

Nyonya Food, Culinary Capital and Women's Empowerment in Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Selina Siak's *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds*

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ABSTRACT

*Nyonya food is part of the construction of Peranakan Chinese group identity generally, but is also central to notions of Peranakan Chinese femininity, which emphasizes, among others, their mastery of culinary skills. The association of Nyonya food with Peranakan Chinese women may signal the secondary roles that are assigned to them by a patriarchal community, as foodwork is often considered supplementary in nature. However, in this paper, we propose a different way of reading Peranakan Chinese women's relationship with food, as one that empowers them as heads of their households, decision-makers and custodians and transmitters of their community's culture and identity. This paper sets out to explore how Nyonya food empowers Peranakan Chinese women in two literary texts: Stella Kon's play *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1989) and Selina Siak's historical novel, *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* (2016) by applying the concept of culinary capital to their depictions of women, food and foodwork. Through this analysis, we will demonstrate that food and foodwork do not merely reinforce Peranakan Chinese women's gendered roles or reduce them to consumable products in literary texts, but rather endow them with culinary capital with which they can exercise their power and influence within their families and their communities. The protagonists of the works selected are formidable Nyonyas who engage in acts of challenging the patriarchal nature of their respective environments, and food is significant in their assertions of their power.*

Keywords: culinary capital; food and foodways; Nyonyas; Peranakan Chinese; women's empowerment

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia and Singapore, the Peranakan Chinese, or also known as the Baba Nyonya, is a subcommunity under the larger category of ethnic Chinese. Geographically, they were a Chinese community that resided in the British Straits Settlements, i.e., Penang, Malacca and Singapore (Clammer, 1979), with some settling in Terengganu and Kelantan on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. The word 'Peranakan' itself is a Malay word that means a person and/or a community that is locally born; the term '*Peranakan China*' (Peranakan Chinese) appeared in a Malay dictionary dated 1856 (Suryadinata, 2022). The most popular version of the early history of the Peranakan Chinese in the Malay Peninsula can be found in the seventeenth-century *Sejarah Melayu* (*The Malay Annals*), which tells the story of a Chinese princess known as Hang Li Poh or Hang Liu who came to Melaka with her retinue and married the Sultan of Melaka, Mansur Shah (1458-1477) (Tan, 2010). Most people, and even some Peranakan Chinese themselves believe that this intermarriage between the Sultan and the Chinese princess begot the first Baba Nyonya in Malaysia (Chia, 1980). However, Tan (2010) refutes this romanticized version, stating that what

has been written in the *Sejarah Melayu* should not be taken as historical truth, as there are no corresponding records of the marriage in Chinese sources. While this narrative of the origins of the community remains to be proven, intermarriage between the Chinese and local women is one of the eminent factors in producing the Peranakan Chinese community and culture in the region.

Chinese traders from the southern regions of China began arriving in Melaka in the late fourteenth century; their numbers grew in the following century when Emperor Yongle (1403-1424) chose the strategically-located port-city as a trading centre (Khoo, 1998). According to Hardwick (2008) and Tan (2010), intermarriage commonly happened when there were no Chinese women overseas, thus the men took indigenous women as wives. Intermarriage between Chinese traders and local women was also common across Southeast Asia (Tan, 2010), and was widely accepted in the Malay Archipelago in general. Cultural and religious barriers did not pose any hindrance to this union, since the Islamic influence was not as strong among the Malays at that time (Clammer, 1979). This allowed for flexibility in terms of interfaith marriages and consequently eased the process of settling down for the Chinese traders.

Tan (2010) further explains that the smaller numbers of Chinese compared to the locals made the process of localization inevitable. This process allowed the early Chinese settlers and their families to form a new community which synthesized both Malay and Chinese cultures (Suryadinata, 2010). This unique blend of cultures can be seen in the language (a patois called Baba Malay), cultural practices and foodways this community developed in response to the local environment. Their food is known as ‘Nyonya food’ as it is the product of Peranakan women, known in the local parlance as Nyonya or Nonya, who “produce food out of their knowledge of Chinese and local indigenous styles of cooking with the use of many local ingredients” (Tan, 2007, p. 172). Nyonya food is often cited as an emblem of Peranakan Chinese identity, as it manifests their distinctive cultural identity through their foodways.

