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PERSPECTIVE

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Milo Dinosaur: When Southeast Asia's Cultural Heritage Meets Nestlé

*Geoffrey K. Pakiam, Gayathrii Nathan, and Toffa Abdul Wahed**[1]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Southeast Asia's built heritage is already world-famous. Meanwhile, interest in the region's intangible cultural heritage has been growing steadily.
- As with built heritage, there are significant political, economic, and cultural sensitivities when elevating intangible cultural heritage through state channels within Southeast Asia. This is especially so in the case of food heritage.
- Food heritage promotion has usually been associated with preserving traditional 'homemade' items from cultural homogenization and globalization processes.
- There has been less attention paid to more recent forms of food heritage in Southeast Asia where multinational corporations influence the identity, ownership and commodification of food from the outset.
- The growing popularity across Southeast Asia of the Milo Dinosaur beverage highlights this recent form and its inherent sensitivities.

* *Geoffrey K. Pakiam is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute; email: geoffrey_pakiam@iseas.edu.sg. He is the Principal Investigator for "Culinary Biographies: Singapore's History Through Cooking and Consumption", a project supported by the Heritage Research Grant of the National Heritage Board, Singapore. Gayathrii Nathan and Toffa Abdul Wahed are Research Assistants for the project.*

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INTRODUCTION

To the uninitiated, heritage can seem like antiquarian indulgence. Yet heritage pervades the present and helps shape the future of international relations, community identity, and economic development. Today, heritage officially encompasses not just old buildings but also intangible cultural heritage (ICH): long-standing 'practices, representations, knowledge and skills'[2] that often straddle borders, defy convenient categorization, and are easily commodified.

Following UNESCO's adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, all ten ASEAN member states ratified the Convention, with Singapore being the latest in 2018. In doing so, all member states acknowledged the importance of ICH in oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature, and traditional craftsmanship.[3] Most ICH successfully inscribed by ASEAN member states with UNESCO spans two or more of these domains (Appendix 1). Singapore's recent nomination of hawker culture for UNESCO inscription also bridges multiple forms of ICH.[4]

Before ICH can be formally inscribed, Convention signatories must work with local communities to construct inventories listing ICH within their territories. These registers are a first step towards safeguarding ICH from cultural homogenization and other globalisation processes.[5] Crucially, such lists do not usually confer legal property rights on a state party's ICH,[6] but they can help nurture popular respect for creativity and diversity, improve social cohesion, and encourage community stewardship.[7]

To prevent inventories from degenerating into exclusivist national claims, UNESCO warns signatories against equating ICH elements with national identity.[8] Unfortunately, this has often proven hard to achieve in practice. For instance, food heritage claims have frequently taken nationalist forms in Europe, Western Asia and elsewhere. Despite overwhelming evidence of the transnational character of all major culinary traditions, cross-border food quarrels persist because local cuisines buttress national identities, while offering exclusive economic benefits through heritage branding and site-specific tourism.[9]

Southeast Asia has not been immune from food heritage fever. Tensions have erupted between social groups in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore over national claims on dishes like chilli crab, Hainanese chicken rice, *rendang*, *satay* and *chendol*. Many of these offerings appear in the national inventories of individual states.[10] Besides unease arising from cultural appropriation, there are understandable concerns regarding the uneven regional distribution of economic gains arising from heritage claims made through each nation-state.[11] The branding and industrialization of food in Southeast Asia also poses difficult questions regarding ownership and know-how. Finally, biological and social sensitivities surrounding food can exclude significant groups within national borders from a shared heritage.[12]

What counts as intangible heritage is thus often influenced by domestic and international political economy. The following case study of Milo Dinosaur – a beverage whose identity rests on a brand belonging to Nestlé, the world's largest food company – highlights geographic, custodial and social pressures on the diversity of human experience. The case is important because it demonstrates how a brand (Milo) has successfully replaced a generic

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food item (drinking chocolate). As Southeast Asia's future generations grow up amidst an expanding ecosystem of branded foods and drinks, we are likely to see more forms of food heritage *drawing upon* established corporate brands, on top of corporate brands *marketing* traditional generic foods.

