and other local fruits was restricted to designated sites within the city limits for a more effective control of seasonal fruit hawkers¹²⁰.

While hawking in general was being increasingly successfully regulated, ‘classic’ problems created by hawkers, association with menace to health included became the preserve of seasonal fruit sellers. And quite ‘classically’, the authorities reacted by attempting to limit the number of seasonal hawkers. Accordingly, already in 1975,

the issue of temporary licenses to itinerant hawkers for the sale of seasonal fruit was curtailed in view of pollution and traffic problems generated by the hawkers¹²¹.

Durian hawking remained a submerged and largely unregulated trade. And throughout the whole history that I have tried to sketch, fruit sellers always represented the most difficult category of street vendors to manage. As we have seen, the Municipal authority, particularly in the Institution of the Town Cleansing Department which was to deal directly with the problem, adopted a sort of resigned attitude towards durian trade, and the actual possibility to control it effectively. This was also because ‘grand’ policies to put under control the durian

¹²⁰ *Report for the Ministry of Environment* (1974), p. 27.

¹²¹ *Report for the Ministry of Environment* (1975), p. 24.

were deemed to arouse public discontent. This is best demonstrated by the previously mentioned, infelicitous proposal of charging 1 dollar tax for each durian imported in order to cover the expenses of cleansing¹²².

Another interesting element of the uncontrollability of the durian trade was its alleged connection with organised crime. Mr Edwin Tongue, then Superintendent of the Detective Branch, was heard as testimony by the Hawker Committee appointed in 1931. In his words,

Cantonese hawkers present the most difficult problem in Singapore. They also control the durian trade from up-country [...] they are potential gangsters and criminals. Many thousands of them could be deported with advantage¹²³.

It is difficult to establish with accuracy the degree to which these allegations were justified. The association between durian trade and illegal activities was undoubtedly present in the colonial mind-set. We have seen how quarrels over durians stroke the public opinion¹²⁴, and this contributed to permeate the ‘character’ of the durian seller with an aura of dishonesty. More in general, part of the uncontrollability of hawking was attributed to its dependence on secret societies. In his 1950 *Memorandum* Mr Doherty echoed Mr Tongue:

[I]t is also a well known fact that practically all Chinese hawkers

¹²² See above, p. 70.

¹²³ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Hawker Question* (1932), p.17.

¹²⁴ See above, p. 55.

contribute regular payments to some secret society or gang of ruffians in return for what is known as ‘protection’¹²⁵.

I am inclined to think that, as far as the durian trade was concerned, these were more than colonial stereotypes. The supplying of durians to Singapore, which already in the 19th century depended greatly on the Malay Peninsula, was a strictly Chinese business. As Carl Trocki has documented, Chinese settlers initially fled Singapore because of secret societies ‘wars’, and obtained *surat sungei*, sort of licenses for settling plantation, from the ruling house of the Temenggongs (1979: 90-128). These planters started up farming along the rivers in Johor and maintained solid connections with the organised crime. It is not too unlikely that they did play a role in the distribution of durians across the strait. Most orchards, above all, were along rivers. Whatever the link between durian distribution and secret societies, it certainly did not survive until the post-colonial period.

The 1966 policy had some effects on durian trade. As we have seen, specific seasonal licenses were issued in 1973-4, and, although often suspended, were later re-issued. In the 1970s and 1980s, relocation was implemented consistently. Areas where the durian trade created problems of traffic congestion were the objects of specific actions: for instance, in June 1983 13 stalls in Adam Road were relocated to Whitley Road after car accidents had occurred¹²⁶. Also Chinatown, once the most problematic trade area, was ‘de-durianised’, and today

¹²⁵ *Report of the Hawker Inquiry Commission* (1950), p. 46-47.

¹²⁶ *Straits Times*, 27 June 1983, p. 10.

the major durian hawking centres have conveniently shifted to more marginal districts such as Geylang¹²⁷. However, this control was by no means a smooth process.

Many resistances indeed occurred. While the policy launched in 1966 had a relative success, at least on the long run, in moving hawking from the streets and stabilising it within appropriate premises, durian sale, again because the very nature of its product, resisted stabilisation in markets or hawking centres. Well into the 1970s and 1980s it was, and to some small extent still is, a characteristic feature of the Singapore roadside scene. As such it continued creating problems of traffic hazard and littering. Still in 1986, when in January a particularly bountiful secondary season boomed, “unauthorised setting up of durian stalls at Smith Street” was reported and acted upon, and no less than 160 fines for illegal parking in “Rochore Road durian sale centre” were charged¹²⁸. Indeed, ‘durian eateries’ appeared in Chinatown only in the 1990s¹²⁹.

A last element is worth mentioning in this review of the problematic control of the durian trade. The 1966 policy entailed not only licensing efforts and relocations, but also a stricter control on hawkers’ activities. This meant for ‘cooked food’ hawkers medical checks and sanitary regulations. For durian sellers it meant also a closer monitoring of their business activity. In the 1970s and

¹²⁷ It is interesting to note that this area, which today hosts the biggest concentration of durian stalls in Singapore, apparently became Singapore’s durian retailing centre at the same time as it emerged as a new housing area for immigrant labourers, and as a more or less informal red-light district. The overlapping of these three activities (hawking, and in particular durian hawking; prostitution; and low-income immigrants’ housing) somewhat resembles the situation in the overcrowded areas of the colonial era.

¹²⁸ *Straits Times*, 27 January 1986, p. 12; for similar cases, see also 28 December 1980, p. 7; 18 June 1981, p. 7; 3 September 1988, p. 27.

¹²⁹ *Straits Times*, 11 May 1994, p. 3. The journalist salutes the durian ‘eatery’, “one with facilities for washing messy hands” as “a new feature of the Chinatown scene”.

1980s, cases of fraud and cheating occurred consistently. During the 1974 season, for instance, some 25 sellers were fined between 500 and 1000 dollars for “using weighing scales graduated in imperial pounds to sell durians by the kati”¹³⁰, the traditional measure of about 1.5 pounds in use since the early colonial era. In one of many similar letters, in 1976, a disappointed reader who signed as ‘Swindled’ wrote to the *Straits Times* that he had been cheated at “the Durian Centre in Beach Road”. He had bought “a basketful” of durians which, he later discovered, weighted almost half the 116 katis he had paid for. After he went back and protested the next day, he could not argue with the seller because “several men – all young and roguish-looking – came out and circled” him¹³¹.

The following year, “[o]fficers of the Weights and Measures Division [were] making random check of roadside stalls to ensure that customers are not cheated”¹³². Unjust scales, fines, and quarrels over unripe and over-ripe durians, along with illegal hawking, marked the durian trade also in the following decade. In particular, in June 1988, a ‘durian dispute’ caused in the public a certain uproar, as several buyers reported attacks by durian sellers. Arrests, ‘durian patrols’, reflections on customers’ etiquette and hawkers’ *ethos*, and even a guide on ‘how to handle aggressive durian sellers’ followed on the press¹³³. The durian could still be a fairly troublesome fruit.

This chapter has tried to describe some characteristics of durian

¹³⁰ *Straits Times*, 6 July 1974, p. 10. Later in August, 11 more durian hawkers were convicted with the same charge (*Straits Times*, 3 August 1974, p. 8).

¹³¹ *Straits Times*, 3 July 1976, p. 11.

¹³² *Straits Times*, 19 September 1977, p. 24.

¹³³ The issue won the attention of the press, and it can be traced in several June issues of *The Straits Times* (for instance, 14 June, p. 1; 19 June, p. 20; 24 June, p. 30; 30 June p. 15; etc.).

consumption and trade in Singapore, from the colonial era to recent times. I have first dealt with the impact and extent of the ‘durian fever’. I have argued that the seasonal nature of the fruit and the unpredictability of the crop played a significant role in the perceptions as well as in the actual experience and management of the durian seasonal booms. I have described the environmental and olfactory impact of the durian season on the urban contest of a growing, overcrowded, and perceived-as-unhealthy tropical city. Finally, I have tried to reconstruct the endless and mostly unsuccessful battle that the Municipality first and the Independent government later launched on hawking in general, and on durian trade in particular.

Durian trade has been throughout this history a particularly uncontrollable aspect of a generally uncontrollable issue: the one which saw those aiming at ordering public spaces facing those aiming at using it. The little history of the durian in Singapore reveals that this fruit, as a particularly charged site of everyday practices, was able to escape the strict controls that different authorities tried to exercise over the excesses and problems it created. Until the 1980s, the durian remained an uncontrollable fruit, a wild, recalcitrant commodity. None the less, patterns of durian consumption have changed, and we turn now to the changes recently occurred, and still occurring, within them.

5. The Stinky King

The ways in which the durian is today consumed and experienced are significantly different from the ones in the past. This chapter deals with contemporary durian consumption in Singapore, particularly with changes occurred in the last three decades which are still occurring today. In the first section I argue that since the 1980s the durian has undergone a process of ‘commoditisation’, that is, it has become a full commodity, today commonly available in Singapore throughout the year, and consumed in a more controlled way as well as with less disruptive impact on the urban environment. In the second section, I suggest that recently the durian started undergoing what I describe as a process of refinement of taste, a process whereby further knowledge is attached to its consumption and the durian enters into the gastronomic discourse. The last part attempts at explaining this latter process by framing it as an instance of singularisation, i.e. the effort by cultures of remaking unique what economies have commoditised.