Nyonya food has conspicuous localized features, characterized by the presence of spicy paste (*rempah*) and chili in addition to typically Chinese ingredients and methods of cooking (Tan, 2010; Leong-Salobir, 2019). Besides Chinese and Malay influences, Indian and Thai foodways are also present in Nyonya cooking (Abdul Karim & Abdul Halim, 2014) as well as European i.e. Portuguese, Dutch and English influences (Ng & S. Ab. Karim, 2016). Another distinctive trait is the presence of pork, the favoured meat in Chinese cooking (Suryadinata, 2007; Tan, 2010) and *belacan* (dried shrimp paste) (Wu & Tan, 2001) which the Nyonya use to enhance the flavour as well as the smell of their cooking. Nyonya food is often referred to as a hybrid cuisine, but Tan Chee-Beng prefers to describe it as “a creolized cuisine” (2007, p. 181). He further explains that this is because “[w]hile the food is much localized, its symbolism remains traditionally Chinese.... Baba food symbolism is based on the Hokkien system of symbolism. Indeed, the food of the Baba reflects their cultural identity that is both Chinese and localized.” (Tan, 2007, p. 181)

Nyonya food is part of the construction of Peranakan Chinese group identity generally, but is also central to constructions of Peranakan Chinese femininity, which emphasizes, among others, their mastery of culinary skills – one of the measures of their prowess in the kitchen is the rhythm of their pounding of the *sambal belacan* (Lee, 2008). It is tempting to read foodwork as a sign of the limitations of Peranakan Chinese women’s roles and influence within a patriarchal community, because it reduces them to gendered roles in their own households (Lee, 2008; Lee, 2016; Ong, 2017; Wang, 1997). The deployment of Nyonya food in English-language fiction by diasporic Malaysian and Singaporean authors with Peranakan Chinese roots has also been criticized as “reduc[ing] a unique culture to its cuisine and only foreground the stories of its women by typecasting them as embodiments of consumable products” (Wagner, 2007, p. 40). However, in

this paper, we propose a different way of reading Peranakan Chinese women's relationship with food, as one that empowers them in various ways: as heads of their households (Devasahayam, 2005), as decision-makers and as custodians and transmitters of their community's culture and identity (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). This paper thus sets out to explore how Nyonya food empowers Peranakan Chinese women in two literary texts: Stella Kon's play *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1989) and Selina Siak's historical novel, *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* (2016). Through this analysis, we propose that food and foodwork can endow Peranakan Chinese women with culinary capital, with which they can exercise their power and influence within their families and their community. The protagonists of the works selected, Emily Gan in *Emily of Emerald Hill* and Chye Hoon in *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* navigate the patriarchal nature of their respective environments with their knowledge and deployment of Nyonya cuisine. Moreover, foodwork in these texts will be analysed not necessarily as contributing to women's oppression, but as examples of what Jean Duruz describes as "cultures of femininity vested in cooking and care" (2016, p. 24).

In the following section, we review studies on the relationship between women's gendered roles and food to consider how it is both implicated in reducing women to domestic labour as well as how food empowers them in various ways. We also review works on Peranakan Chinese women's positions and roles in their community and the significance of food in their lives, in order to present a picture of the complex relationship that they have with food and foodwork than what usually meets the eye.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FOOD, WOMEN'S GENDERED ROLES AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In the discourse on food and foodways, gender is a prominent feature; as Carole Counihan (1999) states, food production and consumption are closely related to gender relations in any community. Women are tasked with food preparation and distribution as foodwork is regarded as feminine in nature (Counihan, 1989). Although food is a basic necessity and a universal source of sustenance, only women are made to shoulder the responsibility of preparing food and feeding people. The social order dictates this because women are considered nurturers and 'producers' of domestic goods in the household and therefore, feeding and sustaining the family are part of these roles (Devasahayam, 2005).

The distribution of labour in the domestic space complicates women's relationship with foodwork. According to Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar (1999), young women experience initiation into domestic and familial duties through preparing food in the kitchen with older women. As Anita Mannur (2009) points out, "cooking and food preparation must be acknowledged for the central role they play in upholding the dynamics of domestic familiarity" (p. 52). Food and domestic spaces like the kitchen, therefore, are central to ascribing gender roles to women to maintain the patriarchal structure of their community (Mannur, 2009; Meah, 2014).

However, the focus of studies on the roles of food and the domestic sphere in women's lives is limited to the relationship of food and foodwork to women's social and familial duties only. It fails to consider the variety of women's experiences in dealing with gender roles and patriarchal values in the community. Studies that examine the relationship of food and women's empowerment suggest that women can and do utilize food to their advantage, such as Josephine

Beoku-Betts' study (1995) of women's roles in cultural maintenance through food practices among the Gullah, an African American community. Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1999) posit that food preparation in the kitchen is the centre of social interactions and shared responsibilities as well as a source of entertainment for women in an extended Hindu household, while Devasahayam (2005) finds that urban, middle-class South Indian Hindu women in Malaysia use food as cultural capital to form their class identity as well as exercise considerable power in preparing food for their families. In her analysis of contemporary Indian women's writings, Shari Daya (2010) reveals that women fight oppression, gain independence, and negotiate their identities through foodwork. She argues that "domestic spaces have historically been the primary, sometimes the only sites for such contestation, making food a vital tool for their self-determination" (Daya, 2010, p. 479). The same pattern emerges in a study on Mexican women in the Texas colonies, which finds that marginalized Mexican women manage to secure some degree of familial power through food production, which permits them freedom and agency within the domestic sphere (Sukovic et al., 2011). Like Daya (2010), they propound that food and foodways are the principal domains for women to exercise their power over themselves and their families.

