National Museum of Singapore

HistoriaSG

2019 Lecture 6
14 September 2019, 2.30pm – 3.30pm

FAR FROM EXTINCT? A HISTORY OF THE "MILO DINOSAUR" IN SINGAPORE

Dr Geoffrey Pakiam
Fellow, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

What can a malted milk beverage tell us about a nation's history? We can learn a surprising amount about popular notions of belonging, childhood, well-being and pleasure from the rise of Singapore's most iconic malted drink, Milo, and the now-commonplace "Milo Dinosaur" beverage.

Today's heritage food offerings are often portrayed as having charted a path from humble domestic beginnings to large outward-looking enterprises. In contrast, the Milo Dinosaur has its origins in the localisation of a multinational beverage brand, involving consumers and cooks from all walks of life.

Join historian Geoffrey Pakiam as he recounts the earth-shaking drink's unusual popularity, and asks whether it should be considered part of Singapore's heritage landscape.

TIME (MIN)	
0:06 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Thank you, Vidya, for those very kind words. Hello, everyone. Thank you so much again for taking time to join me on this Saturday afternoon. Can all of you hear me? Okay, great. My name is Geoffrey, and as Vidya has already mentioned, I currently work at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, which is a research centre that's dedicated to the study of social, political and economic developments in Southeast Asia. Today's talk is part of a larger project that reconstructs what we call the biographies of different food items in Singapore's history – some going back as far as the pre-colonial times. Today's talk is going to look at a more recent period in Singapore's past, mostly from the 1980s onwards. A full account of the Milo Dinosaur's past, in my view, deserves a much longer historical treatment, but that isn't really our aim here today. And that brings me to my second point. Can I please have a quick show of hands – how many of you already think that Milo Dinosaur is a part of Singapore's food heritage? Any hands? Okay, so a bit of a mix, maybe about a third of the audience… That's interesting. Okay, that's good. This is exactly why this talk is going on. I've been given an hour to do it but I only want to spend about half an hour at the most talking to myself. I'm really keen to hear your views about this drink. Food heritage, after all, is something that is shaped by all of us, by the wider community. I mean, everyone is a stakeholder at the end of the day and, in a way, I see my role here as really more of a facilitator for discussion in that sense.

1:49 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Just some quick words of thanks to particular individuals and institutions with their help and support in making this event possible. Gayathrii Nathan and Toffa Wahed have been working really hard behind the scenes as research assistants to help compile and analyse the historical data, some of which come into this presentation. Also, a quick word of thanks to Phoon Yuen Ming for her help with some of the newspaper research. Project co-investigators, Dr Loh Kah Seng – who sadly can't be here with us today; he is in the Philippines at the moment – and Michael Yeo as well in the front. They have helped to conceptualise and have driven this project since it began in 2018. I also want to thank NHB [National Heritage Board] for supporting this project with the Heritage Research Grant, and I'm also grateful to NMS [National Museum of Singapore] for hosting this event. And, in particular, Wong Hong Suen for inviting us to speak here today. A point of clarification: Our research is not sponsored by Nestlé. Is there anyone here who works for Nestlé in the audience? No? Okay, good. All right. We're not here on behalf of Nestlé.
3:02 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	But in saying that, during the course of our research, we ended up drinking a lot more Milo and Milo Dinosaur than usual actually, doing the writing research for this talk. This had nothing to do with any notion of science. We weren't trying to do taste tests or find out which was the best version of it. I mean, it had more to do with just inner cravings, while constantly thinking and remembering the drink while researching and writing about it. It was a bit torturous in a way, and a lot of us here in the audience probably grew up drinking Milo and maybe the Milo Dinosaur. Its taste has been imprinted on us since childhood. Some of us, anyway. So, at this point, I'm sure some of you are thinking of all the possible things we could have researched on, why of all things do we have to choose the Milo Dinosaur? We could have chosen something more traditional, more Asian. We are in the heart of Asia, what's going on? Well, the drink itself, as we'll soon see, actually poses, I think, some really interesting questions about what it means to be a "heritage food" in today's context in Asia. And our decision to choose the Milo Dinosaur as one of our case studies was also shaped, as historians would say it, by the abundance of materials that was already available, that we could use to flesh it out and analyse its life and time, so to speak.
4:21 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	The context that we live in today includes a lot of what we can call "living heritage" – heritage that's actively practised and promoted across Singapore, not in the past but today. And not all of it, but a great deal of what we consider "traditional" or "Asian" food heritage has arguably already been branded and mass produced often for international or overseas audiences. It includes complete dishes like chilli crab, kaya toast, samsui chicken. And when I last checked outside at the shop, we had notebooks with the Milo Dinosaur on the front cover, and badges as well. But also we were talking about just basic ingredients, sauce kits including laksa paste, chicken rice paste, fish balls, tofu, soya sauce, Maggi seasoning.

