

**Intangible Cultural Heritage Symposium**

**29-30 October 2018**

**Asian Civilizations Museum**

**Keynote Address by Tommy Koh**

**Salutations**

Minister Grace Fu

Ms Chang Hwee Nee

Ms Montakarn Kittipaisalsilp

Professor Lily Kong

Distinguished Speakers, Moderators and Delegates

Ladies & Gentlemen

**Thank You**

I would like to begin by thanking the CEO of NHB, Chang Hwee Nee, for giving me this opportunity to share my unlearned thoughts with you. I am neither an expert of food culture or of cultural heritage. I would have declined the invitation if I had known that I would be speaking in front of my guru, Professor Lily Kong. Professor Kong is the author of an excellent book, Singapore's Hawker Centres: people, places, food. We have foreign friends attending this symposium. I hope that Hwee Nee will host them to a meal at one of our hawker centres.

## **In Praise of UNESCO**

UNESCO is a specialised agency of the United Nations. Its mandate is to promote international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture and peace. In 2003, it adopted the Convention for safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. In 2017, the United States announced that it was withdrawing from UNESCO. I would like to take this opportunity to declare my continued faith in and support for UNESCO. I believe in multilateralism and in multilateral institutions such as UNESCO.

## **Cooking and Baking**

Human beings cannot survive without air, water and food. When I think of the long sweep of the evolution of the human civilization, I have come to the conclusion that the invention of cooking and baking were two of our most important achievements. Just think about it. Before our ancestors learned how to cook, they were eating raw meat and raw vegetables. With cooking, the raw ingredients were transferred into delicious food. Baking is even more remarkable. The humble wheat flour, with a few simple ingredients, can be transformed into delicious bread and cakes. This is why I admire cooks and bakers. I simple cannot understand why some modern humans want to follow the so-called Neanderthal diet.

## **Food and Culture**

Food and Culture are closely related. There is a saying that we are what we eat. I think it is true. Every country, every region, every city has a distinctive cuisine. When I travel I always make it a point to try the local cuisine. I do this because

I believe that cuisine is an important aspect of culture. If I want to understand a culture, I should try its cuisine.

The French cuisine is much admired by the world. It is refined and elegant. It is a reflection of the high civilization of France. The French cuisine was recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage in 2010.

Singaporeans love Japanese food. It is very different from the French cuisine. It is less complex, less saucy but it is a great cuisine. It reflects the Japanese people's preference for simplicity, fresh ingredients and aesthetics. Every Japanese dish is a work of art. The Japanese cuisine or Washoku, was recognised by UNESCO, as an intangible cultural heritage, in 2013.

The point I want to make here is that a country's cuisine can be an intangible cultural heritage,

### **Laboratory of Multi-culturalism**

We live in a very troubled world. There is trouble between people of different races, religions, tribes, languages and traditions. Singapore is one of the world's most diverse nations. Our population is made up of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, Arabs, Jews, Armenians, Parsis and many hybrids. The American think-tank, Pew, has described Singapore as the world's most religiously diverse society. More than ten of the world's religions are practised here.

Miraculously, in Singapore, people of different races and religions live at peace and in harmony with one another. Our public housing policy and our education policy encourage people of different races and religions to stay together and to study together. Over time, it has become part of our cultural DNA to show tolerance and respect for people who are not like us. It is not acceptable to Singaporeans for any religious leader to badmouth another religion. When a Christian pastor was caught on video badmouthing Buddhism and Taoism, the public reaction was instantaneous and unanimous. He had to apologise to the Buddhist and Taoist leaders.

Singapore's successful multi-culturalism is reflected in our food. Every hawker centre is multi-cultural. Interestingly, several of our famous dishes, are the result of the cross-fertilisation of different cultures. One example is fish head curry. You will not find this dish in India. Another example is Indian mee goreng, or fried noodle. You will also not find this dish in India either.