Clearly, food affords women with opportunities to reclaim power, exercise their agency and resist a patriarchal social order. Rather than characterizing food as a domain for female subjugation, women continue to negotiate food and foodways and reassign new meanings to them in their lives (Devasahayam, 2005). As writings about Peranakan Chinese women tend to foreground their domestic roles and their perceived lack of agency, we propose instead that food provides Peranakan Chinese women a source of power that they can wield within their households and communities. The female protagonists of the selected texts and their narratives on food and foodwork will be read as instances of culinary capital at work, contributing to their empowerment.

WOMEN'S LIVES AND FOOD IN THE PERANAKAN CHINESE COMMUNITY

In the past, little was known about the lives of Peranakan Chinese women, or Nyonyas. Records and publications about their lives were scarce, as women in traditional Peranakan Chinese households were restricted to domestic spaces only, especially the maidens (Lee, 2016). Peranakan Chinese womenfolk did not have a place in the public sphere, as they were raised solely to fulfil their familial duties as daughters, wives and mothers (Lee, 2008; Seah, 2006; Tan, 2007). They were invisible in the public domain because the custom of confining women to domestic spaces upon reaching puberty restricted the roles they could occupy outside their homes. The only time young, unmarried Nyonyas were allowed out of their houses was during the festival of Chap Goh Mei (held on the fifteenth night of the Lunar New Year) when their aunts or maids would chaperone them while they hoped to attract eligible suitors (Ho, 1985; Pillay, 2017).

Basically, the Nyonyas' lives revolved around their households, managing their husbands, children, extended family and servants. This is because, according to Lee (2016), they were illiterate and financially dependent on their husbands. The only income they could generate was through making and selling Nyonya *kueh* (pastries and cakes), sewing and doing embroidery work (Lee, 2016). Such limited opportunities and roles for Nyonyas attest to the patriarchal nature of the Peranakan Chinese community, in which the elders and men of the community were responsible for determining the correct behaviour and lifestyles of the women (Lee, 2016). These practices were encouraged by the tenets of Confucianism, which established the 'Three Obediences' and 'Four Virtues' to ensure the subordination of women and to confine them to domestic spaces (Yung, 1995). The Three Obediences instruct women to "obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and eldest son when widowed" (Yung, 1995, p. 18), while the Four

Virtues is a set of moral principles that requires Chinese women to have “propriety in behaviour, speech, demeanour, and household duties” (Yung, 1995, p. 18).

However, while the patriarchal nature of Peranakan Chinese society is indisputable, this does not mean that their womenfolk do not enjoy autonomy in their lives. A recent study by Neo et al. (2020) argues that popular and cultural constructs of the Nyonyas show that they held privileged positions in the family and community, were highly valued and thus were able to negotiate Chinese patriarchy. Because the home is their domain, Nyonyas exercise power and influence when it comes to family and household matters. Senior Nyonya matriarchs, known as *bibik*, could and did wield a lot of influence in their families and communities –such matriarchs are “strong willed...managing director[s] par excellence and the supreme boss of the palatial Baba Nyonya residence” (Khoo, 1998, p. 122-123).

The kitchen is one of the spaces they are given freedom to rule. It is a central place for them since their childhood, as their training to become good cooks starts when they are still young (Tan, 2007). In fact, the kitchen in a Peranakan Chinese house is referred to as the “*perut rumah* or ‘stomach of the house’, the centre of gravity of a household’s life and activity” and the “main seat of feminine power in the household” (Lee & Chen, 1998, p. 105). If a Nyonya manages to acquire exceptional culinary skills, she would be an exemplary woman and a good prospective wife or daughter-in-law (Lee, 2008). Thus, while food and foodwork may become a means to reinforce gender roles in Peranakan Chinese women, it can also accord them power in matters related to the household and the family.