5:15 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	What we think about… When we think about what makes something that we eat and drink part of Singapore's heritage and traditions, most of us don't really think too hard about it. I mean, it's fine – it's either yes or no. We make a snap judgment and that's usually enough to keep things going. But as academics, for me, there are plenty of grey areas that do matter and I would like us to treat the Milo Dinosaur as part of a thought experiment. It might push boundaries that, at times, we might feel a bit uncomfortable considering what is important. I think that we try and have these discussions about such boundaries, because through them we can learn a lot about assumptions of food heritage and even the society that we live in today.
6:00 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Now, to answer this question about Milo D and its place in Singapore's food landscape, we can start to think about the question in three different ways. I think it's useful to think about it geographically – if you want to put it cutely, the Milo Dinosaurs' "habitat and range", so to speak. It's an open secret that it's popular regionally, especially in Malaysia, but are there aspects of the drink which are especially local, Singaporean – is there a "subspecies" of the drink in Singapore, so to speak? And what about know-how, the craftsmanship that goes into the drink? Or, in a more legalistic way, the property rights associated with recipes and preparations? Who are the custodians of the Milo Dinosaur? Are they individuals? Are they families? Coffeeshop vendors? Big businesses? Who does the Milo Dinosaur really belong to in that sense, and who does it benefit when it's made and sold and, of course, drunk? And, finally, food, and food is often seen as a way to bring people together. In other words, sharing an identity and making a community of sorts, and does the Milo Dinosaur really do this? Who does it exclude? Who does it include? Does it really matter at the end of the day?
7:18 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Okay, are any of you not familiar with what the Milo Dinosaur is before I go on further? Everyone knows? Okay, that's great. What about Milo itself? Everyone knows what Milo is, right? Okay. So, excellent. Milo: malted chocolate powder usually used to make drinks, made by Nestlé, currently the world's biggest food company, by the way. And also, I would say, possibly responsible for some of the haze that's going on outside, which is making it a bit hard for me to talk at the moment. Because Milo has got two ingredients in it which come from tree crops that are produced in this region. I see some of you nodding. One of them is palm oil and the other one is cocoa. So we've got two of those things, but we don't know how to really trace it, so that's another question that we put aside for later. As for Milo Dinosaur, I'll just go through the basics. It's basically Milo powder blended with sugar, hot water, milk, chilled with ice cubes, and then you crown it with several spoonfuls of Milo powder on top. So the recipes, of course, vary. Some coffeeshops give three spoonfuls, others as many as five spoonfuls, which is about just as much as what's already inside, the liquid that's chilled to begin with. So it's times two. So it's a bit like a milkshake, but not exactly one either.

8:38 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	So, there are several ways to trace the birth of the Milo Dinosaur. The first story has to do with our little Singapore. And, in this story, the Milo Dinosaur was invented by Indian Muslim open-air eateries in Singapore during the mid-1990s – the kinds of eateries that were already serving very sweet, sweetened milky drinks, like teh tarik, bandung and ice Milo. Some of the claimants include A&A Muslim restaurant in Sembawang, or used to be in Sembawang. Al-Azhar eating restaurant near Beauty World Shopping Centre. Al-Amin eating house, also near Beauty World; they are neighbours sharing the same street. And one newspaper account claims that Nestlé actually went to Al-Amin to ask for permission to use the names Milo Dinosaur, Milo Godzilla and Milo King Kong. And these are all variations of the Milo Dinosaur. For those of you unfamiliar, Milo Godzilla is Milo D with a scoop of ice-cream on top, sometimes whipped cream. Milo King Kong is two scoops and maybe with whipped cream as well. Nestlé went to Al-Amin and asked them for permission to use the names of these three drinks for their own marketing purposes, which sounds really weird to me. Why should Nestlé be asking for permission to use its own Milo trademark? So we'll come back to this a bit later. Anyway, the other question, of course, is why these monstrous names? One reason is presumably to get customers to imagine a larger, rowdier version of the ice Milo that was already being sold, something that was fiercer, something bigger, a bit more intimidating, more fun. The other reason was something which had to do with the times of that period. We had a cinema culture in the early 1990s and early 2000s, where popular imagination in this region was dominated by films about giant lizards and apes. So we had *Jurassic Park*, which started in 1993. I think [*Jurassic Park*] 1, 2 and 3 were in 2001, and then the last one, *Jurassic World*, was in 2015. So it's always there in the background.
11:02 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	We had *Godzilla*, which came out in 1998 – not the current 2019 one, which I haven't seen yet – but this one definitely wasn't very good. And it was made by the folks who gave us *Independence Day*, so it's big blockbuster, special effects, loud. And then we've got *King Kong* in 2005, which was a much better movie. So these were all sort of happening around the same period and it was part of a public consciousness in a way.
11:29 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Of course, things are never that simple when it comes to food and food histories. We have a second origin story, and that's looking at Malaysia itself. In this story, Milo Dinosaur was born in Malaysia by the mid-1990s, around the same time. But it was served under a different name and this name was the Milo Shake. And it was served at roadside stalls, and we have none other than KF Seetoh, our local food champion, who talks about this in an interview. He says that, in the past, we had something similar to the Milo D that was served in Malaysia at roadside stalls and I had this myself. But it wasn't just him – Singapore vendors also knew about the Milo Shake. When they were interviewed around the same time in the mid-2000s, they claimed that, well, yes, we know about the Milo Shake in Malaysia but our Milo Dinosaur is different. It's more chocolatey and it's more creamy. So, nevertheless, many Malaysians remain convinced that the Milo Dinosaur is a Malaysian creation. Now, there's probably never going to be a clear answer and maybe there isn't a point to try and ask who started it first. That's not really the point, but we should note also