Singapore is a living laboratory of multi-culturalism. Our hawker food is a reflection of this success story.

### **Indonesia's Intangible Cultural Heritage**

I am a friend, neighbour and an admirer of Indonesia. With a population of 240 million, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous state. The Indonesian archipelago spans 8 time zones. It is a country with great cultural diversity.

There are nine Indonesian assets which have been recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. They include the Indonesian puppet theatre or wayang, the Indonesian kris, Indonesian batik and Indonesian angklung.

### **Vietnam's Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Vietnam has been even more successful than Indonesia. There are twelve Vietnamese assets which have been recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage.

The success of Indonesia and Vietnam have inspired other ASEAN countries, including Singapore, to consider proposing their unique cultural assets to UNESCO for recognition as intangible cultural heritage.

### **Singapore's Hawker Food**

I spent more than 20 years of my life in America. When I asked Singaporeans in America what they missed most about home. They often replied, Family, Friends and Food. By food, they meant not our restaurant food but our hawker food or street food. Whenever they returned to Singapore, one of the first things they did, was to visit their favourite hawker centre and order their favourite hawker dish from their favourite hawker chef. It could be chicken rice or roti prata, or nasi lemak or laksa or char kway teow.

Our love of hawker food is one of the things which make us Singaporeans. Our culinary love transcends our ethnic identities. It is not uncommon to find a Chinese Singaporean who loves Malay food, an Indian Singaporean who loves

Chinese food and a Malay Singaporean who loves Indian food. When a Singaporean family eats at a hawker centre, it is a common sight to see the different members of the family eating food from different culinary traditions. One member of the family may be eating satay from a Malay chef, another may be eating nasi biryani from an Indian chef and a third member of the family may be eating fishball noodle from a Chinese chef. Eating in Singapore is a multi-cultural experience. It is also a joyful way of bonding a nation of people from different races and religions.

### **Singapore's Hawker Culture**

Some of my Malaysian friends have said that, some of our favourite hawker dishes are also loved by Malaysians. This is true. We are therefore not proposing to inscribe any particular dish, such as laksa or mee siam as our intangible cultural heritage.

What we are seeking recognition for is not any specific hawker dishes but the whole ecosystem of hawker food, hawker chefs and hawker centres. Hawker centres are important social hubs, where Singaporeans from different races and walks of life meet, queue up and eat together. This is a living culture in Singapore, evolving with our society. They are our community dining rooms. This is what we are seeking recognition for. It is a statement on what we value as being Singaporean.

At the same, we must also find ways to ensure that our hawker trade and culture remains sustainable. The median age of our hawkers is 60, which means that more than a third of our existing hawkers and hawker assistants will retire in the next

decade. As we build more hawker centres, we must encourage younger people to join the trade and grow a pool of new hawkers so that we can sustain our hawker culture for generations to come.

I think the hawker centre is probably unique to Singapore. In the movie, Crazy Rich Asians, Nick and Rachel and their friends went to the Newton Circus Hawker Centre for dinner. A hawker centre in Singapore is a place where the rich and the poor meet. It is a place where the people of the different races meet. They all go to the same hawker centre because of their love of hawker food. I would argue that the hawker centres are the most democratic and multi-cultural meeting places in Singapore.

### **Simon Tay**

I will conclude by quoting from my good friend, Professor Simon Tay, a former Chairman of our National Environment Agency (NEA). The NEA manages most of our hawker centres.

This is what Professor Tay wrote, in Lily Kong's book:

“We have come to recognize that hawker centres are special places, unique to Singapore. They are an important part of the Singapore way of life. Hawker centres are a great social leveller Singapore, a place where people of different races, religions and cultures can mingle, and rich and poor people queue up for their favourite dishes. They are emblems of our country, places we remember when we are away.

I think I will give the last words to Professor Lily Kong, who wrote that “hawker centres are very much a microcosm of Singapore society and offer insights into Singapore’s history and development.”

Thank you very much.

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