The complexity of Nyonya cuisine is a testament to Peranakan Chinese women’s creativity and agency as they are the ones actively producing their unique cuisine in their community (Tan, 2011). The use of the *agak-agak* principle (literally, cooking by estimation) also showcases a Nyonya’s creativity in cooking; Nyonyas learn how to cook by experience as traditionally they do not use exact measurements when cooking, which results in its non-standardization, making Nyonya dishes unique and distinctive even among the Peranakan Chinese themselves (Tan, 2007). The Nyonyas’ culinary creativity gains them their community’s respect– since Nyonya cuisine is complicated and tedious to make, if one could produce delicious dishes, she would gain social capital (Bensman, 2016). Hence, food and foodways can empower Peranakan Chinese women and afford them a respectable space in the public domain, and not just within the confines of their homes.

One of the important roles of Nyonya food is its function as a “cultural marker” (Khoo, 1998, p. 128) of Peranakan Chinese identity, because it sets them apart from the *Sinkhek* or newly-arrived Chinese during British colonial rule. The spiciness and ingredients of Nyonya food makes it very distinctive from Chinese food. The association between Nyonya food and communal identity elevates it to something more than just delicious fare, because “it expresses Baba sentiment associated with Baba subjectivity, and Baba identity associated with group identification” (Tan, 2007, p. 181). In this sense, women who produce Nyonya food are gatekeepers and guardians of Peranakan Chinese culture, tasked with developing and maintaining group identity through food. In more recent times, the proliferation of Nyonya cookbooks and cooking shows in Malaysia and Singapore since the 1970s show how seriously Peranakan Chinese communities in these two countries take this role of Nyonya food, as a response to the predictions that their unique identity would be subsumed by the state’s categories of ‘race’ and imposition of a national identity on its citizens (Duruz, 2007) and that its traditions will be overcome by the onslaught of modernity (Choo, 2004; Ng & S. Ab. Karim, 2016).

The two works chosen for this study feature Nyonya matriarchs in whose lives food and foodwork figure prominently. *Emily of Emerald Hill* has been read mostly from a postcolonial and/or feminist lens (Lo, 2004; Varney et al., 2013; Seet, 2014), which are also applied to its culinary scenes. Such readings critique the exoticisation of Nyonya cuisine; Seet for instance says:

Emily is also the object of the colonial gaze in terms of the play's positioning: her lengthy expositions of Peranakan cuisine (explaining the recipes for Babi Buah Keluak or coconut ice cream) are unnecessary unless she is constructed as Oriental exotica for an audience outside that milieu and unfamiliar with its operations. (2014, p. 167)

This critique echoes an earlier study by Tamara Wagner (2007) on how food fictions by diasporic Malaysian and Singaporean writers are vulnerable to being consumed by “the boutique multiculturalist” (p. 34) eager for something exotic even as such works represent multicultural societies. The culinary scenes in *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* may therefore serve only to exoticise Peranakan Chinese culture as well as reinforce the view that the protagonists are circumscribed by their patriarchal community to familial roles “despite [their] apparent matriarchal power” (Varney et al., 2013, p. 41). This paper however will attempt an alternative analysis of the selected works that foreground how Nyonya food and foodwork give women agency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to shed light on how food empowers the Peranakan Chinese women in the selected texts, this paper employs the concept of culinary capital (LeBesco & Naccarato, 2008; 2012) alongside studies on food and women's empowerment in various ethnic minority communities, specifically a study by Devasahayam (2005) on urban, middle-class South Indian Hindu women in Malaysia and D'Sylva and Beagan's (2011) work on how food constructs the ethnic and gender identity of Goan Canadian women.

Expanding the work of French sociologist and anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who had introduced the concepts of economic, cultural and social capitals, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato coined the concept of ‘culinary capital’ to understand “how and why certain foods and food-related practices connote, and by extension, confer status and power on those who know about and enjoy them” (2012, pp. 12-13). Initially, they looked at how American consumers acquire culinary capital through watching and/or reading popular television cooking shows, cookbooks and biographies by culinary icons Julia Child and Martha Stewart. These activities give the consumers an “illusory access to ‘culinary capital’ as they use food and food practices as vehicles for performing an imagined class identity” (LeBesco & Naccarato, 2008, p.224); however, the culinary capital acquired is limited, allowing viewers/readers to achieve an imagined upward class mobility, while their actual economic and class positions remain unchanged. The concept of culinary capital has since been expanded to look at how food and food practices in contemporary North America are implicated in the discourse of power and consumers' construction of themselves as model or dissenting citizens, but can also be deployed in other contexts because “all cultures use food and food practices as a way of conferring cultural authority and circulating dominant ideologies just as their citizens may use them to both reinforce and transgress their culture's norms and values” (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012, p. 26).

