8 Urban foodways: a research agenda

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The fishball revolution: food in the Asian metropolis

Over 50 people were arrested, 100 injured, and shots fired in the air by police during the 2016 Chinese New Year celebrations in Hong Kong. The *casus belli* was the police removal of unlicensed mobile street vendors peddling fishballs, meat skewers, and other traditional Chinese snacks in the canyon-like alleyways of Mongkok, the most densely populated neighborhood in the world. Naturally, more than fishballs were at stake, as the protests could also be seen as a continuation of the 2015 "umbrella revolution" that brought thousands of young people to the streets in protest against the Chinese central government's undemocratic election law proposal. Seen differently, the feared loss of the fishball, in its sensual materiality, represented a material threat to urban lifestyles, an issue that could bring people to streets despite a general despair at achieving larger political changes. As explained by one restaurateur to a reporter:

> It is the quintessential Hong Kong street food and – culturally – it represents the Hong Kong working class like no other institutions can. Street food, and the fishball represent the values of entrepreneurship. Of capitalism. Of liberal democracy. Anthropologically, they mean more than a $5 skewer with curry satay sauce. (Moss 2016)

If fishballs mean something more than a snack to people in Hong Kong, how do they mean it? More broadly, what can urban foodways teach us about cities and how people imagine and experience their lives in them? Also, we must not forget that a fishball or skewer actually does represent a cheap meal in one of the most expensive and economically stratified cities in Asia. Cities require affordable food. The daily quest for food animates the city streets, and the city itself can be metaphorically understood as a hungry body consuming resources and spewing wastes on a global scale. The question of what food means for city dwellers thus calls for a multi-scalar approach to urban foodways, from the space of the consuming body itself up to global flows feeding the hungry metropolis (Bell and Valentine 1997).

The term "foodways" encompasses the economic, cultural and social organization of food production and consumption. This chapter explores existing research on urban foodways and aims to show how food studies may uniquely contribute to urban studies. It focuses on East Asian global cities because this is where I have

lived and done my research for over 20 years. East Asia is also experiencing the most dramatic urbanization of any world region (ESCAP 2011). By 2010, East Asia alone had 869 urban areas with more than 100,000 inhabitants, 600 of which were in China. If the region's new urban population from 2000 to 2010, nearly 200 million people, were a country unto itself, it would be the world's sixth largest (World Bank 2015). Issues surrounding feeding Asian cities thus should be central to urban studies.

The body in the city: urban experiences of good and bad eating

No other social activity, with the possible exception of sexuality, intertwines the bodily and social aspects of the human being as does eating (Bell and Valentine 1997, 21–56). However, as Krishnendu Ray points out, while the "body" has been widely celebrated within the social sciences, less obvious progress has been made in capturing corporeal experiences of food (Ray 2012). The 1990s scholarly "turn to the body" ironically remained largely focused on discourse (heavily influenced by Foucault). Studying embodied acts of eating, like sexual activity, has remained methodologically tricky for urban ethnographers. Specialized perceptual, emotional, and cognitive mechanisms are active in taste and smell. As embodied sensations, these are difficult for the social scientist to access and to convey, yet central to the everyday experience of the city. A mixed methods approach may be necessary, melding insights from neuroscience to ethnographic perspectives.

We can start with the commonly evoked example of the "Proust phenomenon," after French writer Marcel Proust. In the novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust's narrator dips a madeleine cookie into a cup of tea, and long-forgotten memories of his childhood come flooding back into his consciousness. Food, with its emotionally charged associations, becomes the perfect vehicle for conveying urban nostalgia. Indeed, neurological research shows that odors are especially more evocative of emotions rather than cues from sights or sounds (Chu and Downes 2000; Herz et al. 2004). It is thus not surprising that food is often associated with and deliberately used to invoke nostalgia for specific places, in ways that would fall flat in purely verbal messages. As the ethnographic urban studies literature shows, culinary nostalgia is employed by Asian immigrants recalling ties to home (Mannur 2007), by Singaporeans marketing rapidly changing urban places as still embodying the spirit of old neighborhoods (Duruz 2016; Eng 2016) or by Shanghainese constructing a Shanghai urban identity in which the national narratives are downplayed in favor of local ones (Farrer 2014; Swislocki 2009). Culinary nostalgia is a political and social process that borrows the physiological mechanism of olfactory memory to connect people to the concrete places and times in the city. Olfactory childhood memories anchor people to the physical spaces of the city, as well as allowing culinary marketers a direct entry point into the psyche.