GEOGRAPHY

Milo Dinosaur is a chilled drink commonly found in casual eateries across Singapore and Malaysia. Each offering is prepared by blending spoonfuls of Swiss multinational Nestlé's chocolate-malt Milo powder with sugar, water, milk, and ice, before crowning the solution with a heap of Milo powder. Recipes vary between vendors; some even include rainbow sprinkles (Figure 1). Regardless of these differences, residents of both Singapore and Malaysia have claimed the beverage as part of their respective national cultures.

Figure 1. A Milo Dinosaur. Photograph taken by Gayathrii Nathan, Teh Tarik Time Restaurant, 244 River Valley Road, Singapore, August 2019.

Milo Dinosaur's name appears to have originated with Singapore-based Indian-Muslim open-air eateries during the mid-1990s. Such eateries were already serving sweet milk-based drinks including *teh tarik*, iced Milo, and *bandung*. A&A Muslim Restaurant (then at 431 Sembawang Road), Al-Ameen Eating House (still operating at 4 Cheong Chin Nam Road), and Al-Azhar Eating Restaurant (11 Cheong Chin Nam Road) all claim to have invented the drink. Years later, Nestlé representatives reportedly asked Al-Ameen's operators for permission to use the names Milo Dinosaur, Milo Godzilla (Milo Dinosaur topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream), and Milo King Kong (topped with a double scoop) for marketing purposes.[13] These product names evoked associations with larger, rowdier versions of iced Milo.[14] They were almost certainly riffs on cinema culture of the 1990s and 2000s, when giant reptiles and apes entertained audiences with *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lost World* (1997), *Godzilla* (1998), *Jurassic Park III* (2001), and *King Kong* (2005).

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A second origin story looks towards Malaysia. A similarly-constructed drink called Milo Shake was being served in Malaysian roadside stalls by the mid-1990s.[15] Al-Azhar's operators were aware of this earlier concoction, but claimed in 2004 that Milo Dinosaur was 'more chocolatey and creamy' than Milo Shake.[16] Yet many in Malaysia continue to insist that Milo Dinosaur is a Malaysian creation.[17] Malaysia, after all, has the world's highest per capita consumption of Milo, with Singapore in second place.[18]

A third line of enquiry focuses on Nestlé's international presence. The essential ingredient in Milo Dinosaur/Milo Shake – Milo powder – was developed by Nestlé chemist Thomas Mayne in Australia during the Great Depression.[19] Initially manufactured in Australia, Milo was marketed in British Malaya from the mid-1930s as a convenient 'fortified tonic food' for middle-class individuals in need of calming or stimulating refreshment.[20] From the 1950s, advertisements targeted Asian Malayan students, housewives, professionals, and those leading (or aspiring to) sporty, leisured lifestyles.[21] Following Malaysia and Singapore's independence, Nestlé began advertising in both states along national lines, pushing consumers to imagine Milo as a national drink.[22] Independence and separation were also reflected in changing production geography. Milo was being manufactured in both Malaysia and Singapore by the 1970s.[23] In this telling, Milo Dinosaur was ultimately the outcome of Singapore and Malaysia's joint colonial legacy and continued openness to Swiss capital.

Diverging accounts of Milo Dinosaur's political geography have continued with the globalization of food. In the Philippines, where nine-tenths of residents already consume Milo,[24] some establishments sell Milo Dinosaur as a Singaporean offering.[25] In Hong Kong, it is often served as a Malaysian specialty. In Australia and the United Kingdom, vendors refer to Milo Dinosaur as either a Singapore and Malaysia-style beverage, or otherwise tap into oriental nostalgia, calling the drink the 'hot chocolate of the Far East'.[26] In New York, the Singapore Tourism Board has helped promote Milo Dinosaur sales as part of a larger Singaporean cultural showcase.[27] National branding efforts often determine the prevailing narrative.