	that Malaysia has had one of the highest, it has had the highest per-head consumption of Milo in the world. And guess who's in second place? Singapore. So we are still partners in many ways, all these years. A quick aside: Did you also know that the slogan "Malaysia Boleh" was coined by Nestlé, by Milo's sponsorship of Malaysia's SEA Games effort in 1993? So you can see how ingrained Nestlé is in the national culture in Malaysia and, we'll see later, in Singapore as well.
13:23 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	And this, of course, brings us to Nestlé itself, which is our third point of origin, and the Milo Dinosaur's main ingredient. As we've said before, Milo powder was developed in Australia by an Australian chemist working for Nestlé Australia. And his name was Thomas Mayne and he was working on it during the Great Depression at a time when he wanted to find – according to the Nestlé story – he was trying to find a drink that would help children who were in need of more nutrition.
13:54 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	So, there you have him. Not in the 1930s, this is him in the 1980s, still going strong, still loving his Milo. He was a devout promoter of Milo to the very end. He had a cup of it, reputedly, every day till the end of his days. But in the '30s, Milo was first made in Australia, the powder itself, and then it was exported and it was marketed in places such as British Malaya, as a fortified tonic food for the middle classes in the mid-'30s onwards. So this is a point where, as you know, Singapore and mainland Malaya were both part of the same, arguably, the same political entity, and also the same integrated market as well. So a lot of the advertising, a lot of the material culture was interlinked. After Malaysia and Singapore achieved independence in the '50s and '60s, Nestlé continued its advertising and sponsorships, but now it took place along national lines in both states, and Milo was now being seen and promoted as a national drink. It wasn't just in the realm of consumption; in production as well, Milo was soon manufactured in the… by the early '70s in both Singapore and Malaysia. So, what does all this mean? In this telling, Milo Dinosaur is ultimately the outcome of Singapore and Malaysia's joint colonial legacy as well as their continued openness to Swiss capital with a bit of an Australian face. But don't take my word for all this, okay?
15:27 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Let's just ask everyone else outside, the rest of the world, where they think Milo Dinosaur comes from. So in the Philippines, nine-tenths of residents already consume Milo and some shops do sell Milo D, and they sell it as a Singaporean offering. One of these shops happens to be a shop that's run by KF Seetoh: Makansutra. So he's doing his job and waving the flag. In Hong Kong, it's often served as a Malaysian specialty by a Malaysian F&B [food and beverage] brand known as PappaRich. In Australia and the UK, you have both Singaporean and Malaysian F&B businesses that are selling Milo Dinosaur. So you get different narratives depending on who you go to, and also sometimes consumers themselves call it the "hot chocolate of the Far East", which has this sort of colonial nostalgic sense to it, which is interesting as well. And lastly in New York itself, the Milo Dinosaur was featured in 2015, thanks in part to the Singapore

	Tourist Promotion Board and KF Seetoh, who brought it in, and it was written up as a Singaporean food. So, in short, the answer depends on who's selling it. In many cases, national branding efforts often determine the prevailing narrative.
16:45 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Now, to make matters just slightly more complex, we will be moving on to who are the craftsmen of Milo Dinosaur, this is the fourth origin story that lies with the families themselves. So we get to the nice, big, popular narrative. So before the Milo Dinosaur got its official name, families in Australia, Singapore and Malaysia were arguably already preparing versions of the drink already, but they didn't call it that. They didn't call it the Milo Dinosaur then; it wasn't "branded" in that sense. The thing about Milo is that many of you will know that it's actually more coarse, more gritty, crunchy than a lot of hot-chocolate powder, which is very fine. And if you try and put hot-chocolate powder in your mouth, hot cocoa, it just sort of clogs up your whole mouth and it's almost suffocating because it's so fine. Whereas Milo, if you have it in a spoonful, you've got a… It's palatable, it's delicious. And in this story, according to Nestlé, Thomas Mayne settled on the coarse texture of Milo by accident in the early '30s. He actually found his children eating a Milo prototype in the family kitchen, and they were eating it because they couldn't actually get it to dissolve in the milk properly. So he went, oh, okay, it's actually not such a bad thing, I don't need to make it dissolve fully. It's fine as it is, it's delicious. So I'm going to sell this as a virtue instead. So, children, maybe children, are the key to the Milo Dinosaur. And certainly we find that by the '50s and the '60s, once refrigeration becomes widespread in homes in Malaysia and in Singapore, Milo becomes even harder to dissolve in milk because the milk is often taken from the fridge cold to begin with. It's not room temperature, it's not condensed milk, which is also room temperature. So this led to many episodes where children, sometimes children who couldn't boil their own hot water but just got the milk straight from the fridge, made their own "Milo Dinosaurs" at home. So both on purpose and also by accident, and we have testimonials that actually talk about this. So it's a nice story, you know, it's about innovation from the bottom up.
18:55 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	But, okay, we'll come to that in a moment. So, the history of Milo Dinosaur is then also a history of eating Milo in rather strange ways. Maybe not strange to us because we are from this region. So we have generations of children, our children, our fathers, our mothers, our grandparents who ate Milo when they could, straight from the tin, often without their parents knowing. We had children who were sprinkling Milo on bread; maybe the parents would do it for them as well. So we go from that pre-Milo Dinosaur to Milo Dinosaur itself and we can actually start to see Milo Dinosaur becoming, in a way, the ideal concoction to play with. So one vendor in Singapore in the mid-2000s was interviewed about this drink because it was quite a novelty then. And he said, well, you know why it's popular? I see, you know these kids, well, when they get the Dinosaur, the Milo powder falls all over the ice and then they start to lick it, they roll it and then they put it over their tongues and enjoy its texture. So you can see this trace that goes all the way back, decades since.