The embodied politics of food is not only about manipulating good tastes and happy memories. Food may also be a vehicle for expressing visceral feelings of revulsion

and disgust. Food safety scares in urban China, for example, have become powerful foci of public disgust at economic corruption and a lack of public trust (Yan 2012). The icon of culinary revulsion is "gutter oil," cooking oil that is recycled from food restaurant refuse, boiled, filtered and resold. According to Chinese informants, it is everywhere, even in many "good" restaurants. Indeed, some claim that one in ten meals in China may be prepared with some form of gutter oil (Barboza 2010). Disgust, like culinary nostalgia, has a social as well as physiological dimension. Among urbanites, the culinary revulsion towards gutter oil is directed particularly at migrant street vendors. As the overwhelming majority of vendors, cooks and servers, migrant culinary workers are central to food production in Chinese cities such as Shanghai. Given their own reluctance to become waiters, chefs, or busboys, Shanghainese urbanites are now faced with a situation not unlike the urban USA, in which migrant laborers completely dominate the food service sector. In essence, what is polluting about "gutter oil" seems to lie less in the oil itself but in the people who make it. Culinary politics therefore may not only be targeted at the state, as in the case of Hong Kong fishball protests, but may be a diffuse form of blame directed at both migrant workers *and* the state for the societal ills felt viscerally in adulterated food. As Upton Sinclair's polemic novel *The Jungle*, about harsh labor conditions in unsanitary meat markets, showed Americans a century ago, we cannot understand the urban experience without reference to this gastronomic politics, often aimed at a moral "heart," but conveyed through our collective "stomachs" (Kantor 1976).

Beyond nostalgia and revulsion, city foodways present the urban dweller with a heterotopia of olfactory indulgence and savory adventure, ranging from grazing in urban food fairs to the cultivation of culinary capital in five-star restaurants. Across Asia, for example, we see an explosion in sweet shops targeting the young female consumer, peddling gourmet chocolates, traditional Asian rice-based desserts, or storefront cooking schools offering quickie cake-baking classes. Beyond such liminal spaces of sugary conviviality, however, city living is organized through well-timed bodily routines centered largely on food. These repetitive "techniques of the body" create the temporalities and rhythms of urban life from regular lunch times to seasonal meals (Appadurai 1997). We cannot understand these everyday routines nor broader understandings of "good living" without reference to dietary practices that mark time in space.

Life in the Asian city is also increasingly organized by regimens of bodily discipline, often centering on dieting and weight control. As with the feminized marketing of chocolates and cake-baking classes, these disciplinary practices are gendered and tied to sexuality (Bell and Valentine 1993, 25–42). They are also globalized. In Tokyo and Shanghai, for example, we see an expansive growth in fitness centers, marketing body-shaping regimens to urban women (Spielvogel 2003). These are often linked to particular diets. Sproutworks, a fast-growing vegetarian restaurant chain I studied in Shanghai, specializes in salads and quick healthy meals for young female office workers, who are the majority of patrons. The manager said that the company deliberately locates new branches near major

fitness centers so that they can become part of these urban women's daily routines of body-maintenance.

Overall, we can see urban foodways as not only sustaining bodies but shaping minds, from the erotic pungency of a durian pudding to the purifying rituals of hot yoga. These ritualized practices of release and regulation are deeply emotional, producing pleasure and pride, anxiety and disgust. These bodily practices connect people to the city through the stomach and heart (or *xin* in Chinese). Connected to this idea, I have been working as part of a team identifying the social rituals and symbolic practices associated with happiness and well-being in China (see Swanson 2016). Though embracing the recent social science emphasis on subjective well-being, we believe this research is over-reliant on a few disembodied survey questions. In my ongoing research I identify food practices as part of everyday rituals embodying the good life in urban China, while showing that the language of food also is used to describe the dystopias of alienated living. As described above, these practices and discourses are imbued with deep emotional contents (Farrer 2016a). An urban sociology of food that relates carefully to emotions, and contextualizes these in culturally specific notions of the good life, can be an effective way of representing the embodied experiences of life in the city.

The city as body: the global urban metabolism

When we move up the geographic scale to the level of the city as a whole we can envision the city as itself a "body" consuming resources and producing wastes. In a pioneering discussion of the "urban metabolism," Abel Wolman estimated that a one-million-person US city in the 1960s had daily inputs of 625,000 tons of water, 9,500 tons of fuel, and 2,000 tons of food (Wolman 1965). A more recent review of the changing urban metabolisms of several major cities shows that rates of both input and waste outputs have largely increased throughout the world. Because of public transportation, dense Asian cities such as Hong Kong are generally more efficient than New World cities. However, a Hong Kong study showed that per capita food, water, and materials consumption had increased by 20 percent, 40 percent, and 149 percent, respectively, from 1971 to 1997 (Warren-Rhodes and Koenig 2001, cited in Kennedy et al. 2007). The urban metabolism model shows that cities are dependent on vast inputs of resources involving systems that are global in scope.

Food system studies show that cities have an ecological and economic footprint far beyond their immediate hinterland. For example, 81 percent of London's 6.9 million tons of annual food is imported from outside the UK, with an average distance of more than 5,000 kilometers (Kennedy et al. 2007). In a Singapore supermarket we find fresh vegetables from five continents arrayed in adjacent display cases, vividly illustrating the global supply chains that enable a diverse diet in this wealthy city state.

Concerns over costs, food safety, strategic vulnerability, and the ecological impact of long-distance supply chains have prompted locavore and urban farming

movements all over Asia, including Japan, advocating eating local products (though sometimes only as a thinly disguised form of agricultural protectionism) (Assmann 2010). Community farms and small-scale urban farming have long been part of the Japanese cityscape. Researchers, however, debate the feasibility of urban farming as a large-scale solution. Southern African cities in particular have been held up as examples of successful cases of high-volume urban farming, but careful quantitative studies have cast doubt on the widespread efficacy of urban farming even there (Crush et al. 2011). Asian cities such as Shanghai have traditionally depended very heavily on farming in the immediate suburban area, but with development of farmland for residential and industrial use, these areas are decreasing. Nonetheless, there is a movement, especially among wealthy entrepreneurs and government officials, to secure suburban land for private farms to ensure a safe supply of foods not available on the open market (Yan 2012). In this case urban farming has a distinctive class and political bias.

Still, urban studies should not return to the classical view of cities as giant mouths consuming the countryside. Cities are also the markets that distribute foodstuffs outward to the world. Ted Bestor's study of Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market shows how it acts as a global nexus for the movement of fresh fish and seafood to and from points all over the world (Bestor 2004).

When energy for transportation, consumption, and the innumerable activities of urbanites earning their "daily bread" are taken into account, food is central to the urban metabolism, and food waste and wasted energy in the production of food become urgent issues for urban studies. Leiden University's new project on "Garbage matters: A comparative history of waste in East Asia" promises to merge historical and ethnographic approaches to this topic in East Asia, a region where total food consumption, food waste, and food packaging have exploded in quantity (Cwiertka 2015).