Theresa W. Devasahayam's (2005) study has already drawn upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to understand how urban, middle-class South Indian Hindu women's food practices are integral to establishing their identity as members of the urban middle class. While it does not specifically formulate a concept such as culinary capital, Devasahayam's findings from the women that she interviewed show that food enables them to acquire and wield power in the family; in other words, it gives them culinary capital. Significantly, the women in Devasahayam's study do not view the act of cooking and feeding their families as contributing to their subjugation "since their role in food provision encompasses cultural values that are not perceived as oppressive" (2005, p. 16), thus challenging the perception of cooking as a form of domestic labour that perpetuates women's oppression. Similarly, Andrea D'Sylva and Brenda L. Beagan (2011) in their study of the role of food in gender and ethnic identity construction among Goan Canadian women found that their food practices are sources of power and influence for women of the Goan diaspora, because it helps transmit their distinct ethnic and gendered identity in a diasporic context.

As such, our analysis of women and their food practices in *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* is read through the concept of culinary capital and anthropological/sociological studies on women's empowerment through foodwork. We will examine how the protagonists of *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* acquire culinary capital through their knowledge, mastery and deployment of Nyonya food and thereby negotiate the boundaries of their world.

DISCUSSION

NYONYA FOOD AND NEGOTIATING PATRIARCHY IN *EMILY OF EMERALD HILL*

Stella Kon's play, *Emily of Emerald Hill* is a monodrama about a Peranakan Chinese matriarch, Emily Gan, whose trials and tribulations take place during the heyday and decline of the Peranakan Chinese community in early- to late- twentieth-century Singapore. In the play, scenes revolving around cooking, eating and entertaining become set pieces for Emily's demonstrations of the power and influence she wields over her family and community. The culinary capital Emily possesses through mastery of Nyonya cooking, decisions over food and supervision of the kitchen also illustrate how the patriarchy of the Peranakan Chinese community is not immune from being challenged and negotiated by its womenfolk (Neo et al., 2020).

Having married into the Gan family as a 14-year-old orphan, Emily's youth and lower social status subject her to bullying and lack of respect from her much older brothers- and sisters-in-law; she is cast as the *toh tiap* (Hokkien: bullied or victimized) Nyonya, one of the gendered constructs of Peranakan Chinese women (Neo et al., 2020). However, Emily puts another trait to use – *li hai* (Hokkien: manipulative) (Neo et al., 2020) – in order to carve out a position as the favoured daughter-in-law despite her humble origins.

This trait sees her rise to head a household that had initially looked down on her, and scenes involving her preparing and serving food distil the power and influence she wields over her family's lives. Although a Nyonya matriarch's domain is the household, Emily's reach goes beyond it and into the 'masculine' realms of politics and business, which she is able to influence, albeit indirectly. This is evident when Emily skillfully deploys the twin roles of cook and hostess in order to create or maintain relationships with people crucial to her husband and son's good fortunes. Here, Nyonya food becomes a conduit for Emily to establish and strengthen connections

with the right people in politics, business and high society that Kheong, Richard, and by extension she and the rest of the family could benefit from:

The table is set. Emily steps back and goes to extreme stage right. She powders her face, puts on diamonds, hairpins, high-heeled slippers.

The stage lights up, blazing brilliantly.

Emily sweeps forward magnificently to greet her guests.

(With overwhelming graciousness) Welcome to Emerald Hill, Mr Lim. I think this is the first time we've had the pleasure of your company. Some of the other Councillors will be coming too. Kheong, here's Mr. Lim, give him a drink and some makan kecil.

(With great cordiality) Hello Mrs. Ong, hello Johnny. How are you Mrs. Ong? How is your new house coming on? Johnny, you can go inside, Richard is at the back somewhere. Do sit down Mrs. Ong, try my prawn savouries.

...

Mr. Chee! So glad you can come! I'm just waiting for you to be the guest of honour at the table.... Are you ready to makan? Would you like another drink? Yes-lah, I know what you like to eat, I've made my otak specially for your sake. Ladies and Gentlemen – shall we adjourn to the dining room?

Emily leads the way to the dining table where she stands, presiding over the buffet.

(Kon, 2002, pp. 19-21)

The invitees to Richard's birthday party are clearly people whose favour, influence and connections Emily needs to cultivate so that her family could flourish: Mr. Lim, a member of the Singapore Legislative Council that Kheong also has a seat on; Mrs. Ong, a wealthy woman whose son Johnny is Richard's friend; and Mr. G.P. Chee, her father-in-law's old friend who in the past has done various favours for the Gan family at Emily's request. She is also eyeing Mr. Chee's granddaughter as a potential wife for Richard, which would have been a strategic alliance of two prominent Peranakan Chinese families. Each guest is plied with food Emily has prepared herself – *makan kecil* (literally 'small dishes'), prawn savouries and *otak* (a paste of fish and spices wrapped in banana leaf or *daun kadok* and steamed or grilled), effectively lending a personal touch to her dealings with each of them. As the consummate hostess who sees to each and every guest's comfort by offering them food and drink, Emily still inhabits the role of a traditional Nyonya matriarch, but her strategic deployment of food also helps to cement alliances and friendships beneficial to her and her family. Knowledge is power, as her knowledge of what Mr. G.P. Chee's favourite dish is can help ensure her and her family's continued prosperity.

