

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES,
ARTS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Research Highlights 'Interview'



Self-Introduction

- Briefly introduce yourself, the department and school that you are in.

Keri Matwick, PhD, is a Lecturer at the Language and Communication Centre. A food media studies scholar and sociolinguist, her research interests focus on multimodal discourse analysis, food and language, and narrative.

Elaboration

- Share with us what is your research project.

My project “Singapore Cookbooks: The Cooking of a National Identity” aims to investigate how cookbooks in Singapore define a nation and people. Using a sociolinguistic and cultural history approach, the project will trace how cookbooks made in Singapore have changed over time from 1819-2019, connecting this to food practices by the government and industry. In studying Singapore, which has viewed food as essential to national identity and a unifying cultural tool, the expected outcomes are to generate new lessons from Singapore’s history that may widely apply in an era of globalization and contemporary food industry complexity. Benefits of the project may include assisting government officials and other food industry stakeholders in Singapore to better understand the origins of food practices and to articulate the national identity.

- What inspired you to embark on this research project?

Food is an important part of Singapore’s identity, but surprisingly, has received little scholarly attention. As Singapore celebrates its Bicentennial, discourses of nationalism and identity circulate across the island. My project adds by exploring how Singapore’s past and present narratives are being told through cookbooks from a linguist perspective. What new terms and expressions appear in cookbooks, and when, and how are they used are reflective of the development of Singapore as a nation. Examining the language of dishes are clues to understanding the aspirations that lay behind them; to identifying the different flavor combinations cooks craved or the things they worried about in the kitchen. Sociolinguists view text as embodying linguistic relationships and within these relationships, cultural assumptions and practices.

- **What is/are the most interesting finding(s) of this project?**

Western recipes embedded within Singaporean cookbooks offer fascinating meeting points where different languages, foods, and cultures meet and eat literally and symbolically at the same table. As an American, I grew up baking banana bread on a regular basis, and found particular delight in finding a recipe for “Mummy’s Banana Cake” in *Cooking for the President: Reflections & Recipes of Mrs. Wee Kim Wee*. A side narrative relayed about how the family would buy these Western-style cakes at a Hainanese bakery along Orchard Road. Everyone has a story about food. Each story contributes to a bigger story that combined, creates a national story on international encounters.

- **How do you think your research can impact society?**

Understanding one’s relationship to food leads to a greater understanding of self and of others. In curating and researching Singapore food stories, “Singapore Cookbooks: The Cooking of a National Identity” captures Singaporean narratives about food while confirming the strong cultural relationship among people, culinary traditions, and national foods of Singapore.

Future Plans

- **Tell us about your future research plans and if you are looking for any research collaborators!**

I seek recommendations on what cookbooks and recipes to consider as part of the Singapore food literature canon. What cookbooks do you or your family use? What dishes did you grow up with? What recipes are most treasured and why? I welcome food stories, from cooking, eating, and sharing food to everyday eats and special feasts to every snack in between.