Embodied cosmopolitanism: eating the other in Asian cities

The global culinary flows in and out of the city ultimately converge at the level of the individual consumer. City dwellers of all economic levels eagerly pursue the varied tastes available in the city and use these experiences to construct a sense of the self as cosmopolitan and worldly. In Western critical race theory, this ubiquitous "eating the other" has been questioned as a form of cultural appropriation in which the foods of the other consumed by the white majority serve merely to "spice up" white lives, who then can claim multicultural authenticity without actually materially engaging with the other (Hooks 2000). Australian anthropologist Ghasan Hage describes this kind of culinary cosmopolitanism as "multiculturalism without ethnics" in which sampling of the foodways of others is abstracted from history, colonialism, and inequalities (Hage 1997). Rick Flowers and Elaine Swan, however, question this critique as static and one-dimensional, using the study of foodways in intercultural families to show how culinary sharing can be fluid, complex, and

meaningful (Flowers and Swan 2012). This debate suggests that the ubiquitous practice of urban culinary cosmopolitanism – of eating the other – cannot be divorced from claims about class, national, and identity politics. Indeed, food is one of the most common ways of claiming (and transforming) social identity, including the cosmopolitan identities of global city dwellers, distinguishing themselves from more insular culinary localists.

Up until now, scholarly discussions of culinary cosmopolitanism have focused largely on the "food adventuring" of white diners exploring the exotic foods of non-white others (Heldke 2003). In the twenty-first century, however, Asian cities have emerged as cosmopolitan culinary capitals in their own right, and culinary adventuring is now common among Asian city residents. Already, by 1998, close to 40 percent of restaurants in Singapore served Western or International cuisine while around 56 percent offered "Oriental" cuisine (Leung et al. 2001, cited in Kong 2016). Tokyo now boasts more Michelin stars than Paris and Japan's most popular dining website, tabelog, lists 127,465 restaurants in Tokyo, including 9,420 Chinese, 5,725 Italian, 2,904 French, and 719 Thai. There were also 4,646 generic "curry" restaurants, a category that includes Japanese-style curry rice restaurants and South Asian-style curries (from tabelog.co.jp, Feb. 13, 2016).

Even Shanghai, from which international cuisine had all but disappeared under the Maoist program of culinary nationalism and socialist austerity in the 1960s and 1970s, now boasts thousands of international eateries, including over 3,000 Japanese restaurants (Farrer 2015). In all these cities, some foreign restaurants remained pricey luxuries, but cheap versions can be found even as fast food or in hawker centers and street stalls. Moreover, over a hundred million Asian tourists yearly engage in the same types of culinary "adventuring" that characterize Western tourists in Asia, with social media making a culinary journalist of everyone.

Do Asian consumers therefore simply repeat the same patterns of culinary exoticism described above, with simply a role reversal between "East" and "West"? Historical and anthropological research points to striking points of similarity and divergence. In the most important difference, Western foodways were introduced to Asian cities in the nineteenth century as an embodied symbol of Western civilization and colonial power. In Japan, the Meiji Emperor, wearing a Western military uniform and eating French cuisine, showed his subjects that Western gastronomy, and meat eating in particular, was essential to national revival. Nineteenth-century imports of Western foodways into both Japan and China focused on consuming Western food as a source of power, both corporeal and political, not mere culinary exoticism (Cwiertke 2006; Swislocki 2009).

This form of culinary Occidentalism has clear echoes in Asian cities today (Farrer 2010). Michelin stars lend restaurants and chefs in Hong Kong and Tokyo instant status and attention that is not always wanted but cannot be ignored. Even before the Michelin guide was published in Shanghai in September 2016, customers flocked to any restaurant run by a chef with a Michelin pedigree. After the guide

was published, starred restaurants were booked months in advance, even while the list of awardees was contested (Farrer 2016b). And, despite Singapore's multiple Asian food traditions, Singaporean food writer Sheere Ng points out that innovation in fine dining restaurants is still measured by its approximation to Western culinary standards (interview Jan. 1, 2016). In the global circulation of culinary capital, only Japanese cuisine has achieved a status comparable to the French culinary tradition and its various spin-offs as nouvelle cuisine, molecular gastronomy, the new Nordic cuisine, and so on. Moreover, in Japan, the term "ethnic" (*esunikku*) food refers largely to lower-priced "spicy" Southeast Asian, Latin, and African cuisines, closely reproducing the culinary hierarchies in Western cities.