As Emily "presid[es] over the buffet" (Kon, 2002, p. 21) and urges everyone to eat, audiences may be reminded of her earlier recollection of her father-in-law's Sunday open houses and evening parties which showcased his generosity and wealth. Back then, as young Nyonyas, she and her sisters-in-law had played the inferior roles of kitchen helpers and servers of food under their mother-in-law's supervision. This shows the patriarchal structure of a Peranakan Chinese family with a clear hierarchy according to one's sex and seniority. Jacqueline Lo reads *Emily of Emerald Hill* and the community it depicts as "inherently patriarchal" and Emily's influence in public affairs "limited to that of a hostess or facilitator and never as agent" (2004, p. 118). Furthermore, this patriarchal nature of the Peranakan Chinese community in the play could be seen in how "[f]emale power and influence could only be achieved by subterfuge and by capitalising on 'feminine' attributes such as coyness, flirtatiousness and *manja*, a Malay word which suggests playing up to the affections and expectations of others" (Lo, 2004, p. 126) – attributes that Emily, indeed, deploys. Meanwhile, Stephanie Diamond pithily describes Emily as part of an era when "[Peranakan Chinese] women were cut-throat compradors within the family" (2008, p. 179), linking her with the colonial-era role of Peranakan Chinese men as middlemen between the British and the local people.

While feminist readings of Emily foregrounds Peranakan Chinese women's oppression, we would like to highlight instead how food gives Emily culinary capital and agency, which she exercises in the form of the power to influence and make decisions on matters that extend beyond the domestic sphere. To borrow from Neo et al.'s (2020) study, Emily's deployment of food could also be read as instances where a Peranakan Chinese woman "negotiat[es] and challenge[s]...Chinese patriarchy" (p. 27), instead of simply enduring the secondary and limited roles assigned to her as woman/wife/daughter-in-law.

In a climactic scene in Act Two of the play, Emily displays both her culinary expertise by making her "speciality" (Kon, 2002, p. 18), *babi buah keluak* (a dish of pork cooked with *buah keluak*, the seeds of the fruit of the *Pangium edule* tree native to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore), and her power to manipulate public perception of her. Faced with a rival who is a modern career woman, Emily turns to her culinary skills to assert her position as the only woman who matters in Kheong's public life, if not his private life. Her elaborate description and enactment of making her *babi buah keluak*, Kheong's favourite dish, is revealed to be part of a strategy to show her husband's mistress and the community that she is 'the good wife' who continues to "look after him" (Kon, 2002, p. 39) despite the fact that they no longer live together. She continues to send food to Kheong and perform other domestic duties, such as doing his laundry, as if nothing has changed. In an interview, Malaysian actress Pearly Chua, who has performed the role of Emily Gan multiple times, explains that

[s]he simmers and stews and spews venom here...[b]ut is still determined to be the dutiful wife who takes care of him. It's in keeping with how she needs to portray herself as the super-efficient lady of the house all the time, because appearances were very important in Nyonya culture...The ladle is her magic wand, her conductor's baton, her weapon. (in Lazaroo, 2014, p. 39)

Indeed, Emily knows only too well how appearances matter, and her efforts in her protracted 'cold war' with Kheong ends with her victory when she manages to maneuver him into returning to Emerald Hill to host an important annual dinner in their social calendar. The dinner gathers Kheong's business and political connections, including the Governor of Singapore; as the wife, the household manager and de facto hostess, Emily's skills at making both the culinary and non-culinary preparations for the dinner are invaluable to Kheong's social standing. It is in these roles that, Emily points out, Kheong's mistress, Diana, "a modern woman, working all day in an office" (Kon, 2002, p. 42) could not perform, and therefore she has no legitimate place in Kheong's public engagements.

Although Emily's triumph comes at the price of losing her husband and her son, Nyonya food is a source of power for her in a world where she was at a disadvantage for being female and poor. As a young girl, she had to fend for herself when her father died and her mother abandoned her for being born "a useless girl" (Kon, 2002, p. 44) rather than the desired male child. Having spent the earlier part of her life forced to live on her relatives' charity and then needing to prove her worth in the Gan family, it is her mastery of Nyonya cooking and the attendant businesses of feeding people and extending hospitality to them that gives her the respect and influence that she craves. Food therefore gives Emily culinary capital in terms of being "a source of pride and influence...a platform for wielding a certain power within the family and larger community" (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011, p. 285).

NYONYAS' FOODWORK AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN *THE WOMAN WHO BREATHED TWO WORLDS*

In Peranakan Chinese communities, women perform another gendered role: that of guardians and transmitters of their community's culture and thereby, contributing to the construction of Peranakan Chinese cultural identity. The Nyonya matriarch is a central figure in the cultural transmission of the Peranakan Chinese, and her culinary skills is part of this role. In line with the matriarchal nature of Nyonya cooking, food is key to Peranakan Chinese identity formation, as the matriarch uses food as a way for the family to imagine their cultural identity (Bensman, 2016; Valentine, 1999). In addition, the status of the kitchen as the "embassy of cultural tradition" (Barolini, 1997, p.109) reinforces the Nyonyas' role as 'ambassadors' of their culture through their mastery of the distinctive culinary fare of their community. Meanwhile, the emphasis on young Nyonyas to learn and master the art of Peranakan cooking is to guarantee that their food and food practices live on; for Nyonyas carry the responsibility of personifying a distinguishable Peranakan identity (Duruz & Khoo, 2014).

While these gendered roles can be oppressive to women, Selina Siak's novel, *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds*, presents food and foodwork as crucial to the continuity of Peranakan Chinese culture and tradition in the face of colonialism. In the novel, women do not view tasks and activities related to food as burdensome; instead, like many women in real life, cooking is used to show affection to family members and friends (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011), to display their power as decision-makers about food in the family and to express their creativity (Devasahayam, 2005). Nyonya food is depicted as the essence of Peranakan Chinese cultural identity, a 'weapon' against the encroachment of Western culture and technology as the British made rapid advances in their colonisation of Malaya. In this sense, food and foodwork bestow culinary capital to the Nyonyas because through food and culinary skills, they are able to maintain and transmit their identity and culture as ethnic minority women in their particular context (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). In addition, foodwork is portrayed in the novel as positive and empowering, gathering wives, mothers, daughters, servants and friends in the kitchen, occupied with the task of preparing food, which also reinforces the process of cultural transmission.

This historical novel portrays a Nyonya's life in late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century British Malaya, which saw great changes and momentous events such as World War I, the Spanish flu pandemic and the Great Depression. Like Emily Gan, the protagonist, Chye Hoon's characterisation as a spirited Nyonya who speaks her mind and with a never-say-die attitude encapsulates what Neo et al. (2020) have noted about constructions of the Nyonya in popular culture and in real life, particularly as *garang/lihai* (fierce/manipulative) and *poon su* (resourceful). The former trait, *garang* appears early in the narrative when Chye Hoon resists being taught how to cook as a child; her training in the kitchen begins when she is eight years old, where she is taught basic tasks, such as pounding ingredients with a pestle and mortar. Her "apprenticeship" (Siak, 2016, p. 30) in the kitchen starts off badly – Chye Hoon hated having to learn how to cook, preferring to attend school instead, and she bites her mother as a response to her attempt to make Chye Hoon return to the kitchen. However, as the years pass, Chye Hoon grows to love cooking the unique food of her people, seeing it as a manifestation of their identity: "'We so lucky,' I said. 'We cook Chinese style, Malay style. We make pork dishes, spicy dishes. We use wok to fry, hands to eat. We are really *champor-champor*, a mixture of things.'" (Siak, 2016, p. 35)

It is Chye Hoon's skill at cooking Nyonya food that leads her future husband, a recent immigrant from China, to her as a prospective bride. Once married, the food served in their home is Nyonya food and not Chinese food, despite the husband being from the Hakka clan and also a *Sinkheh*. Thus, even though her role mostly revolves around the domestic sphere, Chye Hoon can

determine the type of food her family eats, even getting her husband to adapt to her culture through his consumption and appreciation of Nyonya food. This is one of the ways that Nyonyas exercise their power in their families, which includes making decisions about the ingredients and produce to purchase (and in relation to this, managing the finances of food), what dishes to make, and employing and managing the servants to assist them in the kitchen.

Food is a medium for women to display affection and care for family members, friends or neighbours, and they can do this as individuals or as part of a group of other women. The production and preparation of food are included in the chore of mothering and food-giving is a nurturing routine rather than occasional spurs of the moment (Sceats, 2000). This is evident when Chye Hoon's mother travels to Ipoh from Penang to care for her daughter after the birth of Chye Hoon's first child, preparing confinement food "smothered in plenty of sesame oil and ginger to replenish lost energy" (Siak, 2016, p. 87). Special occasions such as the one-month celebration of a baby's life, weddings and Chinese New Year are occasions for communal foodwork involving various family members and servants; although Chye Hoon's sons also take part in food preparation, the majority of the tasks is still the preserve of the women of the house. Such occasions strengthen Chye Hoon's sense of her identity as a Nyonya, and how foodwork, performed with women of the community, is a means of continuing and passing on Peranakan Chinese culture. After the birth of her first child, cooking in the kitchen with her mother and her best friend, Chye Hoon reflects:

As I looked at Mother and Siew Lan, I was reminded of our boisterous kitchen in Ah Kwee Street, where women had congregated to gossip, giggle and make delicious food. A longing for times past hit me. I was suddenly proud of my kitchen, of what I could do inside it. *This*, I thought, *is what being a Nyonya means*. Deep within my bones I felt my culture stir – the calling of my ancestors.

(Siak, 2016, p. 87; author's emphasis)

It is significant that Chye Hoon's realization of what it means to be a Nyonya should take place in the kitchen, surrounded by other women as they prepare the special food to celebrate her daughter's first month. Jean Duruz speaks of "a generational and gendered cooking community – cultures of femininity vested in cooking and care" (2016, p. 24) involved in the production of food in a Peranakan Chinese household referenced in a Nyonya cookbook. This rings true in the novel as cooking is shown to be not just an individual's effort, but a communal one binding mothers, friends, daughters and female servants in an intimate, intergenerational way. This scene underscores how women perform the core of the cultural work in the Peranakan Chinese community as well through cooking Nyonya food.

As the excerpt quoted above shows, Chye Hoon's longing for her childhood kitchen brings her to the realization of how important Nyonya food and food practices are to the maintenance of her cultural identity. In the novel, the maintenance of Peranakan Chinese identity and culture becomes a crucial task because colonialism is threatening the way of life she has always known. Chye Hoon's children attend English schools; Siew Lan, her best friend, marries a white man whom she disapproves of; and her eldest son Weng Yu enthusiastically takes to Western knowledge and culture, eventually becoming one of the 'mimic men' that imperialism and colonialism produced. The threat of Peranakan Chinese customs dying out or disappearing motivates Chye Hoon to pass them on to her children through storytelling, food practices and foodwork. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Nyonya food marks the Peranakan Chinese as being distinct from other Chinese communities with a more recent history of migration and settlement in Malaya and Singapore. By preparing food for daily consumption, festivals and offerings to

deities and ancestors, Chye Hoon actively participates in ensuring the continuity of Peranakan Chinese customs and traditions to subsequent generations.

We end this discussion by highlighting how in *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds*, Nyonyas' culinary skills is also a means with which they can earn an income to support their families during hard times. In the wake of her husband's untimely demise, Chye Hoon is forced to find ways of supporting her family and establishes a Nyonya *kueh* and catering business in Ipoh. Although she faces several setbacks over the years, Chye Hoon manages to overcome these challenges with her characteristic determination and creative solutions. Thus, Nyonya food affords Chye Hoon with culinary capital in multiple and connected ways; as an entrepreneur of well-made Nyonya food, she gains influence and status in her family as well as in the larger Ipoh community. Through her business, she engages in the act of preserving and passing on Peranakan Chinese culture, maintaining its unique identity even as the British expand their influence in Malaya.

CONCLUSION

Emily Gan and Chye Hoon are literary representations of real-life Nyonyas whose resilience and resourcefulness are expressed through their deployment of Nyonya food in ways that go beyond its traditional place in the home. In *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds*, the often-overlooked work that goes on in a Nyonya's kitchen is shown to be instrumental to determining the survival of the women's families as well as of that of their traditions. In our reading of both texts, Nyonya food and foodwork bestow culinary capital on Peranakan Chinese women, which contributes in no small part to their autonomy, power and influence as the womenfolk of an ethnic minority group struggling for visibility and acknowledgment in Malaysia and Singapore. Peranakan Chinese women of the late-nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century (the settings of both works) who know how to cook (and cook really well), perform related tasks such as managing the kitchen, the household and act as hostess on special occasions have culinary capital. With this capital, they can influence or make decisions in matters usually controlled by men, having gained respect and deference from their family and their community through their knowledge and experience with foodwork. Nyonyas' culinary capital is also captured in their role as transmitters of Peranakan Chinese cultural identity through their culinary heritage, as a response to colonialism. Reading food and foodwork in the selected texts as culinary capital and capable of empowering women reveals the intricate connections between food, power and the gendered roles of the Nyonyas as household managers and cultural ambassadors, as well as explores the potential that Nyonya food has in giving them more access to public roles as power-brokers (Emily) and entrepreneurs (Chye Hoon).

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