20:00 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Now, what does Nestlé think about all this? They probably love it. It's been a new growth sector for them, in a way. It gives you an opportunity to sell lots more Milo powder, but I think more importantly it also keeps the Milo brand in the spotlight. And, in fact, in January 2009, there was a news article interview featuring Nestlé's then managing director, and he was quoted by a reporter stating that the Milo Dinosaur's development took place in a Singapore coffeeshop. He didn't give a name, adding to the mystery, and he said that this development was a partial result of some input from a Nestlé sales team and he doesn't give any more details about that, in that sense. So we don't really know for sure, but what we can, what we can look, what we can do, is place what they did in a bigger context of Milo's tie-ups with coffeeshops, both now, past and present. So most recently we've got things such as the Milo towers, which are like beer towers but only full of Milo instead. And these are… These have been a product of close collaboration with Nestlé. We go further back, we've got things like porcelain saucers, which were distributed to coffeeshops. So these were ways for Nestlé to get its branding out to the vendors and you didn't even have to drink Milo to actually know what the product was because it was featured on the saucers if you had coffee anyway. And, by the way, the National Museum has got some of these saucers in their collection at the gallery, so if you want to have a look, [it's] two more days to the close of the exhibition. Product tie-in. We also have recipes for households. So it wasn't just the fact that Milo was tying up with vendors. They were also trying to reach out to families in their homes. In the late '50s, in newspapers that were circulating in what was still Malaya at the time, both Malaysia and Singapore, they were featuring something called Milo Delight, which was something urging families to sprinkle Milo over bread together with condensed milk. And, in the late 2000s, this came up again but now it was being pushed through vendors and was being called Milo Toast, in conjunction with Nestlé. We go back even further to 1940: We have a recipe in, I think it was one of the papers, the *Malaya Tribune*, which sounds awfully similar to the Milo Dinosaur. So, it says… You see this one here. So this is this is the suggestion, what you can make for your daughter. Let's make Milo milkshake, pour hot water into a shaker, add sugar, float Nestlé's milk powder and Milo on top. So you want to get that mix and make it hot and make sure it dissolves some of the Milo and milk powder. Shake it well and then open the shaker and then insert ice to cool it down. Shake well again and then pour it into a tumbler, and if you like it rich, add a tablespoon full of Nestlé's cream. So it's almost there, not quite – you don't have those additional spoonfuls of Milo powder on top. But essentially you're getting, you know, a lot of these ideas which are coming from the company itself. What I haven't been able to find out yet is whether the company got the ideas from people outside, and to do that would require a different set of sources which we unfortunately haven't gotten to yet.

23:11 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Now, so far, I'm not sure how this works, but the knowledge of how embedded Nestlé is in our food culture. I'm not sure how it bothers people, whether it's an issue for people or not. But we're talking today about food heritage and one-third of us here are quite happy to say that Milo Dinosaur is already part of our food heritage. So in both Singapore and Malaysia, it's been embraced, arguably, as a drink bringing people together, typically consumed at hawker stalls, coffeeshops, Indian Muslim eateries. It's been essentially naturalised like teh tarik, bandung, kopi-O, teh-C. The most high-profile episode from Milo Dinosaur so far, arguably, has to do with Joseph Schooling in 2016. As many of you will know, he was Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold medallist in swimming. And when he set off on his victory parade in Singapore after coming back from the Olympics, he took a tour of the country to thank his fans – and I think many of you may still know this – he made sure to stop by a hawker centre at Marine Terrace Market. And there in front of Singapore's entire media scene, and he was crowded in by his fans, he had a short, quick gulp of his childhood favourite, Milo Dinosaur, made by the drink store vendor who had been serving Schooling and his family as regular customers for the past seven years. So Schooling didn't have time to finish the whole mug, of course. It was a strategic decision, arguably, and it paid off for him, for the vendor, and for Nestlé as well. And Milo's been happy to sponsor him since the Olympic Games. This scene and Joseph, I think, are a winning combination of sportsmanship national achievement, homegrown talent and someone whom the general Singaporean public can relate to through food habits. Also, just another short diversion again.
25:45 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	If you look at the packet that features Joseph and you go to the left, you can see Nestlé's been marketing the Milo Dinosaur. I don't know whether any of you have these, these are plastic collectibles, about this size. But it's not just the Milo D as well. They've got other things you can collect. You can collect the Milo van, you can collect the Milo van uncle, and you can also collect Milo soccer boy. And these three are all, in a way, nostalgia. They are trading on memories of past times because, quite frankly, our soccer is not quite what it used to be anymore.
26:25 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Okay, so this again brings us back to Milo, a much longer history of community, consumption that the Milo Dinosaur actually draws from. I don't want to talk too much about Milo because this is really about the Dinosaur itself, but we can't ignore Milo itself. It's been promoted in Singapore and Malaysia since the 1930s as something that was quite rare at the time. It was seen as a hygienic, nourishing, relatively affordable drink – at least for the middle classes at first. And that was something that was not easily found. And certainly, by the '50s and '60s, doing Milo with cow's milk had become a habit for growing numbers of families wanting to raise healthy children. In Singapore, especially, most families started having children in the '50s and '60s because that was when we had more women in Singapore; before then it was very much a male-dominated society. So, Milo comes in at a point where families are starting to be part of the natural landscape. Children are starting to