At the same time Western foodways are not simply seen as foreign in these Asian global cities. Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai all have their own versions of indigenized Western foods. In Japan, *yoshoku*, or localized Western cuisine, represents some of the most popular everyday meals, such as hamburger steak, curry rice, and rice omelets (Cwiertke 2006). In Singapore, the ubiquitous *kopitiam*, or local coffee shops, specialize in serving a highly localized version of an English breakfast of toast smothered in butter and coconut jam (*kaya*) with a sweetened coffee (*kopi*) (Duruz 2016; Eng 2016). In Shanghai and Hong Kong, localized Western dishes include a cabbage soup derived from Russian borscht and fried pork chops (*dapai*) seasoned with a local version of Worcestershire Sauce (*lajiangyou*) (Farrer 2014). All of these are understood, not as exotic imports, but as nostalgic urban foods that form part of the cosmopolitan heritage of these cities.

Across East Asia, this type of culinary post-colonial nostalgia is combined with a civic pride in their rise as cosmopolitan cities that rival New York and Paris economically as well as culturally. Eating the "other" in Asia is thus about confronting, and reinterpreting the colonial past, as well as about forms of food adventuring and exoticism that are common in the West. Cosmopolitan identities constructed through hybrid urban foodways may thus be simultaneously nationalistic statements about arrival on the world stage. In East Asia, we thus find many parallels to the West, but also differences that relate in part to a not-so-distant colonial past.

Culinary place making: authentic foodways and culinary non-places

Cities do more than feed people: they provide meals in social spaces that either support or deny meaningful relationships and identifications. Sharon Zukin has written eloquently on the struggle over "authentic" urban spaces, often characterized by small-scale purveyors of food who make neighborhoods affordable, livable, heterogeneous spaces on a "human scale" (Zukin 2011, Zukin et al. 2015).

As the example of Hong Kong's fishball riots above shows, threats to (perceived) authentic urban spaces can become a flashpoint for political contest. In a city in which a handful of billionaire developers are accused of steadily eroding access to

public spaces with the support of the state, Hong Kong's mobile food vendors represent the counter-claims of communities and individuals to city streets. Similarly, across the People's Republic of China, illicit street food vendors represent a point of resistance against the developmental priorities of city governments eager for land-use fees, and hence willing to cooperate with private developers to sanitize and privatize public spaces. Heavy-handed *chengguan*, urban para-police, are known for violently removing vendors and confiscating their goods. A police report issued in 2009 reported that yearly there were 600 violent incidents involving *chengguan* and street vendors in Guangzhou alone (Human Rights Watch 2012, 21–22). Across East Asia, including China, we see the rise of shopping-mall cities, in which foods are purveyed in air-conditioned food courts operated exclusively by large food corporations. However, in all these cities, small-scale eateries, including mobile vendors, survive and thrive in the interstices of modern infrastructure, and around Asia's cities these street-level foodscapes are most closely associated with authentic eating and a good city life.

If we understand this as simply a David and Goliath struggle between small vendors facing a developmental state, however, we would fail to appreciate the considerable role of the state in shaping "authentic" urban culinary spaces. Especially in the case of Singapore, the government was central to banning street vendors but also to preserving their characteristic cooking in multistory, open-air concrete towers. Between 1974 and 1979, 54 such "hawker centers" were built to house vendors relocated from neighborhood streets. By 1986 there were 113 hawker centers housing 6,000 cooked-food stalls, selling myriad specialties, including localized and hybridized versions of Chinese, Indian, Malay, but also Western and Japanese foods (Kong 2007, 41).

A shared love of this multi-ethnic and low-market hawker center food is a singular marker of contemporary Singaporean urban identity, one that is celebrated by the government in exhibitions such as a photographic history of hawker centers shown in December 2015 in the Clementi Public Library (itself in a shopping mall adjacent to a lively hawker center). Singapore food bloggers devote themselves to finding the best *char kwey teow* (flat rice noodles stir-fried with a heavy soy-sauce with lard, chives, cockles, or other ingredients). Families travel across the city to queue for a famous vendor. The future of hawker center cuisine even has become a national concern, as aging hawkers retire and are not replaced by young cooks. Ironically, for a hybrid cuisine that was created by migrant vendors in the early twentieth century, Singaporeans are largely opposed to the entry of recent migrant culinary workers into hawker centers and (privately owned) food courts, out of fear that "authentic" Singaporean flavors would be lost (interview with Sheere Ng, Jan. 1, 2016). A hybridized migrant cuisine thus runs a risk of being "heritaged" out of existence.

City governments in Japan have also had a complex relationship with small-scale eateries and street vendors. Recently there has been a boom in back-alley (*roji*) eateries, with some of the most celebrated examples developing in former black

markets (*yami-ichi*) adjacent to commuter stations. In the immediate postwar period, cities closed most of these markets and supported the development of modern department stores featuring sanitized restaurants for the rising middle classes. However, in the past two decades local governments have come to recognize the nostalgic and touristic appeal of the remaining ramshackle blocks of two-story bars and eateries. For example, Harmonica-Yokocho in suburban Tokyo's Kichijoji neighborhood is a flourishing patchwork of tiny bars and restaurants squeezed into the shells of the former black market. Although an alcoholic watering hole for workers and "salarymen" for decades, the area was discovered by young people, particularly women, in the 2000s (partly because clean toilet facilities for women were installed). Many of the more popular eateries are actually operated by a single company, VIC Corp., started by a former videographer with an eye for matching the nostalgic maze of a postwar black market with a cosmopolitan vibe, serving global foods, wines, and craft beers, and hiring many international students as servers. Whether owner-operated or with a larger enterprise lurking in the background, such small-scale, open-air venues create spaces of conviviality among strangers (Inoue 2015). Such carefully staged "authentic" urban food scenes are one of the reasons the Kichijoji consistently tops the list of the most desirable neighborhoods to live in Japan.

Of course, contemporary cityscapes also contain many forgettable culinary non-places, with generic options and thin sociability. In the USA and UK, there are even discussions of "food deserts" or entire inner-city areas in which healthy food is unobtainable, too expensive, or limited to fast-food chains, though some researchers dispute their existence, at least in the UK (Cummins 2014). In Asian cities, which are denser and also less class-stratified than US cities, food deserts do not seem to exist, but there are many spaces in which meaningful sociability over food is limited either out of choice or lack of options. All over Asia, we find increasing numbers of people living apart from families and regularly eating alone. One of the most important institutions serving them is the convenience store, which has probably passed the fast-food outlet as the most common purveyor of convenience meals in cities from Taipei to Tokyo. Convenience store eating is – rightly or wrongly – associated with a lack of social ties, irregular employment, and the decline of dating and marriage among Asian young people (see Whitelaw 2006). Studies of culinary place making should document not only spaces of authenticity and sociability, but also these culinary non-spaces frequented by the growing urban precariat.

Conclusions: new directions

This chapter has reviewed some research on urban foodways with an eye to pointing out new directions in research, including a focus on tastes, emotions, and the urban body, food, and energy waste in the urban metabolism; the embodied cosmopolitanism of culinary consumption; and the notions of good and bad living expressed through different forms of culinary place making. This chapter asks the

Anglophone researchers to think more about regions outside North America and Northwest Europe, especially Asia, where most of the world's large cities will soon be (and many already are). Finally, I also implicitly make connections to established traditions of urban ethnography. Ethnographic research brings to bear the full-bodied experiences of the researcher and the creativity and imagination of the writer. Indeed, the primary message of my brief chapter here may be that much exciting ethnographic research is being conducted on urban foodways in East Asia, but much more could be done.

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