The end of the season

The momentum of the season was central to the consumptive patterns of the durian in Singapore. As we have seen, sudden seasonal booms were source of excitement for consumers, and preoccupation by authorities. Up until the 1960s, as soon as the durians fell from the trees in Johor, Pahang, and Malacca, ton of them were loaded onto boats, carts and lorries, and transported to Singapore. As the durians descended on town, they brought with them their ill-famed smell as

stalls mushroomed in overcrowded urban areas. As middle-class clerks and working-class coolies bought and ate the fruit, they also littered the streets with skins much to the indignation of officers in the Cleansing Department. As nocturnal eating ‘orgies’ of the overripe fruit spread, creating social brawls, as well as traffic jams for the duration of the durian season, local councils tried to control the chaos via imposing fines and confiscating fruits if hawking and other urban regulations were not observed by durian sellers. However, as quickly as the durian mania happened, it also quickly vanished into thin air as durian hawkers and all the rowdiness and excitement around durian feasting disappeared from the urban landscape. With some variations, this is the picture which reappeared over time since the early days of the settlement, to the decade following Independence.

It was only since the mid-1980s, and more decisively in the last twenty years, when the durian became available year long, that a distinctive durian season ceased along with the troubles that come with the desire for this thorny fruit.

The inconsistency of harvests, which vary dramatically according to year as well as region, may prevent clear conclusions on when the end of a distinctive season began. However, Singapore’s Trade Statistics record¹³⁴, in which the durian trade has been noted under the entry of ‘Durian: fresh’ since 1979, allow us to locate the mid-1980s as a period of remarkable increase in durian imports from Malaysia¹³⁵. The average yearly durian import of the period 1979-1984 was 8,579

¹³⁴ All the following figures are taken or calculated from Singapore Trade Statistics, 1979 to 2009.

¹³⁵ Import from other countries, namely Thailand and occasionally Indonesia and Viet Nam, is numerically negligible. The yearly average total import in the period 2000-2009 was 25,655 tons a

tons a year. Most importantly, imports are overwhelmingly concentrated in the durian season, a time span which due to the ‘unpunctuality’ of the crop usually extends between May and August. The figures are at: 91.2% in 1979; 97.8% in 1980; and 92.8% in 1981. In the subsequent three years, there was an average of 93.4% per year. If we look more closely into monthly import figures, it seems clear that durians arrived in Singapore almost exclusively in the ‘classic’ fruit season period. However, durian import was scarce during the out of fruit season and often absent from the street scene during the off season period. Between 1979 and 1984, in the typically out-of-season months of March and November, only 44.1 and 58.1 tons of durian were imported, and in the pre-seasonal month of April the average import for 1979-1984 was a mere 6.1 tons. ‘Durian-less’ months were still quite common until 1984: October and November 1980, March and April 1981, April 1982, November 1983, and January and February of 1984 saw almost no durians in town.

The situation, in short, was not very different from the colonial scene previously depicted, when Singaporeans lamented or rejoiced over the absence of “the prehistoric fruit” or “the lordly durian”. Also quantitatively speaking, no radical change seems to have had occurred between the colonial period and the early 1980s. Although no precise figure of durian imports prior to 1979 is available, patchy indications do exist. At the boom of the season in 1892, Singapore was importing “15,000 – 20,000 durians per day”¹³⁶. In June 1938,

year, of which averagely 2,071 tons (8%) were imported from Thailand. Comparatively, the highest import from Thailand was in 1984, when 2,245 out of 10,086 tons, about 22%, were imported.

¹³⁶ *Strait Times*, 27 June 1892, p. 2.

“[a]pproximately 70,000 to 80,000 durians a day [were] being received in Singapore”¹³⁷. This would mean¹³⁸ something like 900 tons a month in 1892 and 3300 tons in 1938. Strikingly, these figures are not disproportionate to those in the early 1980s, when Singapore had become a far more populous city with a far more effective transportation system.

In 1985, 29,330 tons of durians were imported into Singapore from Malaysia. This peak was due to an exceptional minor season this year which brought almost 10,000 tons of durians into Singapore in the month of December. Remarkably, there was also a high import of the fruit during the out of season period for that year, i.e., 637 tons for March-April and 2,097 tons for September-November. In the following decade, from 1986-1996, the yearly durian import ranged from 20,546 in 1986 to 32,357 tons in 1994. The monthly import after 1984 reveals that the durian had by this era become available throughout the year. Prior to 1984, more than 90% of the yearly imports were concentrated during the durian season. However, subsequently this percentage decreased to an average of roughly 60% as durians became easily available throughout the year. Although seasonal peaks grew numerically, i.e., almost 16,000 tons between July and August of 1987 and 12,023 tons in July 1991, the durian had by then become fairly available during the off season months. During the early 1990s, formerly ‘durian-less’ months such as February and March saw significant imports, with an average of 5,396 tons imported between 1990 and 1994. This was in striking contrast with the 41 tons during the same off season in 1988 and 1,337 tons in the

¹³⁷ *Singapore Free Press*, 20 June 1938, p.9.

¹³⁸ These figures are hypothetical and assume an indicative average weight of 1.5 kilo a fruit.

off season of 1989. ‘Durian-less’ months had not occurred since the early 1990s. When Malaysian crops underwent particularly bad seasons, such as in 1993 or 1995, durians from Thailand substituted for the lack of Malaysian durians. In June 1993, Singaporean consumers coped with a belated Malaysian harvest by importing 3,493 out of the total of 4,155 tons of durian imports from Thailand.

The last decade has seen the stabilisation of the pattern of durian import. Between 2000 and 2009, a considerable 35.6% of the total import (amounting to some 84,000 tons of durians) occurred out of the major season, that is, outside the months from May to August¹³⁹. Although the annual import varies, ranging from 19,918 tons in 2007 to 34,177 tons in 2000, durian supply is guaranteed throughout the years. The minor season of December-January still sees some 31,000 tons of fruits, or about 13% of durian imports, coming into Singapore. While out of season, imports are comparatively lower¹⁴⁰, supply was clearly constant throughout the year, and there was never a scarcity of durians. The picture emerging from statistics in the last three decades shows that durians have become increasingly more available throughout the year. Inevitably, this was an outcome of agronomic and technical improvements as well as extensive cultivation of the fruit¹⁴¹.

Increased availability in Singapore was enabled by agronomic

¹³⁹ The figure would rise to 43.4% if the 18,413 tons of durian imported in the months of May 2000-2009 would be considered out of season. For consistency with the former data, I count May imports as part of the season.

¹⁴⁰ For instance: 199 tons in March 2000; 143 in October 2002; 228 in October 2006; at any rate, in the decade, few more months recorded imports under the 500 tons.

¹⁴¹ Despite the year long supply, the core durian season remains an important moment for durian lovers and its adversaries alike. It is significant that durian imports remain overwhelmingly highest in the months of the ‘classical’ fruit season, which has since long enlivened Singapore’s urban landscape. Nonetheless, because of the year-long availability, the durian has somewhat lost part of its status as a seasonal delicacy.

improvements in Malaysia. Although Singapore did and still does have local grown durians, the city-island has always relied upon supplies from the Malaysian Peninsula. Durians from Malaya were already essential to consumption on the island in colonial times. In the Summer of 1892, “100 carts of this tempting fruit [came] down daily from the country [to Malacca] to be shipped to Singapore”¹⁴², and at the peak of the season the Sunday Labour Ordinance was even amended in order to grant shipments to the Singapore Settlement on Sunday¹⁴³. In the 1930s, Johor became “Singapore’s main source of supply”¹⁴⁴, and by 1950 “there [were] few durian estates in Singapore and most of the Colony’s supplies [came] by trucks from Muar, Batu, Pahat and Rengam [in Johor]”¹⁴⁵. Some twenty years later, during the postcolonial era, local production, concentrated in rural areas such as Lim Chu Kang and Changi, supplied “a negligible 800 fruits a day”¹⁴⁶. The 1973 Census of Agriculture reported as many as 59,123 durian trees on the island, 50% of which are “assumed productive”¹⁴⁷.

Thirty thousand fruiting durian trees were not negligible but low yield was due to unsystematic durian cultivation in Singapore. Of the 7,304 farm holdings engaged in growing durian trees in 1973, 73.9% owned less than 9 durian trees and 51% less than 5. Moreover, all were principally engaged in other forms of horticultures as well as poultry farming. Hence there was no systematic, grand-scale durian production which could optimise productivity and facilitate large

¹⁴² *Straits Times*, 4 July 1892, p. 3.

¹⁴³ *Straits Times*, 10 August 1892, p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ *Straits Times*, 28 July 1937, p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ *Straits Times*, 9 March 1950, p. 8.

¹⁴⁶ *Straits Times*, 20 December 1972, p. 21.

¹⁴⁷ *Report on the agricultural census of Singapore* (1973), pp. 24 and 189.

marketing. Local fruits were traded only in small, indeed “negligible” quantities. Most probably they were consumed at the ‘*kampong* level’ by the growers themselves and their families. An informer recalls that durian farms in Singapore were “nothing like an orchard, and at best had only ten to fifteen trees”. He explained that locally grown durians were often “given to friends in order to get a favour”¹⁴⁸.

