



Traditional food practices in village settings remembered by older Singaporeans

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Singapore is a world-leading metropolitan city that has rapidly transitioned (across approximately 5 decades) from residents living in traditional multicultural villages known as kampongs to one of the most population-dense and technologically-advanced countries in the world⁽¹⁾. This study aimed to explore the framework of traditional food culture, beliefs and practice in Singaporeans who grew up in kampongs via questionnaire-based interviews.

Newcastle University Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering Ethics Committee approved the current study. A convenience sample of participants (n = 34) were recruited through convenience and word-of-mouth snowball sampling and interviewed both face to face (n = 29) and by telephone (n = 5). Interviews were conducted in English, Mandarin and Hokkien between October 2016 and January 2017 using a semi-structured questionnaire that included themes pre-identified from an exhaustive literature search.

The majority of participants were male (n = 25) and of Chinese ethnic descent (n = 29). All participants were aged over 41 years of age, with a similar proportion of participants aged 51–60 years (n = 11), 61 to 70 years (n = 10) and over 70 years ((n = 10). A conceptual frame work of eight major themes was noted as a result of respondent input and the pre-identified structural themes of the questionnaire. These were self-sustenance, farming/horticulture, food and water safety, food and beverage retail, nutrition and health, kampong gastronomy and a culture of sharing (or *gotong royong*). Of these themes, 64 % (n = 22) of participants had noted collecting or maintaining fruit vegetables or rearing chickens. While almost a third of participants (29 %) noted memories of traditional food storage techniques, general feedback suggested relatively low levels of concern for food safety. In particular, a number of participants had noted that food was perceived to be safe if it was free from insects (ants and cockroaches). Alongside traditional travelling vendors and permanent cafes (kopitiam) and provisions shops, participants had also noted the importance of “direct selling” within the community, particularly of fish and seafood. Issues related to nutrition and health tended to be more related to limited availability of food. This also drove a lack of food waste, with leftovers either used in dishes the following day or collected up to give to pig farmers in return for produce or small gifts.

Many of these kampong food practices from a kampong were fondly remembered by participants. Consideration of positive food values from early life (such as a strong culture of sharing and togetherness) could help in the development of government drives to improve dietary intake or benefit food security in relation to older Singaporeans.

1. Seng LK (2009). *Asian Stud Rev* 33, 139–159.