	be part of people's aspirations, and investments as well in a way. But also in places like Singapore at the same time, in a situation where more women are going into the formal workforce in the '60s because of industrialisation. Incomes are rising for households, but at the same time, time within the family is becoming increasingly scarce. So an instant drink and instant food, which could be stored away easily for future use and was yet tasty and also full of healthful goodness, became something that was the right product for the right times. And I love this particular advert here. This came out in 1952. I don't think it was specifically marketed for an Asian market because the aesthetics don't look like they are. We've got others which are comic strips which talk about the rubber plantations and fishing industries in this region. But I like this one because it just really captures that sense, I think, the marketing reps really knew what they were doing. They were targeting mothers, housewives. You can see, you've got the clock that's going crazy – time is going out of control. You've got a mother who's maybe, I don't know, what she's doing, mirroring herself as a puppet on strings, so she doesn't have much control over time as well. And the way to gain back that control, in a way, is to try some Milo and get that time back in a way, without sacrificing the health of your kids. But this wasn't just a middle-class thing: Nestlé was also sending free samples to all sorts of communities including remote communities in Singapore, Singapore's outer islands, some of whom were what we, I guess, call the Orang Laut. And in these communities, it was seen not as an everyday drink but as a prestigious, luxury item. And for many people in the mainland as well, it was something that was a luxury. But certainly in the outer islands, it was seen as that. And what happened there was that when they had guests over, visitors, nurses coming over, they would actually take out the Milo and put in a lot of sugar and serve it to them. So it was a sort of special-occasion drink – prestigious, modern, something you wanted to impress your visitors with. Very social. And then there were still children who somehow weren't in this loop. They weren't accustomed to having Milo.
30:03 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	So Nestlé made sure that they gave out plenty of free samples – at amusement parks, at schools, and of course, we can't not mention the Milo vans. They introduced generations of school kids to ice-cold Milo at special occasions, like Sports Days. So, with each… oh, sorry about this. With each successive generation of Milo drinkers in Singapore and Malaysia and elsewhere, we get a situation where in the '50s you get the first generation, in the '70s you get a second generation, in the '90s a third. Milo Dinosaur comes in by the third generation, and now you have a fourth generation who have had their childhoods, arguably, with Milo Dinosaur, like Joseph Schooling. And this is what heritage is about: it's one generation to the next. It's drinking a cup of Milo that makes you think about, perhaps, what your grandparents were drinking when they were growing up as well. And you connect to them through time in that sense, you're going back in history. And for your grandparents, for your parents as well, they are making this drink in a way which triggers their own memories and it connects them with their kids as well.

31:22 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Now, what are the limits of this narrative which Nestlé would love? Who does a Milo Dinosaur actually exclude? Who's left out? This is something which I'm not quite sure about. As far as I know, there are no religious prohibitions on drinking Milo. Quite the opposite, as far as I know. So, in Malaysia we have a case quite recently where a local ustaz [Islamic religious teacher] in Malaysia was scolding traders who were delivering Milo to vendors to stop adulterating Milo, stop selling fake Milo to customers because you are not being honest. You need to sell the real thing to your customers. But aside from religion, aside from custom, there are also genuine biological concerns for quite a lot of us. And one of the reasons why Milo, I think, is often seen as a drink of the young is not just because it's sold that way, but it also contains a lot of lactose. About one-eighth of Milo's composition is made up of lactose, which is, some of you may know, a sugar found in milk. It's a naturally occurring sugar. And many Asians, especially ethnic Chinese, start to lose the ability to digest lactose by young adulthood, including myself. And I have a theory about this actually, that I just wanted to float for all of you and see what you think. The adults who can't drink Milo but grew up drinking it and can still remember its taste, end up passing on this inheritance to their children because they want their kids to have what they did growing up. Or, to put it crudely, they want to actually live through their children, in a way. I don't know what you think but I'd just like to float it out. The other issue of course is a more general health concern more recently about junk food. So in both Singapore and Malaysia, in the last three to five years or so, we've had very highly publicised concerns about rising levels of diabetes and obesity in both countries. And this is part of a swing against sugar and sugary foods, including Milo and the Milo Dinosaur. And this is a bit ironic when you consider that Milo has long been marketed for its health benefits as many of you know. It's not like Cheezels. It's not like some obvious junk food where it doesn't pretend to have any nutritional value. It does contain useful protein, it does contain calcium and it is fortified with vitamins and minerals. And, historically, it's good to remember that Milo was a way to get kids to drink milk. By making it sweeter, making it more palatable, giving it a chocolatey taste. That was how you got milk to go into kids and make them grow up stronger and taller as well. But, you know, we live now in a part of the world where cheap nutritious food is now abundant, so this argument doesn't really hold to some extent. And also I don't think people really drink the Milo Dinosaur for its health benefits, right? Does anyone do that? Sorry if you do, but it's not really healthy. People obviously are not in it for health; they're in it for pleasure, for gastronomy. It's like food that we eat for recreation. We eat it to socialise, to reminisce, to celebrate, and also just to escape from the tedium of daily life. And that, in a way, is one of the definitions of food heritage: It brings people together.