KNOW-HOW

There is a fourth origin story that underlines Milo Dinosaur's regional popularity. Small eateries may have bestowed Milo Dinosaur with its name, but families in Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia were preparing versions of the drink at home in all but name beforehand, sometimes unintentionally, especially once home refrigeration became widespread.[28] Thomas Mayne, Milo's inventor, supposedly accepted Milo powder's coarse texture in the early 1930s, after finding his children eating crunchy lumps of undissolved Milo residue off the top of their drinks.[29] Kung Chien-Wen, a Singaporean who grew up during the 1980s, remembered enjoyed cold Milo with extra powder on top, created by Australian neighbours living in Singapore. He was also allowed to make his own Milo at home from young, resulting in occasional happy accidents when the tasty powder was unable to fully dissolve in refrigerated milk.[30]

Part of Milo Dinosaur's initial allure therefore stemmed from past culinary practice. The texture of its savoury-sweet crust recalled previous generations of children who furtively gobbled Milo straight from the tin, or sprinkled it on bread.[31] Whether at home or outside

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in each other's company, youth found in Milo Dinosaur the ideal concoction to play with. As one Singapore vendor observed, "[the Milo powder] falls all over the ice and they can lick it, roll it over their tongues and enjoy its texture".[32] As Milo Dinosaur's first cohort of consumers grew up, entered the workforce, and expanded their purchasing power during the 2010s, local F&B outlets began appropriating nostalgia, turning out a bewildering array of Milo Dinosaur-inspired cocktails, pastries, and even crab dishes.

Despite trademark infringement, Nestlé has condoned the rise of Milo Dinosaur and its descendants. The multinational has benefitted from the positive impact that the Milo Dinosaur phenomenon has had on brand awareness surrounding Milo, as well as bulk powder sales to retail outlets and households. Indeed, in January 2009, Nestlé Singapore's then-Managing Director Suresh Narayanan was reported stating that Milo Dinosaur's earlier development in an unnamed Singapore coffee shop was the partial result of "some input" from a Nestlé sales team; an intervention only slightly less formal than other Nestlé-vendor collaborations, like the introduction of 'Milo Towers' in 2017.[33]

Nestlé has in fact promoted alternative Milo consumption practices in Singapore and Malaysian households for decades. The late 1950s saw Nestlé run a newspaper campaign promoting 'Milo Delight', urging families to sprinkle Milo powder over bread, preferably together with Nestlé-owned Milkmaid condensed milk.[34] The late 2000s saw a similar promotional exercise via coffee shops, this time marketed as 'Milo Toast'.[35] As early as 1940, Nestlé even advertised a family recipe for '"Milo" Milk Shake', which bore some similarities to today's Milo Dinosaur:

"Pour [hot] water…into shaker. Add sugar. Float Nestlé's [Milk] Powder and "Milo" on top. Shake well. Open shaker and insert ice. Shake well again and pour into tumbler. If you like it rich, add a tablespoon of Nestlé's Cream".[36]

Whose know-how counts the most? Essentially a modified milkshake, Milo Dinosaur's precise balance of ingredients still rests on the preferences of brewers and consumers. Nevertheless, expertise behind the one constant ingredient in the mix – Milo powder – remains locked within Nestlé. While a similar drink can be concocted from substitute powders like Ovaltine, many consumers are sensitive to taste differences.[37] Yet, for Singapore's then-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, redressing Milo's powerful influence on regional foodways during the 1990s was primarily to correct trade imbalances: "Every time you drink Nestle's Milo, you are contributing to the Swiss GNP. I…cheered Yeo Hiap Seng for making chrysanthemum tea in Guangzhou where it is selling well".[38] In his view, what mattered was less big business's impact on food cultures than whether profits were sufficiently reinvested in home economies.

COMMUNITY

Many Southeast Asians appear similarly sanguine that their tastebuds have been reshaped over several generations by a Swiss multinational. In both Singapore and Malaysia, Milo Dinosaur has been embraced as a socially-unifying food item. Typically associated with hawker stalls, coffee shops, and Indian-Muslim eateries, the beverage is typically sold alongside other local staples like *teh tarik*.[39] Milo Dinosaur's most high-profile episode in Singapore so far came when Joseph Schooling, Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold

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medalist, drank his childhood beverage at his favourite hawker stall during his victory parade in 2016. "It is the way [Schooling] connected like a Singaporean that has endeared him to us", mused a journalist afterwards. "His native sense of citizenship, from a grungy love for grease-black chye tow kueh (fried carrot cake) and Milo dinosaur, to his neighbourly generosity in sharing his extraordinary accomplishment with citizens regardless of race, age or station".[40] Schooling's yearning for Milo Dinosaur was thus linked with Singapore's general hawker culture and national identity.