On the contrary, since the 1980s, both production in Malaysia and retail in Singapore underwent huge transformations with impact on the consumption of durians in Singapore. I turn now to describe these transformations.

In 1980 the picture of durian production in Malaysia provided by a study by the Universiti Pertanian Malaysia showed a quite dismal situation:

No details are available in terms of the annual production of various other local fruits, particularly the seasonal type. However, if one drives through the durian-growing areas around Kuala Kangsar (Perak), Batu Pahat (Johor), and Jerangau (Terengganu), one notices that, except for a few well-managed orchards, the fruit trees are largely neglected; the holdings are over-crowded with all types of non-fruit crops and infested with pests and diseases. Yields of these

¹⁴⁸ Local production always retained a particular position in popular imagination. As back as 1893, in reference to durians imported from the Peninsula, it was “well known that the imported article does not come up to what is grown in Singapore” (*Straits Times* 2 June 1893, p. 2). Well after local production completely disappeared, ‘native’ durians excited a remarkable interest. In 1993 it was reported that “[s]ome Singaporeans have been camping out in the jungles along Rifle Range road to pick the fruit . . . Hordes of durian lover . . . armed with knives to open the durians . . . search for fruits which have just dropped. [They are] worth waiting for because of their full-bodied taste compared to commercially grown durians from Malaysia” (*Straits Times*, 14 July 1993, p. 22).

various fruits are generally low, except for an occasional peak season such as in 1976 (Othman 1980: 5).

The study had then called for more scientific management and distribution of seasonal crops. The report states that since “durian, rambutan, and possibly others too produce fruits at different times of the year in peninsular Malaysia ... supplies can be properly regulated”. Emphasis is placed on research and technological developments such as “new techniques of preserving the fruits during peak period”. Nonetheless, on the durian, the report had concluded that “there is still a lot of work to be done on this crop including research on agronomic practices and food technology, in addition to breeding” (Othman 1980: 1-5 and 305).

However, things were already changing. Durian orchards in Peninsular Malaysia had risen from 7,723 to 8,792 hectares in the decade 1963-1973, with a percentage increase of 13.8%¹⁴⁹. In 1987, the durian cultivation had impressively expanded to an area of 40,667 hectares, “with the highest hectarage in Johore”, and with an export income amounting to 53.3 million ringgit (Lim 1990: 4-5). This increase of planted area continued in the 1990s and reached a peak of 116,271 hectares in 2003. This growth was accompanied by ameliorations in agronomic practices.

A study dated 1962 still states that “[t]he durian is often only semi-cultivated, being accorded no special care” (Soegeng-Reksodihardjo 1962: 278). By the late 1880s, about 40 diseases of the durian tree and fruit had been described, and some 130 chemical fungicides were available on the market to

¹⁴⁹ *Statistical Digests* (1973), Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Kuala Lumpur.

durian growers (Lim 1990: 76-80), in striking contrast to the scarcity of information on diseases and treatment of the durian in a study of some thirty years earlier (Soegeng-Reksodihardjo 1962: 279). While “[t]raditionally, little husbandry, apart from clearing around the base of each tree during the fruiting season, was carried out”, in the 1990s it was recognised that “sound horticultural manipulation must be maintained”: fertilization, irrigation, plant protection, pruning, disease control have become widespread practices among “élite growers in eastern Thailand and to some extent in Malaysia” (Othman and Suranant 1995: 95-104).

Extension of cultivated area, improvements in field husbandry and agronomic techniques were undoubtedly very important steps towards the new character of durian production and consumption. Equally important, was the introduction of extensive breeding, that is, the selection and propagation of particularly excellent durian specimens. Selection of cultivars¹⁵⁰ started in Malaysia well before the 1980s. Indeed, a rudimentary form of selection has always occurred, and to some extent it is still practised. This basically consists in the propagation by seeds of fruits from plants recognised as good:

In the existing very old *dusun*, propagation was commonly done by seed, hence the number of forms is very large. A superior durian tree

¹⁵⁰ A cultivar is a cultivated variety of a particular species. Botanically speaking, the durian which this thesis focusses on is a particular species (*Zibethinus* Murr., according to the prevailing nomenclature), of the *genus Durio*, belonging to the family of the *Bombaceae*. Thus, durian cultivars are varieties, or races of this same species, selected because of their particularly desirable characteristics (flavour, but also shape, colour, durability, resistance to diseases, etc.) for the very purpose of maintaining and propagating them. I will refer to cultivars also with the terms races, clones, and breeds.

soon gains reputation in its neighbourhood: its fruits are sought and carried for short distances, and its seeds are sown in new places.

This form of selection “has led to some improvements, but quite often the offspring produces fruits unlike those of the parent”. In sum, both cultivation and selection of breeds in Malaysia remained “rather haphazard” processes until the 1950s (Othmann and Suranant 1995: 92)¹⁵¹. Indeed, a more scientific interest in durian breeding by the colonial Department of Agriculture started as early as the 1920s: varieties were collected, breeding by grafting was initiated, and important and long-lasting clones such as D24 were obtained between 1934 and 1939. However, it was only in the 1970s-1980s that genetic breeding became practised extensively and for large-scale commercial purposes: 19 clones were registered between 1934 and 1955; 43 in the early 1970s; and 56 between 1981 and 1993¹⁵².

The advent of breeds is crucial for the understanding of contemporary durian consumption. On the one hand, breeds resulted in standardised tastes and more predictable and consistent harvests, as more homogeneous and durable cultivars were created. On the other, as we shall see in the next session, breeds presented the buyer with differentiated durians, in terms of characteristics, taste, and, of course, price. These were soon conceptualised in Singapore as ‘brands’, and thus were central to the process of refinement that I will describe. For the moment, suffice it to stress that extensive breeding, along with the other

¹⁵¹ The passage seems to have been largely derived from Soegeng-Reksodihardjo (1962: 278).

¹⁵² *Comprehensive list of durian clones registered by the agriculture department*. Document dated 1994 provided by the Commodity Development Branch, Peninsular Malaysia Agriculture Department.

agronomic improvements, contributed “to overcome the difficulties of export peculiar to this fruit”. Research had “provided insights into how durian’s two most limiting properties [that is, smell and short shelf-life] can be overcome”. It was now increasingly possible “to manipulate ripening ... which offer the prospect of greatly extending the shelf-life and limiting the undesirable nature of its smell” (Brown1997: 87-88). In brief, extension of cultivated land and agronomic research had removed the limits of the durian as a commodity, and thus made possible its extensive commoditisation.

Significant changes at the retailing phase of the fruit also occurred during the 1980s. The most important innovation was perhaps the introduction of polystyrene foam packaging. Pre-packed arils, the edible parts of the durian, appeared in Singapore in the mid-1980s as a solution to the problems of dispensing skins and containing the odour. According to sellers, by 1993 packaged fruits amounted to “[a]s much as 80 per cent of durians sold at wholesale markets”, where “3 out of 5 vendors are pre-packing most of their fruits”. This new form of consumption was labelled as suitable to “the younger, better educated, and more fashionable customers”, as opposed to the “die-hards who believe that durian meat must be eaten straight off its thorny shell”¹⁵³. A sense that durian consumption was changing and ‘modernising’ became evident in the 1990s.

Mr John Hoe, a durian trader who claimed to have first introduced polystyrene foam packaging in 1983, attempted at ‘revolutionising’ durian consumption in the 1990s. He developed “nitrogen gas-filled bags” to further

¹⁵³ *Straits Times*, 21 June 1990, p. 25.

reduce the smell, and provided “disposable gloves for customers”. He set up air conditioned durian eateries and imaginative forms of labelling (“creamy, medium, and firm”), as well as date-stamping of the fruit. He also claimed to be the first seller to supply packed durians to supermarkets. Regardless of the originality and the success of his ideas, Hoe was aware that people “are not eating durian like 100 years ago, sitting by the roadside”¹⁵⁴. Hence, he tried to promote new and ‘socially friendly’ forms of durian consumption. By the same token, others, namely the above mentioned “die-hards” perceived a sort of gustatory and cultural loss, which today has become nostalgia, as embodied in this quotation by one informant:

The craze will never die. But you have a better selection now, and your way of consuming the fruit is different, even the buying the fruit is different. Most people don’t even buy the fruit; they buy the packed fruit, which poses no problem on skin disposal. Although you gain a little bit, you lose a lot on the fruit. The flavour is less, the sweetness is gone, the joy of opening a fruit is no more there, sometime you have to fight the fruit, sometime it is so easy, and the unexpected joy of looking inside is no more there. Previously when you opened a fruit in front of everybody there would be a ‘wow’. We are more controlled today. In the attitude there’s a change, there’s no more craving for it¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵⁴ *Straits Times*, 16 June 1991, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010.

More controlled forms of distribution developed with more controlled forms of consumption. Both Mr Hoe and the nostalgic customers have perceived a change. Durians are now available out of season. They are consumable in appropriate, sometimes indoor and air-conditioned premises. Durians are now de-shelled, ready-to-buy, and packed in odour-proof polystyrene foam boxes as the fruit has become extensively commoditised. The sale and consumption of the durian have adapted to the demand and exigencies of clean and odour-free urban modern society.