34:44 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	So, just to conclude, one way we can anchor the definition of food heritage is to look at UNESCO's guidelines for what we call "intangible cultural heritage". How many of you are unfamiliar with the term "intangible cultural heritage"? It's the same category that Singapore's hawker culture bid is being put under. So it's about heritage that's in knowledge and all that. I just want to go through the definitions briefly because they also apply to food heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is traditional, contemporary and living at the same time. It's not only inherited traditions from the past but contemporary practices. It's inclusive, it contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility, which helps individuals to feel part of different communities. It also is representative because it thrives on its basis in communities and depends on their knowledge, their traditions, and skills, and customs being passed on to the rest of the community from one generation to the next. So, despite being synonymous with the corporate brand of Nestlé – the world's largest food company today, I repeat again – the Milo Dinosaur does appear to fulfil these criteria. So that provokes another question: What role can and should corporations play in food heritage today? And I just want to end by suggesting that we need to look beyond just worrying about our traditional Asian food heritage becoming mass produced and watered down, and we need to start thinking about heritage that has its roots in recent history in a time when multinational corporations do dominate much of what we eat today. And we like it in a way, we like what we eat; otherwise you wouldn't eat it. And that's all for now. I look forward to questions and having a discussion. Thank you.
37:36 (Speaker: Audience)	Thank you, this was very enlightening. I won't torture you or the audience with academic questions, but I have a couple of minor questions. And one thing, I mean, I'm from Europe, not from the island in Europe but from continental Europe. And Milo is something that you normally don't get there – maybe you get it in a special shop – so do you have any idea why Nestlé actually made this decision not to sell Milo in continental Europe? I mean, it's very much a British Empire thing but this company is not necessarily the British Empire. So that's one thing and the other question is: Did you actually see connections to Horlicks because that's also, to a certain degree, something that you would… in Europe, not necessarily get as a drink. I mean, there is no Horlicks Dinosaur and so on, but it still has this touch of baby food, healthy food and so on that, as you mentioned, it's maybe not necessarily something you'd link to a Milo Dinosaur. But at least the idea that you would actually eat large amounts of Milo powder is already an idea that I think is not necessarily something that… a European culture [that] would be promoted. I mean, it would be seen as a luxury or at least be seen as a kind of, sign of decadence, I would even say. So I mean, when we talk about Thomas Mayne and so on, these stories about 19th-century culture, if you're drinking hot chocolate every day then you're already a decadent person so to speak.

39:17 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Hello. Well, is this on? Thanks. Sorry. You're Stefan, right? Yes. I sort of have to ask the question, are these… are you talking about adults eating the powder or children eating the powder, generally? Well, what we've done with Milo Dinosaur today is just that we are doing a very small study in what is I guess a much bigger field of drinks, which are malted drinks. And as you've rightly mentioned, you've got Horlicks, you've got Milo. The other one that came before Milo in this region was Ovaltine and that started off in the early 1900s and that was marketed also by a Swiss company. So it is peculiar that the Swiss are making these malted beverages. Horlicks, I think, was an English brand actually, is a British brand. But the Swiss were exporting initially Ovaltine and then after that Milo to many parts of the world, and including Malaysia and Singapore. The… sorry, I am rambling. One thing that's been suggested to me is that we don't actually have a beer-drinking culture in this region. And beverages like Horlicks would be more symmetric with that. It's easier to go with that because people don't have that… they're not accustomed to something so sweet in their diets. But I really think that the more interesting question for me in a way is when did we actually get interested in chocolate in our region? Because it's not something that is part of, it is not indigenous to our culture. It's when did chocolate, when did drinking chocolate, as well solid chocolate, become something that we just assume is naturally a part of our desserts, the sweetness in that sense. The chocolate sweetness itself, that's something I'm interested in. Sorry, we can talk more about it later, for sure.
42:09 (Speaker: Audience)	Thanks for the presentation. I'm just curious about Indonesia. Why hasn't Milo taken off or has it taken off already? Because the cultural and the culinary context of Indonesia is actually quite similar to Malaysia and Singapore.
42:26 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	I didn't mention Indonesia for various reasons. One is that this was really supposed to be a talk about Singapore to begin with, and I didn't want to take it too far away. But the Indonesian case, we didn't do very much research on it. But the sense is that, because it was a Dutch colony, the marketing channels were a bit different. And Van Houten was actually one of the companies that had privileged access to the market in Indonesia at the time. I have to fact-check this, of course. But clearly there was a question of what we call "imperial preference" coming in by the mid-1930s and certainly around the same time that Milo was being marketed. So you start to see goods being marketed along national empire lines in that sense. That's not to say that Indonesia doesn't have a thing for Milo, but I think it's seen as a sort of latecomer to the process. They don't… Milo Dinosaur isn't really a big thing there, but we've got what we call a "Milo ice kepal", which is Milo ice kachang essentially. It's a Milo ice ball, rather. So it's Milo syrup poured on top of an ice ball. So you get these incredible fusions which are taking place – you've got ice kachang coming in from the region, but you've got Milo being brought in in a new way as well. But that came from Malaysia, apparently; it was made by some vendors in Selangor and then somebody in Indonesia took up the idea and it started spreading in Jakarta as well.