Yet even before Schooling's appearance, the drink was so well-known in Singapore and Malaysia that local politicians and celebrities were using it as a symbol to render abstract ideas more concrete for national audiences. In Singapore, parliamentarians invoked the drink to discuss concerns about public health insurance and general living costs.[41] Musicians in Singapore enrolled the beverage in songs expressing coffee shop cultures and nationalism.[42] A Kuala Lumpur-based rock band went even further, naming itself Milo Dinosaur.[43]

The drink's popularity must be traced back to Milo itself. Promoted in Malaya since the 1930s as a hygienic, nourishing, yet relatively affordable beverage, Milo was eventually able to transcend class differences in both Malaysia and Singapore. Brewing Milo with cow's milk became an ingrained habit for households wanting to raise healthy children.[44] Easily prepared, Milo insinuated itself into breakfast and night-time routines for time-scarce families.[45] It became a mainstay of households, coffeeshops, hospitals and schools, especially for adults eyeing substitutes for coffee and tea.[46] For children unaccustomed to Milo at home, free samples were distributed within amusement parks, remote communities, and schools since the 1950s; cups of chilled Milo from roving Milo Vans remain a fond childhood memory for many.[47] With each successive generation, Milo-drinking increasingly brought people together through space and time.

While Milo Dinosaur's ingredients insulate it from religious prohibitions, Milo remains marked by biological issues and health concerns. Roughly one-eighth of Milo consists of lactose, limiting its consumption by lactose-intolerant individuals.[48] In both Singapore and Malaysia, recent highly-publicized concerns about rising levels of diabetes and obesity have helped stigmatize sugary food and drinks, including Milo.[49] Perhaps it is for these reasons that the Milo Dinosaur's primary consumers have been youth, who still produce the enzyme needed to digest lactose in large amounts, and are less restrained in their consumption of sweetened beverages.[50]

Nonetheless it seems unlikely that health concerns will endanger the drink's popularity within Southeast Asia. Nestlé has ramped up reduced-sugar versions of Milo in conjunction with marketing campaigns stressing the powder's protein and calcium content.[51] And even if Milo's touted health benefits seem less credible in contexts where cheap nutritious food is now abundant, consumers are unlikely to cease imbibing Milo Dinosaur altogether. For the vast majority, eating and drinking remain crucial ways to socialize, celebrate, reminisce, and escape the tedium of everyday life.

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FINAL REMARKS

Does a beverage like Milo Dinosaur count as intangible cultural heritage in Southeast Asia? UNESCO's current guidelines are eye-opening. The agency considers ICH to be:

- "Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time…not only inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices…"

- Inclusive: "It contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities…"

- Representative: "It thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation…"[52]

Despite being intertwined with Nestlé's corporate identity, Milo Dinosaur appears to fulfil these criteria. Other branded fusion offerings such as Maggi (Mee) Goreng, Ribena Limau, Neslo (Nescafé combined with Milo), Milo Ais Kepal (Milo Ice Ball) and Horlicks Cake are also becoming increasingly popular in parts of urban Southeast Asia, especially amongst younger generations. There is also at least one generation of adults across much of Southeast Asia who already nurse fond memories of urban childhoods spent at branded fast food outlets like McDonald's. All this raises further questions about Southeast Asian food heritage in the longer term:

- How might families, communities, and societies respond as corporations broaden their influence over local taste preferences and food heritage?

- How might Southeast Asian communities promoting and preserving social phenomena like coffee shop culture and hawker culture respond to the branded food items that give these cultures their life, texture, and connections to the past?

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Appendix 1. ASEAN Member States' Participation in UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

Country	Date of ratification[53]	Additions to Representative List of ICH of Humanity (year of inscription)[54]
Viet Nam	20/09/2005	Nha Nhac court music (2008) Space of gong culture (2008) Quan họ Bắc Ninh folk songs (2009) Gióng festival of Phù Đổng and Sóc temples (2010) Worship of Hùng kings in Phú Thọ (2012) Đờn ca tài tử music and song (2013) Ví and Giặm folk songs of Nghệ Tĩnh (2014) Tugging rituals and games (2015) