



**Publication:** South China Morning Post

**Date:** Jul 15 2007

**Headline:** Worldbeat: Singapore (Banquet in Stone)

## Worldbeat What's going on around the globe

### Singapore

They look good enough to eat – a hotpot called dragon and phoenix steamboat, a plate of Yangzhou fried rice and a melting walnut ice cream – but they're for show only. The scrumptious-looking dishes are made of rock.

A Banquet in Stone is an exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore that showcases a quirky collection of marbles, pebbles and all kinds of rocks that bear an uncanny resemblance to popular Chinese dishes.

"Collecting stones is nothing new," says Wong Hwei Lian, a curator at the museum. "It's been done by the Chinese for centuries, but what sets this collection apart is the creativity and imagination the collector has shown in making the dish look like the real thing. The rocks and fossils aren't carved or polished to resemble the food, or even coloured. They're only oiled to give them some shine."

The 50 pieces come from a collection of more than 250 that Hsu Chun-i, from Taiwan, has created during the past 21 years.

The hobby of collecting shaped stones and fossils is part of Chinese culture and history. Large, unusual and bizarrely shaped stones, suggestive of mountain peaks, used to be collected and displayed in landscaped gardens, and Chinese scholars would surround themselves with ink stones in the belief that the rocks exemplified perseverance and provided inspiration for their work.

Collectors are often attracted by stones in the shape of animals, but Hsu says he got the idea for his collection after seeing

a piece of jade that resembled a cabbage and a brown rock that looked like stewed pork at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. This led him to combine different stones to create a variety of "dishes".

"I'd say these dishes are more than 80 per cent realistic," says Wong. "Some really look like the real thing – like the pig's trotters and eggs in dark soya sauce." For that dish, Hsu used chalcedony (a microcrystalline form of quartz) from Indonesia and rocks from the Gobi Desert in Inner Mongolia for the trotters and rocks from Thailand for the eggs.

Among other dishes, Hsu represents shark's fin with a grey, triangular piece of hemimorphite, mined from zinc and lead ore. Stalactites (mostly made of calcium carbonate crystals) form lion's head meatballs and amber becomes an ice jelly.

"A lot of the dishes we've chosen for this exhibition are those that the local audience would be able to relate to because they've seen the real thing before," Wong says. "That's how you can make the visual link."

Hsu's collection is valued at more than S\$2 million (HK\$5.14 million). The most valuable item on display is the pig's trotters, worth an estimated S\$130,000.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is a Jinxiang stone from Yunnan, which not only resembles chocolate but smells like it – although viewers may be disappointed to know that the aroma is caused by the decomposition of organic materials absorbed by the stone over time.

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**Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop**

**A Banquet in Stone,  
National Museum  
of Singapore.  
Ends Aug 12**