44:12 (Speaker: Audience)	Hi, Geoffrey. Thank you for your talk. I enjoyed it. I'm just wondering, do you actually have conversations with local Singaporeans about how they actually see Milo Dinosaur as part of Singapore food heritage? And, if yes, maybe you could talk more about that? Thank you.
44:39 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	We have talked to a few people. Nothing too formal, nothing too structured. I mean, one of the reasons why I chose this case study to begin with was that people I was asking generally seem to say I would consider it part of our food heritage. But I didn't ask them why. And maybe that's something that we could do in future, if we had more money, or more time, to put it in a nicer way. But I mean this is one of the reasons why I'm so glad we're here in a way because we need to have these conversations and the more people we can talk to, the better. There will be something that'll be published out of this and maybe that will get a bit more circulation as well, a bit more feedback. We have a few more talks but about other food items as well that are on our checklist of our project. So we have to sort of balance our time out between different items as part of the research.
45:57 (Speaker: Audience)	Milo seems to have edged out Ovaltine as a competitor as a chocolate malt drink, right? Does it have to do with better branding and efforts like the Milo Dinosaur?
46:11 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	To answer that, we need the Nestlé rep here. I was hoping they would come. We need the archives, actually. We need the marketing archives. The archives, I mean, they're in Switzerland, but I'm sure there's documentation here as well. Maybe some of you might know people who work for Nestlé and you can ask them the questions as well. Don't do it on my behalf, please, but just ask around. You know, one of the things that historians love to do is to find out where these sources are. It's a community effort in a way. And, you know, you're absolutely right. It's a fascinating question because Ovaltine, as far as I could see from the newspaper records, was neck and neck with Milo up until the '80s and even the '90s. It was often mentioned in the same breath; it was part of the "holy trinity". Forgive me, forgive the term. Milo, Horlicks and Ovaltine were always those three that were mentioned. You could have those if you didn't want coffee or tea. Those were the three, but those sorts of references start to die off in the newspapers by, after the '90s, after that. So it could be a marketing tactic. I don't know. The other thing is that – I don't know how many of you know this – Wander, which is the company that was producing Ovaltine, that held the trademark for Ovaltine, Swiss company, they were producing Milo on behalf of Nestlé in Singapore during the '70s. Whereas Nestlé was producing Ovaltine for Wander in Malaysia during the '70s. So they had a production sharing agreement going on. They didn't build factories of their own in both countries. So what I said there was not quite the full story. And one of the reasons why they did it, I suspect, was to avoid catastrophic competition. You kind of want to do a production sharing agreement when your markets are still developing, and the region itself is still developing. And now they're producing, now Nestlé is producing on both sides because the market is a lot bigger, and they've got their

	R&D facilities in Singapore as well. But the world's biggest Milo factory is in Malaysia. I have a question. Sorry, if I can ask the audience about this. I talked about Milo not having religious prohibitions but I'm always curious: Is Milo supposed to be heaty? It is, right? Does having it at a certain time of the day have any effect on heatiness itself? Whether at breakfast or at bedtime? Does anyone know anything about this? Because this is really an area which we could know more about.
49:11 (Speaker: Audience)	From my understanding, usually you don't want to eat heaty stuff at night. So the TCM [traditional Chinese medicine] doctors usually recommend that, for example, if you want to do a jog it's preferred that you do it in the morning. Because if you jog at night, it's too much on your liver. So, for the same reason, you do not want to take heaty stuff at night. So [for] things like ginger, which is also heaty, it is preferred that you take it in the morning. So, before Milo Dinosaur, my understanding of… Milo is usually drunk in the morning, at home especially, because I was given Milo as part of my breakfast when I used to go to school. So, that's my understanding.
50:10 (Speaker: Audience)	Thank you so much for the fascinating presentation. This is more of a comment than a question. So I found it really interesting in your presentation that, especially concerning the marketing of Milo, the earlier marketing has this very obvious gendered approach – focus on the mom, focus on the family, and how to, basically, by serving a cup of Milo to the kids, will allow you to achieve this kind of ideal womanhood, to become a good mother. And later on I found this very dramatic shift towards, oh, you know, consuming Milo is all about, you know, sports, athletic and then healthiness in a sense. Well, according to the marketing, right? So I wonder, though, let's say… whether anyone you have talked to or in any of the archive has any specific gendered narratives about, let's say Milo being healthy or Milo being part of, you know, social life and such. So that's just a comment plus question. Thank you.
51:26 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	Thanks. That's a great question. What we didn't have time in a way to show here was the history of advertising, with Milo itself. And our sources mainly were NLB's [National Library Board] digital newspaper archive, which is a great source especially for English- and Chinese-language newspapers. There are some interesting breaks in the way the marketing develops. In the '30s, in the mid-'30s, it was marketed primarily towards Europeans. And it only started to be marketed towards Asians after World War II for reasons that we can make good guesses about. Like you said, it starts off being marketed towards families and towards women, but it's really interesting because it covers such a wide spread of the demographic. Even though this is a middle-class demographic that we're talking about to begin with – we're talking about traders, middlemen, rubber dealers, fishing dealers, people in ties, women who are going not just into the workforce but also women of leisure as well, meeting their friends for a movie. Milo's being targeted at all these sorts of people, and the comic strips that come up from the time really talk about these scenarios. Where it's great to have Milo