In sum, the expansion of cultivated areas and agronomic improvements has significantly changed durian production since the 1980s. The rationalisation of durian production has resulted in the increased availability of durians throughout the year in Singapore. An increase in durian imports and availability throughout the year have led to other transformations. In particular, through breeding and the control of the fruit's ripening stages a standardisation of durian tastes has been produced. Classical 'durian problems' in the past such as traffic obstruction and littering have been to a great extent resolved through licensing controls and relocation. Today, the introduction of polystyrene foam packaging has effectively made durian consumption a clean, odourless, and 'socially friendly' affair. As the durian becomes extensively commoditised and more readily available throughout the year, there is also a standardisation of taste and a modernisation of consumption patterns to suit the contexts of an urban and continuously modernising city. The "end of the season" may well now become a

metaphor of the taming or domestication of durian consumption today. However, although commoditised and eventually controlled, the durian also underwent in the last decades what I shall call a process of refinement of taste. It is to this process which we next turn.

Symptoms of refinement

Before describing the process of refinement of taste in durian consumption in Singapore since the 1980s, I shall make clear how I frame such a process. Besides limiting my scope from the outset to processes of refinement of taste for edible objects, two premises have first to be established. Firstly, I refer to refinement as a social and cultural process. Here I am not primarily interested in technical or technological changes, but in changes of taste. Although the two dimensions of taste and technological developments are often inextricably intertwined, I will limit my scope to the dimension of taste as I am concerned more directly with the sociocultural significance of the consumption process than with the associated technological dimensions. As far as matters of food are concerned, the best way to capture the relationship between production and consumption of tastes is perhaps to refer to the views of the great chef Auguste Escoffier, who has said that ‘tastes are constantly being refined and cooking is refined to satisfy them’. In relation to durian consumption, this means that the creation, selection and marketing of breeds, which are often achieved at the production level through technological advancements, are all aimed at satisfying the customers and heightening their desire for durians, and even accelerates cultural needs of the consumers.

Secondly, I would like to avoid the lumping together of meaning between refinement on one side, and sophistication, affectation, and ornament on the other. Sombart, for instance, initially defines refinement as “any treatment of a product over and above that which is needed to make it ordinarily useful” (1967: 59). More recently, Berry expands his treatise on luxury by distinguishing between needs and desires: luxuries, or refined goods, are the answers to desires, hence are in substance unnecessary or inessential (1994: 9-10). These definitions¹⁵⁶ resemble common understandings of refined goods which are often associated with superfluity, sophistication, and redundancy. The equation of refinement with the unnecessary is superficial, for it does not acknowledge the crucial fact that refinement is also a social and cultural need. Drawing from Elias’ (2000) and Veblen’s (2005) ideas, I would maintain that refinement is rooted in the social and cultural circumstances of those who develop it, hence what is deemed as physiologically or pragmatically superfluous is often socioculturally necessary.

With this said, I broadly define the refinement of taste as any process whereby further aesthetic knowledge is attached to the consumption of food. By aesthetic knowledge, I mean knowledge concerning not only technical aspects of cookery, horticultural practices, or dietetics. Along with all these dimensions, processes of refinement are characterised by the attachment of aesthetic knowledge, that is, knowledge concerning the *pleasure* given by food.

As part of civilising processes, the refinement process often has “no zero

¹⁵⁶ To be sure, both the scholars further developed these starting definitions. Sombart then elaborates on the historical and cultural relativity of wants and needs, while Berry later on (1994: 231-241) further distinguishes between necessary needs and socially necessary necessities, coming close to the point that I will soon make.

point”. According to Elias, increased social interdependence made modern Europeans far more emotionally restrained and socially controlled than medieval people, but “medieval people were not unrestrained or without social moulding in any absolute sense. ... The person without restrictions is a phantom” (Elias 2000: 181). In a similar way, we can say that the processes of refinement have no origins: the person *without* taste is a phantom, too. In other words, human beings have always attached knowledge to, and felt pleasure in, eating. The point is that at certain turning points in history, these processes do accelerate: as information and ideas around food consolidated and become recognised, they gradually take the shape of organised and systematised *corpora* of knowledge – they become gastronomy¹⁵⁷.

Examples of the process of refinement of taste for food abound and have drawn scholarly attention. The development of *grande cuisine* in 17th century France, with the shift of emphasis on quality, freshness and variety of ingredients, importance of table manners, delicacy and recognisability of flavours, and simplicity of preparations, is perhaps the most studied example (Mennell 1985: 69-83). Another is to be found in the degree of elaboration which cookery attained in the urban courts and households of medieval Middle East, where variety, rather than quantity, became the most valued feature of the growing bourgeois food culture (Waines 2003: 575-576). Also 11th and 12th century China

¹⁵⁷ Although the word ‘gastronomy’ dates as back as 3rd century CE (Perullo 2008: 28), Gastronomy as a literary genre was born in France short after the Revolution (Mennell 1985: 270-272). I do not mean here gastronomy as a genre, but as a discursive realm. It is of course possible to talk and write about food also outside this realm, and indeed centuries of cookery, dietetics, medicine, and pharmacopoeia attest this possibility. It is only when knowledge on how to consume food in order to feel sensory pleasure and provide aesthetic satisfaction is systematised that gastronomy, by its Greek etymology a ‘set of rule’, emerges. It is my opinion that all the texts cited here meet this requirement.

presents us with an instance of the process of refinement: there the Song dynasty patronised the creation of a greatly elaborated cuisine, and saw the emergence of “[c]onnoisseurship and gourmetship”, cookbooks, and the earliest ‘restaurant scene’ in history (Anderson 1988: 57-72).

All these are instances of radical change of attitudes and tastes concerning food. All show that pleasure derived from eating grows more recognised and more systematically defined. All are shaped by the process of refinement of taste, that is, they occur by an attachment of aesthetic knowledge to food. Written recipes provide standards and ‘right’ ways to treat ingredients in order to reproduce ‘correct’, palatable dishes which produce enjoyment. Codes of manners teach one on how to behave at the dining table so as to produce ‘correct’ and pleasant social interactions during eating. Terminologies for the description of tastes provide canons on how a particular food or drink should taste, and make available linguistic means to convey sensory pleasure (or its twin, displeasure) otherwise confined to wordless palates. All these provide us with the textual axioms of the processes of refinement, the ‘tools’ with which refinement taste is developed and becomes widespread.

Processes of refinement of taste are traceable in many texts on food. ‘Arts of Living’ and etiquette manuals which emerged in Renaissance Italy (Elias 2000: 58-60; Montanari and Capatti 2003: 13-22) represent famous instances. The emergence of food journalism and restaurant criticism in post-revolutionary Paris consolidated and spread French culinary taste (Mennell 1985: 266-290). Increasingly precise lexicons for describing degrees of sweetness of Champagne

wines elaborated in the early 19th century in Britain are another example (Devroey 2002: 166-167). Literature around food connoisseurship which grew in late Ming China led to the spread of ideas on how to appropriately choose, appreciate, and enjoy items the pleasure of food. It provides us with a non-Western example (Clunas 1991: 40-74)¹⁵⁸. Not least, modern wine and restaurant guides, or the creation of technical vocabularies on sensory analyses of olive oils or cheeses are two of many contemporary instances of the refinement of taste. All these are ‘tools’ of refinement of taste, or textual instruments through which food is associated with particular aesthetic and sensory knowledge of pleasure and where the notion of taste becomes inscribed as part and parcel of gastronomic discourse.

Therefore, processes of refinement of taste consist of the crystallisation of aesthetic knowledge around food. This is usually signalled by, and documented through written texts. Jack Goody has famously proposed that writing, namely in the form of cookbooks, is the most important prerequisite for the emergence of what he terms ‘hierarchical’ cuisines, culinary systems in which the differentiation between ‘high’ (i.e. elite) and ‘low’ (i.e. peasant) cooking and eating grows more and more marked (Goody 1982: 97-153)¹⁵⁹. The textualisation of knowledge about food, besides representing an indispensable instrument for

¹⁵⁸ Clunas is mostly concerned with works of art and craftsmanship, but the *Treatise on superfluous things* he analyses indeed has a chapter on ‘Vegetables and fruits’, an excerpt of which is reported by the author (1991: 45). Moreover, Clunas, in line with Bourdieu, remarks that food, clothes, furniture, decorative animals such as birds and fishes, and all the items dealt with in the *Treatise* “existed in the same continuum of consumption as other areas which (on first sight, at any rate) are better documented” (63).

¹⁵⁹ In Goody’s classic analysis, other prerequisites for the development of ‘high’ culinary standards are a high degree of social stratification and the professionalisation of cookery. Goody’s argument, which is based on the lack of variety and differentiation characterising ‘simple’ *vis-à-vis* ‘hierarchical’, more developed cuisines, has recently been directly criticised by McCann (2009).

the historian to trace past processes of taste refinement, is certainly vital to them. But, if we look at processes of taste refinement, we see how behind each of the relevant texts are also changing systems of values.

The anthropologist Heather Paxson has recently studied the valorisation of *terroir* in American artisan cheese-making. According to Paxson, *terroir*, a French term which refers to the “notion that distinct ecologies of production generate distinctive sensory qualities in handcrafted agricultural product” (2010: 444), is becoming valued, marketed, and appreciated¹⁶⁰ in US cheese-making. This phenomenon happens through a number of practices, ideas, even human relations and ethical values.

The elaboration of the concept of *terroir* is in fact changing the public’s taste for cheese in America. By using the notion of *terroir*, the taste for cheese is being refined and an elaborate set of aesthetic knowledge become associated with cheese making and eating. Cheese-makers now aim at producing fine cheeses with special qualities which evoke the sensory palates and aesthetic responses of the consumers. The ‘texts’ that Paxson uses to document the refinement of the taste for cheese in America are websites, advertisements and reports from meetings of the American Cheese Society. Of course, materials from food columns and reviews were equally important to spread this new type of cheese consumption and enjoyment. The entrance of cheese into the American gastronomic discourse is however not simply a textual product. This is because while texts may document refinement, knowledge of food is to an extent also

¹⁶⁰ In Paxson’s study of *terroir*, the notion is ‘retooled’, for she is concerned with the adaptation, namely the “reverse engineering” of this French concept to the American context.

inscribed by social behaviours, practices, ideologies, and experiences.

The use of the concept of *terroir* allows us to turn back to the durian as this concept is applicable to the process of refining the taste for the durian in Singapore.

Undoubtedly, the use of *terroir* with regard to the durian may seem inappropriate to some, as the concept of *terroir* is very much associated with the Western practice of wine tasting. Nonetheless, the notion that certain durians owe their specific and special flavour to the particular soil and the terrain where are produced has always been part and parcel of the common knowledge around durian consumption. Indeed, it is arguable that the notion of *terroir* was found in early narratives about the durian well before the French term was adopted in Anglophone gastronomic writing and earned the prominence it enjoys today especially when it comes to fine wine tasting.

‘Durian narratives’ which point to the workings of *terroir* can be gleaned from past records as well as views procured during my study. For instance, judgements such as “the best fruits I ever tasted were from a tree [in] Labuan” (Burbidge 1880: 545) reveal that was already a common perception during the colonial era that particular regions gave rise to particularly good durians. Not only regions, but also trees were recognised as endowed with particular ‘properties’:

Fruiterers ... separate the durians. Those from tree known to produce the eagerly sought-for orange or cream coloured pulp are segregated

from the ordinary durians¹⁶¹.

In a 1954 study on the marketing of durians in Perak, Peninsular Malaysia, Wilson writes:

The appeal of the fruit lies in its definite odour and flavour; these differ considerably between different trees, areas and seasons and even fruits. ... Most durian fruits from those trees which, by local knowledge and standards, are of the best flavour are retained by the grower to be eaten by friends and relatives (Wilson 1954: 211-212).

The same situation was described by Soengeng-Reksodihardjo, who observed in Java the “idjon system”: that certain orchards, trees, and even branches are recognised among villagers as bearing the best fruits, and thus these superior durians are auctioned and sold to local dealers “on the tree while [they are] still unripe” (1962: 279-280). One of my informants, a consummate durian expert, also provided a similar opinion when he talked of how during the 1950s and 1960s, six “towns” in Pahang and Johor were known for producing *kampong* durians which tasted “distinctively different” from others as the flesh was more or less “golden, yellow, white, thick, dry, creamy, fibrous”. According to him, the differences were due to “different lands”. “You have hills, and slopes, and winds and rainfalls. And you have seas and rivers, and streams, and mixed orchards

¹⁶¹ *Straits Times*, 10 May 1948, p. 6.

where other plants are grown”¹⁶².

Even without knowing the word, he was using the very concept of *terroir*. Thus, specific values and histories were inscribed onto durians from specific areas, estates, orchards, rows, trees, and branches, in a way that does not differ from the valorisation of certain vineyards marketed as selections or reserves by world renowned wine houses.

In durian marketing, the notion of *terroir* has evolved and become spread in the last three decades. Since the 1980s, the practise of ‘earmarking’ special durians from certain farms, orchards, or trees with coloured dabs of paint has been a widespread practice in Singapore¹⁶³. The owner of a durian farm in North Western Penang explained that in his estate “out of sixty trees, one dozen give superior fruits”. The superior taste of fruits from the one dozen trees, he said, was because “their position is better, they are closer to the river, and get more sun, which make the fruit sweeter”. Because of this, his “fruits [have won] local competitions since 1983, and fetch very high price in good seasons”¹⁶⁴.

Today, with the advent of genetically reproduced breeds, the link between place and taste has become more intimate. A durian lover remarks that “a Red Prawn [durian] from Johor tastes quite different from one which is grown in Penang”¹⁶⁵. While past notions of *terroir* associated with generic *kampong* durians were more or less haphazard and left to popular imaginations, today

¹⁶² Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010.

¹⁶³ It is noteworthy that, according to an informant, these marks “are more useful to retailers than customers” (Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010). At any rate, this practise exposes the buyers to a differentiation of fruits coming from different places, and it could well be seen as an embryonic form of labelling.

¹⁶⁴ Conversation with grower, 19 November 2009.

¹⁶⁵ Conversation with consumer, 14 August 2010. This is a particularly prized breed. Originated in Penang, this cultivar is today genetically reproduced in other parts of Peninsular Malaysian.

special durian breeds are associated with specific birthplaces. In a staggering enumeration made by a young durian enthusiast breeds are inextricably localised:

D24 is the average durian available in Singapore. It is cultivated in many places, but the best ones come from Pahang: chunky and quite bitter. Muar gives the best Red Prawns available here, though I think the brand was first created in Penang, hence the Hokkien name ‘Ang Hay’. Those from Muar are orangier than red, and milder. The Cat Mountain King, or Mao San Wang, is the most priced variety. This season [August 2009], the best are from the Johor area, they are richest in flavour, very bittersweet, and most buttery. There are many more brands; in Penang there are many which are not traded here, like Xiao Hung, from Balik Pulau, which is slightly sour, and Hor Loh, dry and very bitter. I have been told Hor Loh come from a particular orchard, the Brown orchard in the same area. These brands from Penang are really the best, but we do not have them in Singapore.

The informant was unable to specify anything about this “Brown orchard”, except for the fact that Hor Loh, or “Water Gourd durians” were “first cultivated there”. He also mentioned another estate in the same area where “the late Mr Teh first cultivated D604”¹⁶⁶.

The association between breeds and breeders is another interesting aspect of the conceptualisation of durian *terroir*. Human agency plays a marginal role in

¹⁶⁶ Materials from email exchange with consumer, August 2010.

durian cultivation. However, since the outburst of breeds, their creators have been publicly awarded and recognised. Since the 1990s, durian contests in Malaysia have captured the attention of Singaporean durian lovers, and Malaysia winning breeds have easily become top-selling brands in Singapore. In 1992, “Mrs Tan Chee Koon’s D24 durians [won] the top prize” at the Perak State Durian Festival, and in the 1993 season sales of the breed increased¹⁶⁷. In 1995, the *Straits Times* reported that “[n]ewcomer 666 look[ed] poised to put up a good fight against hot favourites Sultan and XO durians [and] was crowned Durian King recently by experts in Malaysia”¹⁶⁸. The farmer who cultivated the variety was recognised and interviewed as the breed’s “father”. This is the same for other ‘brands’ and other awarded specimens that, even if they are hardly available in Singaporean stalls, they gradually contribute to the inscription of *terroir* in durian discourses.

Today the notion of *terroir* or association of durian with particular geographical locations is even ‘transmitted’ to ordinary *kampong* durians. One trader operating on East Coast Road, who runs a small, seasonal business and sells only *kampong* durians from trusted small-holdings, says that his customers, mostly “regulars, ask for durians from a particular farm which they already knew. They like the durians from that farm and expect a particular taste from these durians. They pay more for that taste”¹⁶⁹. The point here is that a sense of authorship or birthplace of the durian is becoming more and more important in the cultural dynamics of durian consumption.

Terroir is not the only instrument by which durian taste is being refined.

¹⁶⁷ *Straits Times*, 17 October 1993, p. 7.

¹⁶⁸ *Straits Times*, 16 June 1995, p. 21.

¹⁶⁹ Conversation with seller, 3 July 2010.

Efforts to create and standardise a terminology for the description of sensory characteristics of the fruit represent other media for the process of taste refinement. An informant, for instance recalls how unripe durians used to be described by experts as “green-smelling”. Also, “choosing a durian [was] an art”, already in the colonial era. It was an expertise “hard to acquire Only the ‘veterans’ can really pick out the best from a group”. In other words, the ‘protocol’ of looking, smelling, shaking, and ‘listening’ a fruit was already recognised and ‘fixed’ in the 1950s¹⁷⁰. And the popular term of ‘Sultan durian’ which is accorded to the D24 breed seems to have originated in the colonial era¹⁷¹. However, such popular practices became incorporated into ‘guidelines’ on choosing and appreciating good durians only during the 1980s.

In an article published on the *Sunday Nation* in 1981, the food writer Margaret Chan gave tips on “how to pick a durian”. With the help of the seller and expert Mr Ong Kwee Huat, “who sells durian along Adam Road” and “has been associated with durians for more than 40 years”, Chan gives “rough rules of thumb” on the smell (“for a sweet or bitter fruit”), colour of stem (“it will be the same as the seeds within”), shape (“round, pumpkin, and deformed”), and thorns (“soft, flexible, for a thin skin”). She also describes the process of looking, smelling, and shaking the fruit, and goes on to examine the flesh of palatable durians:

Golden or white, the flesh can be either sweet or bitter. Golden-

¹⁷⁰ *Straits Times*, 10 May 1948, p. 6.

¹⁷¹ Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010.

fleshed durians however have a richer note. So a bitter golden-fleshed durian will be more mellow-tasting than a bitter white-fleshed durian.

Grey flesh usually indicates a bitter taste¹⁷².

Similar ‘durian guides’ continued to be published in the 1980s and 1990s¹⁷³. In the last decade, especially through the internet, such ‘guides’ have become almost commonplace:

Confronted by a vast pile of durians ... what should a visitor look for when he or she selects the ‘right’ one? Always go for a durian that has a mild smell because the strong odour will indicate over-ripeness, in addition to probably putting you off for life! There must be no broken skins, and the stalk should look fresh and not shrivelled. The final test is to shake the fruit gently, while all the time looking knowledgeable (Cook and Cook 1995: 5-8).

Besides the irony of “looking knowledgeable”, it appears that picking and appreciating a durian require expertise or connoisseurship. The fact that visitors can at best mimic the expert suggests the assumption of the existence of expertise on durian consumption. There are other attempts at standardising durian tasting through social behaviour and language.

A panel of experts evaluating durian specimens at a durian contest in

¹⁷² *Sunday Nation*, 21 June 1981, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷³ *Straits Times*, 2 July 1983, p. 24; 24 June 1988, p. 30; 14 July 1993, p. 22; 9 November 1999, p. 10.

Penang in 1995 provided the sets of criteria through which “durians should be judged”. The panel suggested that the shape of the fruit “must be pleasant to the eye, either roundish or slightly elongated”. The texture of the durian flesh was no less important and should be “the less fibrous, the better”. In terms of colour, the experts decreed that “yellow [is] more attractive than white”. In addition, the panel pointed out that the flesh to seeds ratio should be at about “70:30”. The aroma, a crucial point, was not left out, and should be “soft and pleasant, not too strong or pungent, or too mild like Thai durians”. Interestingly the panel concluded that taste was “of course a subjective matter”¹⁷⁴.

This case provides us with an example of how the process of eating durian is turned into a process of tasting the fruit, i.e., by the creation of expected standards of flavours and an elaboration of a series of expectations of the fruit in terms of its shape, texture, flesh and so on. Hence, emphasis is now placed on the ‘aesthetics’ of the durian, or the sensory characteristics and pleasure which can be provided by the durian.

The “tasting notes” of a blogger who participated in a “durian degustation session”¹⁷⁵ held in June 2009 register impressions on four “‘branded’ durians”.

Red Prawn ... the texture was very fine. ... sweet, fine pulp. Creamy almost to a fault D13: somewhat stronger in fragrance and taste ... more intense. There was a slight winey tinge on the tongue. But the

¹⁷⁴ *Straits Times*, 25 June 1995, p. 11.

¹⁷⁵ Degustation sessions are events held for the very purpose of analysing, describing, comparing, and appreciating the organoleptic properties of some edible product. Usually, but not exclusively, they are collective events, and they are common in sensory analysis and professional wine tasting, as well as in more leisurely contexts.

flesh was smooth, creamy, and sweet. Black Pearl: the thin waxy coating over the super creamy flesh was indication of freshness. Under the yellow waxy coating, a tinge of black can be observed. The pulp was very smooth, fibre-less, creamy, and sweet with a tinge of bitterness. The seeds were super small, but not shrivelled vestigial [sic] seeds. Golden Phoenix: ... the flesh was bitter sweet, very smooth, fibreless, creamy. The seeds were vestigial, very small. ... it yielded a lot of pulp, and tasted wonderful.

In another occasion, the same taster reviews a “durian buffet” in Kampung Teratai, Johor.

We started off with a mild durian - the D101. The pulp is creamy, sweet and easy on the palate. If there ever was a starter durian, the D101 was it. Note a waxy membrane on the pulp As the membrane punctures with a bite, the smooth, creamy flesh of the durian oozes into one’s mouth, providing a sensation which triggers all umami sensors. Next up, we sampled the famous ‘Ang Hay’ [Red Prawn] The characteristic red pulp is very creamy, sticky. The durian was sweet, but with a bitter aftertaste, much like eating bitter chocolate Each course was different in the taste (sweet, bittersweet, sweet with bitter aftertaste, winey flavour), texture (firm, sticky, soft), and in smell (fragrant, pungent, strong).

And the feast continues with the D24 - “The pulp was yellow, and very creamy. The flesh had very little fibres, and was very aromatic”. And finally the Mao San Wang, “the *piece de resistance*” was tasted:

Very sweet, with a tinge of bitterness. Very creamy, concentrated flavours, with very little fibre, the pulp was incredible! ... The body of the pulp, the concentration of flavours, the mouthfeel is second to none. Excellent¹⁷⁶.

All this descriptive efforts are somewhat condensed in a list of the breeds available in Singapore during the 2008 season. Here the name of the ‘brand’ is followed by few notes on colour, taste, provenance, and price. The list features ten breeds and each is reviewed in this fashion:

Golden Phoenix

Other names: Jin Feng

Colour: Pale yellow-white

Taste notes: Bitter with a more watery texture and a strong pungent smell

From: Pahang, Johor

Price: \$15 to \$50 per kg

¹⁷⁶ The first excerpts are from <http://shiokhochiak.blogspot.com/2009/06/durian-season-part-1-singapore.html>., the second from <http://shiokhochiak.blogspot.com/2008/08/durians-kampung-teratai-off-segamat.html>. Both lastly accessed on 8 January 2011. I am grateful to Peter Chong for having permitted the use of this material.

Less expensive breeds are also reviewed in the list. For instance, D13, of a “deep burnt orange” colour is priced “\$6 to \$8 per kg”. It is advised to “people trying durian for the first time”¹⁷⁷. Such ‘texts’ are instruments which capture and formalise durian taste. They work in the same manner through which labels define the qualities of wines. What we see here is that the process of taste refinement uses as well as produces particular sets of vocabularies and ideas about the durian. Hence, both linguistic terms and aesthetic knowledge are vital to the inscription of durian taste, transforming it into a gastronomic discourse.

Besides the notion of *terroir* and the use of linguistic terminologies, other practices of durian consumption such as durian degustation sessions also add to the process of taste refinement. During a durian degustation, usually under the guidance of an expert, different breeds are sampled and their tastes, sensory properties and nuances of flavour described and compared¹⁷⁸. To be sure, they can be seen as contemporary adaptations of the ‘durian feasts’ during colonial times described in chapter 4. Indeed, durian degustation sessions are collective consumption events organised during the boom of the fruit season and they often feature huge quantities of durians. In some cases, they even re-enact the ‘expeditions’ *in loco* as practised by Malayan aboriginals, as in the case of Singaporeans who today drive to farms and orchards in Malaysia¹⁷⁹.

However, while the central element of durian feasts, ‘orgies’, and seasonal

¹⁷⁷ *Sunday Times*, 13 July 2008, pp. 8-9.

¹⁷⁸ Reports on these durian tasting sessions are available online. Besides the ones already mentioned, others are described in the blog <http://ieatishootipost.sg>. Last access on 8 January 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Indeed, this may be seen as an emerging form of gastronomic tourism. For instance, traders in Singapore offer today ‘plantation tours!’ (see <http://www.durianculture.com/tour.html>), and farmers in Penang farm stay and ‘durian buffet’ (see <http://www.durian.com.my/>). Last access on 8 January 2011.

‘fevers’ in the past was the sheer quantity available during the fruit season, today the emphasis has shifted to quality. The very introduction of breeds affords the customer a differentiation of tastes. It is due to the desire to sample and appreciate different varieties that durian degustation sessions are organised. Inevitably, one cannot of course deny that an element of ‘gluttony’ remains in such feasting¹⁸⁰.

Degustation entails the organisation of an order or a sequence of courses. There is a hierarchy associated with different tastes. As it is with wines and cheese, durian breeds which are lighter in taste must be ‘served’ first before milder and more pungent varieties. This practice seems to be rather widespread in Malaysia and Singapore today. One retailer explained that, “if you have D100 after having eaten Mao Shan Wang, D100 will taste better. Its flavour is strong enough to challenge Mao Shan Wang”¹⁸¹. With this conceptualisation that durian breeds must be consumed in particular orders/hierarchies the taste for durian is also being refined.

Notions of *terroir*, the elaboration of descriptive terminologies, and the practice of durian degustation are three new dimensions of durian consumption documented in this section. All point to a shift to an emphasis on quality and differentiation of breeds and tastes which typify other processes of taste refinement. Mennell, for instance, has argued that “the break with medieval cookery which seems to have begun in the city-courts of Renaissance Italy and

¹⁸⁰ Paradoxically, these elements can even run against qualitative appreciation. Among the tasting notes of the “durianista” who ventured “off Segamat”, we read that he and his companions “had a few other cultivars, but the eating was vigorous, and I soon forgot which was which” (See above, note 176). Overeating counteracts appreciation.

¹⁸¹ Conversation with seller, 9 August 2010.

spread to the noble courts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, involved a shift in emphasis from quantitative display to qualitative elaboration” (1985: 33). The importance of differentiation in the development of complex culinary cultures has already been stressed earlier. Durian eating is entering into the domain of gastronomic discourse, where aesthetic dimension of tasting are developing. While still in the embryonic stage, the ‘symptoms’ of taste refinement are clear. In the concluding section we will see why this is so.

Conclusions: singularising the durian

Processes of refinement are typically ascribed to elitist logics. A line of thought which finds in Pierre Bourdieu its most authoritative advocate, maintains taste as an instrument of social struggle. Classically, either dominant social segments pursue to distance lower groups, or emerging groups emulate and thus seek to reach higher positions in the social ladder. In his famous anti-Kantian reprisal against the idea, or, better, the ‘ideology of natural taste’, Bourdieu has argued that taste, far from being a natural or absolute virtue in any sense, represents a conspicuous part of the cultural capital inherited by the members of the dominant class. On the contrary, taste is used by elites as a tool for maintaining their privileged status and exercising over the dominated what the French sociologist called ‘symbolic violence’. Attaching aesthetic knowledge to consumption becomes then a social weapon deployed by elites in an attempt at reproducing social structures. In the same way, refinement may be used by emerging social segments, liable of sharing the very aims established by the dominant groups. They aim at ‘upgrading’ towards a higher position in the hierarchy, in a sort of

endless ‘social chase’ (Bourdieu 1984)¹⁸².

Similar dynamics, albeit different in weight and implications, run through Veblen’s theory of ‘conspicuous consumption’. The “leisure class”, i.e. the elites of American and similar “barbarian societies”, expresses and maintains its social position by “showing pecuniary strength”, that is, by means of leisurely activities, conspicuous expenditures, elaboration of connoisseurship, and other forms of “non-productive consumption of time” (Veblen 2005). Also Elias’ ‘civilising process’, manifest in the elaboration of etiquette and dramatic changes in taste, is a class-based phenomenon. It was because of the economic advancement and social ‘mimicry’ of the *noblesse de robe*, the new riches from the emerging bourgeoisie, that the French courtly society developed manners and refined modes of consumption, and indeed reconfigured a whole emotional structure around disgust and delicacy (Elias 2000). In these classical cases, taste is used by social groups to move upward, or to maintain upper positions in the social ladder. It is used, one may say, ‘vertically’.

Turning to food, Mennell has shown how French culinary refinement parallels the civilising process. In the dining rooms of the nobility, new ways of asserting social superiority emerged. Until the Renaissance, the richest displayed their status by quantitative display, but in the 17th and 18th centuries the culinary language of the upper strata became centred on delicacy: elaborated recipes,

¹⁸² In this condensation of such a capital and complex work as *Distinction*, it is worth clarifying at least two points. Firstly, that the book, although elaborating mostly on the results of a survey conducted in France between 1963 and 1969, aims at formulating universal propositions on the dependence of culture from class. Secondly, that Bourdieu uses the concept of taste in the broadest sense which encompasses both “legitimate” and “illegitimate” cultural practises. Artistic (i.e. ‘purely aesthetic’) tastes, and other forms of preferences concerning everyday dimensions, such as clothing, furniture, and food, are thus put under the same rubric.

variety of preparations, table manners, ‘beauty’ of dishes, and so on (Mennell 1985). And the whole argument of Goody on the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ is based on the distinction between simple cookery and cuisine. The latter emerges only in highly stratified society, where elites distance themselves from the ‘low’ even as they produce an elaborate ‘high’ culinary culture in order to distinguish themselves from peasant food culture (Goody 1985). Also in these instances, the refinement of taste is seen as a mechanism which mirrors social structures and dynamics or more precisely as a ‘vertical’ tool, or an instrument employed for moving up the social hierarchy.

Therefore, a first issue to deal with the refinement of taste is whether Singaporean social structure is ‘vertical’ enough to allow the use of taste as a ‘vertical’ tool, that is, whether Bourdieu’s theory of social change is extensively possible. I argue it is not.

The myth of Singapore as a homogeneously middle-class or, worse, classless society has already been debunked (Quah *et al.* 1991; Chua and Tan 1999). As in any capitalist society, the uneven distribution of wealth has generated class stratification in Singapore. However, differently from classical capitalist societies there is political homogeneity across different classes in Singapore. Chua and Tan have proposed that ethnicity, which in colonial plural societies represented a major demarcating line between classes, is not any more a valid criterion for social stratification¹⁸³. Instead, lifestyles and patterns of cultural consumption

¹⁸³ This alleged marginality of ethnicity in Singapore has been widely disputed. For instance, Barr has argued that “Singapore’s multiculturalism ... encourages a high consciousness of one’s race even as it insists on tolerance it has been considered by many as a form of covert discrimination in favour of the majority Chinese and against the minorities, especially the Malays”

(leisurely activities, fashion, food, in a word, ‘taste’) are today the most manifest ways through which class culture is expressed and social differences are made visible (1999: 137-142).

Chua and Tan (1999)¹⁸⁴ argue that Singapore’s middle class, notwithstanding its superficial appearance as a culturally homogeneous overwhelming majority, is increasingly “amorphously constituted and internally highly differentiated” (145). Membership of the upper segments of this class is displayed by acquisition of “positional goods”, such as cars, private flats, and branded clothing (143-149). Below this class, the members of the working class are characterised, in terms of consumption, by lack of a distinctive class culture, as well as aspirations of ‘upgrading’ to the middle class (149-150). At the top of the hierarchy, a small number of the very wealthy represent the elite. Chua and Tan write:

Culturally, what is significant about the rich in Singapore ... is their public absence. They are not surrounded by glitter. They do not make public appearance to show off their wealth or ‘taste’ Those who have public profiles tend to be seen as generous supporters of public

(1999: 145). In framing my analysis in terms of class rather than ethnicity, I do not mean to foster the idea that racial differences are absent from Singapore. On the contrary, I suggest that race and ethnicity do play an important role in the sociology of taste in Singapore. Patterns of durian consumption, especially when it comes to the process of refinement of taste, certainly have an ethnic dimension. However, the whole point of this chapter is to describe such process and explain it as not strictly class-based. Further study, which exceeded the limits of this research, would be required to explore the interesting hypothesis that this process follows more or less rigid ethnic lines of demarcation.

¹⁸⁴ The authors base their analysis on statistics of the 1990s, and quote materials from the 1980s. A similar class stratification emerges from another study by Tan (2004), who uses statistics and surveys of the early 2000s. In short, the picture can be assumed to broadly represent Singapore society during the process of refinement here discussed.

institutions, such as tertiary-education institutions, clan associations and other civic organisations. This group of individuals and households are known in Singapore for their public spirit and philanthropic generosity, not for the display of their legendary wealth (1999: 151).

This ‘inconspicuousness’ of the elite¹⁸⁵ is of great significance for my analysis. If the elite does not exercise the cultural function of trend-setting, then any proper dynamics of distinction or conspicuous consumption is hindered. Middle class becomes the taste-maker. If Singaporean middle class ‘sets the standard’, then the whole theory of social emulation and the logics of taste-making are compromised and become ‘little games’ almost exclusively internal to the middle class and its edges, that is, the working class aspiring to middle-class status. Under these circumstances, it is hard to think of the refinement in durian tasting – as perhaps of any form of refinement of taste – as a ‘vertical’ or class-based process. For one thing, the very social structure within which this process occurs does not allow taste to work ‘vertically’.

At some level, one cannot deny that some class elements are apparent in the process of refinement. The introduction of breeds, so central to the process of refinement, has resulted in the inscription of the durian with what Chua and Tan

¹⁸⁵ I think that Chua and Tan are right in suggesting that this public absence of the rich is partly due to the fact that “the ruling PAP [Peoples’ Association Party] may have reinforced the suppression of public display with its own code of ‘humility’ applied to ministers, Members of Parliament and party members” (1999: 152). The inconspicuousness of the politico-bureaucratic elite, that is, of the highest stratum of the socio-political system, is central for the point I am making here.

call as “brand consciousness” (144), even if they are referring to clothes. ‘Branded’ durians, legitimised as better through the process of refinement, represent new tastes for new consumers who are economically and culturally able to acquire them. Quite elementarily, ‘classes’ of durians create classes of eaters or one could also argue for things going the other way around. The stratification of Singapore society in terms of the working class and different segments of the middle class accounts for a ‘classification of eaters’. However, at a deeper level, refinement for durian does not seem rigidly class-centred.

In the first place, aesthetic knowledge crystallising around the durian has not originated within the cultural framework of upper social segments. Indeed, it is firmly rooted in the popular. As we have seen, the notion of *terroir* and the employment of new terminologies become more elaborated through the process of refinement. However, both have ‘folk’ antecedents. In addition, durian connoisseurship is not restricted to any particular social group, let alone one situated higher in Singaporean social structure. Rather, it is a kind of expertise which is firmly rooted in the experience with the fruit, regardless occupation, income, educational level, or other social markers. There is no clear ‘social type’ of the durian connoisseur. Most people involved in the elaboration of this knowledge seem to be from a sociologically grey area between working and middle class¹⁸⁶. In some cases they even retain some link with the rural world.

¹⁸⁶ In a study on Singapore class stratification based on surveys and statistics from the early 2000s, Tan has concluded, quite cautiously, that the city-state “may be characterized as a mix of middle class and working class”. More interestingly, he noticed a sort of confusion in the class awareness of Singaporeans: large proportions of the sample identified themselves as members of either middle or lower class in a six-classes scheme but, confronted with a 4-classes scheme, placed ascribed themselves to the working class (2004: 11-16).

The durian is still ideally part of the Malaysian countryside. Indeed, it is in virtue of this link, and of the acquaintance with the fruit that expertise is claimed and acknowledged.

If any, this makes more unlikely for members of the upper-middle class, urban in their lifestyle and relatively cosmopolitan in their tastes, to participate in the attachment of knowledge to the durian. Asked whether he trusted sellers who often justify the expensiveness of ‘branded’ durians with their superior qualities, one informer who spent his youth in Perak retorted with “do I trust the seller? The seller trusts me”¹⁸⁷. His authoritativeness is derived from experience; it pre-existed and outstripped any form of branding or labelling. The process of refinement as I understand it does not replace such forms of pre-existent knowledge, rather it draws from it.

Secondly, the public arenas wherein such knowledge is today attached to durian can be said to be ‘democratic’. Durian degustation sessions are instructive in this sense. The expert is in no way the sort of high-brow aesthete who featured as the judge of taste in classical processes of refinement. In most cases, he (significantly, never ‘she’) is a member of the working or middle class. In general, degustation sessions do not resemble exclusivist events. On the contrary, they are social gathering opened to people from “all walks of life”, as one organiser claimed. They retain a democratic element in that the price is shared, allowing also less well-off customers to enjoy the most expensive breeds. More ‘discursive’ arenas are newspapers and magazines, commercial publications, and the world of food blogs. These too can hardly be seen as sites of exclusivism.

¹⁸⁷ Conversation with consumer, 20 July 2010.

However symptomatic of the logics of distinction, gastronomic narrative, for its very purpose of disseminating knowledge on food, retains a democratic dimension. Mennell has suggested “the co-existence of the *élite*-defining and democratising functions in the work of those who are commonly called gastronomes” (1985: 267). And it is worth remembering the contempt which Pierre de Pressac reserved for gastronomes: “insupportable pedants” who “belong to an inferior and poor species”, and whose only “utility [is] to make this subaltern species advance”¹⁸⁸. The high-brow French gourmet could barely stand such intermediaries of connoisseurship as the gastronomes.

Mennell’s gastronomes had a democratising function, “whether they intended to do so or not” (1985: 266). Contemporary Singapore has her own variety of gastronomes, the ‘foodies’. They seem to exercise this democratising function more consciously. The local food culture is a most interesting phenomenon and it really would deserve separate analysis. At a preliminary level, it can be said that the means and modes by which such culture is developing are by no means exclusivist. To quote one famous local food writer, “food is the purest democracy we have” (Seetoh 2008: cover). Food blogs, restaurant guides, and newspaper gastronomic columns reserve perhaps more attention to hawker food than to international cuisines, which are widely available and appreciated. These arenas are in themselves democratising accessibility, and the gastronomic discourses they produce legitimise hawker food as an object of the refinement of

¹⁸⁸ De Pressac is quoted by Bourdieu as “the aesthete of culinary taste” (Bourdieu 1984: 67-68).

culinary taste ‘from below’. The durian is part of this ‘horizontal’ food culture¹⁸⁹, and in these discourses is being endowed with the new significance of refinement, along with, but perhaps more prominently than, other dimensions of the local culinary heritage.

All this does not mean that there are not upper-class durian connoisseurs and consumers, or that the durian is being refined exclusively ‘from below’. A ‘foodie’ who set up a gastronomy blog that features durian tasting and local hawker food, regularly hosts also websites concerning luxury watches, Italian artisan tailoring, and Parisian restaurants¹⁹⁰. The fact that the durian, along with Hokkien Mee and other hawker specialities, is brought to the same cultural domain of fine dining and luxury items, is perhaps an instance of what has been called “cultural omnivorousness” (Peterson 1992). This phenomenon sees members of the high social strata acquiring and thus ‘pulling up’ tastes associated with popular culture. At any rate, it seems fairly clear that the elaboration and the practice of knowledge concerning the durian involve different classes. While it may not make sense to say that the refinement of durian tasting is class-less, it may however be possible to talk of it as socially transversal, that is, involving members of different classes.

At this point, a question remains: If the process of refinement concerning the durian is not strictly class-based, what sociocultural logic lies behind it?

To attempt to answer the question, it must be borne in mind that such

¹⁸⁹ The point cannot be extensively developed here, but I think that Goody’s ‘vertical’ model of the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ does not fit into the Singaporean context, and perhaps in no postcolonial cuisine. The issue, in particular for the case of the construction of a ‘national’ Indian cuisine in the 1970s, has been touched by Appadurai (1988).

¹⁹⁰ See above, note 176.

process occurred simultaneously to dynamics of what I have described as extensive commoditisation. As one of many effects of extensive capitalisation and modernisation, during the 1980s the durian became more available throughout the year, more easily consumable with more standardisation of supply and flavour. It was ‘domesticated’ and ‘adapted to the exigencies of a modern society and a clean urban environment. The fact that in the same time span of the last three decades symptoms of refinement became manifest should not be seen as a coincidence. In order to explain what I see as the crucial link between extensive commoditisation and refinement, I shall introduce Igor Kopytoff’s idea of “singularization”:

The counterdrive to [the] potential onrush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenize value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anticultural [S]ocieties need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as ‘sacred’, singularization is one means to this end. Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others; and it sometimes resingularizes what has been commoditized (1986: 73).

To be sure, Kopytoff is not directly concerned with fruits. However, being “a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart”(68), namely money, the durian, as the great majority of things, can

be encompassed by Kopytoff's definition of commodity.

For maintaining the status of a commodity, as Kopytoff highlights, a thing needs "to be 'common' – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular" (69). It follows that singularities are unique things. Now, unique things are usually relatively recognisable: there is no arguing about the fact that a Picasso or my mother's wedding gown are unique things, i.e. singularities (which, in Kopytoff's analysis, does not prevent them from recommoditising under certain circumstances). But there is also the possibility that things are *made* singular, that is, they are rescued from the commodities sphere and transported to the realm of the unique. As Kopytoff continues:

[S]ingularization is sometimes extended to things that are normally commodities – in effect, commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere (1986: 73-74).

I argue that this does not happen only by moving things to an upward sphere, as it is the case, for instance, with contemporary collecting: if I collect comic books, I pull them out of the market and the commodity sphere, making of them singularities – which of course may then re-enter into the sphere of the "expensive singular" and be recommoditised (Kopytoff 1986: 80). This almost literally physical movement between spheres of exchange is not the only way by which cultures practise singularisation. They do it also by discourse, that is, by culturally constructing things in danger of commoditisation as singularities which

are endowed with the power of the unique.

The inscription of the durian with the notion of *terroir*, the elaboration of descriptive terminologies, and the practice of degustation are instances of this cultural construction of the singular. At the very root, they are attempt at transforming ‘the durian’, or, to use the Statistics Department’s entry, ‘Durian: fresh’, into ‘the durians’: things which, although naturally belonging to the same family, are highly differentiated among them, and provide the eater with a variety of sensory impressions. The cultural meaning of the passage from eating to tasting, that is, the meaning of the process of refinement, is the transition from the sphere of the undifferentiated and common to that of the differentiated and singular. Above all, no one ‘tastes’ commodities.

The commoditisation of the durian has partly stripped the fruit of its privileged position as seasonal delicacy. Expanded cultivation and agronomic improvements have created standard, durable, and almost odour-free fruits available throughout the year. New modes of distribution and consumption have partly tamed and reconfigured it as a clean and ‘socially correct’ food. In these ways, we could say, its status as ‘the king of fruit’ has been questioned. It is at this point that culture reacts. In highly capitalised societies, the “value-homogenizing drive” of commoditisation produces “results that both culture and individual cognition oppose”. Culture and the individual react by devising “innumerable schemes of valuation and singularization” (Kopytoff 1986: 77-80), that is, by carving singularities out of the commodity sphere. The process of refinement of taste for durian as I understand it is one of these schemes: it is a

cultural reaction to economic commoditisation.

Foucault has written that the fantastic today evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and contains “the power of the impossible”. If singularisation is making the unique and the ‘sacred’, in a sense it is also making the fantastic. Materialists would ascribe it to the fetish-like power which Marx individuated in commodities: in virtue of the ‘alienation’ of the processes of production that the durian, along with all commodities, has undergone, it is possible to culturally reconstruct it as ‘sacred’. Partly, this is certainly true. But it is no less true that the modern individual, caught in a world where things, not only durians, are increasingly made common and thus deprived of any cultural value, find it necessary to remake them unique by elaborating discourses on their uniqueness.

One way of doing so is through taste.

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