	after a movie, it's great to have Milo before you go off to work, as a man. It's great to have Milo with your *kakis* [*kaki* is Malay for "friend"] after work, before you start your badminton game. And then the sports thing starts to come up actually by, I think, the mid-'50s, into the '60s. It starts to really ramp up. But it's not really an abrupt shift; it's more of a gradual thing. You get the professional sports element of it, where you get the sponsorships of sports events. I can't really remember which ones. Maybe you know more stuff about this. But then you get people who are doing sports as recreation as well, so it all ties in. You get women who are playing badminton, men who are playing other racket sports. This whole idea of active, energetic people wearing Western clothes, no longer in cheongsams [a traditional Chinese female dress] or other sorts of *baju* [Malay for "clothes"]. So there's something very… that they're tapping into, I think, a very aspirational ethic, which a lot of other advertisements were doing at the time as well. But somehow… Oh, the other thing was, Nestlé's marketing reps went for a lot of courses after World War II to learn how to be better marketers. So it's in a book that this guy wrote, *Swiss in Singapore*, and I can give you the reference later.
54:21 (Speaker: Audience)	Alright. Thanks for the talk. It's very, very interesting. I'm from the UK, so I was more familiar with Ovaltine and Horlicks. And obviously the climate is very different in this part of the world. So those sorts of drinks, I've only really known them as hot drinks, and generally something adults have at the end of the day. So could it be, you know, before-bedtime-type drink, and probably quite seasonal, so they'd be more popular during the winter time than the summer. So I wonder if part of the appeal here is that you can drink it with ice anytime of the day, any social occasion, throughout the whole of the year. So, the Nestlés, the big companies, probably think they've got much more scope as to the type of marketing that they can make it appeal to. I sort of wonder why this similar thing wasn't done in colder countries because, as far as I'm aware, there hasn't been marketing towards children, the sort of equivalent would be something like Lucozade or Gatorade, and I wonder how those sorts of drinks compare to how Milo is marketed here.
55:33 (Speaker: Dr Geoffrey Pakiam)	When did get Gatorade and Lucozade come into the picture?
55:35 (Speaker: Audience)	Probably in the '80s?
55:38 (Speaker: Mr Geoffrey)	I do wonder whether it's something to do with timing as well because Milo, I guess, sort of started off in the '50s, really, as a mass instant food then. Maybe there was less choice at that point in time? I think that you hit on a really good point about the fact that we, I mean, we have a wet and a dry season here, but we don't have those extremes of temperature, and we don't have long nights and long days, like in temperate countries. But again the iced Milo thing, it's a

	bit tricky because it wasn't... It plays into that narrative about the democratisation of food to the masses, so iced Milo was something initially that could only be consumed by those who could afford to go to milk bars. Some of them, Nestlé, one Nestlé [rep], she set up a milk bar in Singapore to get, you know, essentially these were taste workshops to get people to try iced Milo there besides hot Milo. So they were trying all these different combinations, and the advertisements also were targeting different times of the day as well. From the, I think as early as the '30s, they had already started. And they would make it quite clear that Milo was both a calming drink and a stimulating drink as well. You can have it both ways essentially, depending on what you think about the drink. It's, in a way, all in your head. So, again, it goes to this idea of trying to get people to the widest possible market. The Milo vans, I think, are such an important narrative for a lot of us because in a way that's, for many of us, that was our first taste of iced Milo, in quite a creamy form as well. Did they use condensed milk? I'm not sure, but it's quite hard to get that kind of Milo at home. I mean, you've got this case in Malaysia where this mother and father chased down the Milo vans so they could get the iced Milo for the daughter who was craving it because she was pregnant. So, it's that, you know, strange sort of thing.
58:09 (Speaker: Audience)	My question may not relate directly to Milo Dinosaur but what I understand about Milo based on a news article a few years back… and, I think, I just went to Wikipedia and checked it again. I think it tends to be very popular in certain parts of the world, like South Africa, Oceania, Southeast Asia. I just want to understand, do you have any idea why these other countries, and even South America, that they are more popular about Milo? It's also another thing that is quite common among these countries is that they were colonised. Is there a colonisation kind of history towards Milo? That's why it's actually in these countries.
58:58 (Speaker: Audience)	Hong Kong is a colony but we drink Ovaltine.
59:00 (Speaker: Mr Geoffrey)	And in Britain it's… I mean, you can't really go by the British map of the Empire either because in Britain it's Ovaltine. That's the big thing there. In New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and as you said South Africa, South America as well, the Philippines, yes. I don't know. I mean, I suspect it's marketing. I think it's a production and marketing sharing agreement between the big food companies about how they divide up the world so to speak. But we need somebody to do these global histories of multinationals and that will give us a bigger picture of these things. We can… As far as I can do, we are just covering this region. And that, in a way, I think is useful to bring out some of the local texture. And maybe in future we can look at other parts of the world as well.

National Museum of Singapore

About the speaker

Dr Geoffrey Pakiam is a Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, where he researches and writes about food, farming and commodities in Southeast Asia. He is the Principal Investigator for *Culinary Biographies: Charting Singapore's History Through Cooking and Consumption*, a two-year research project funded by the National Heritage Board. He is the author of several articles and book chapters on agriculture and food history, including a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Global History* on the culinary journey of palm oil in Southeast Asia.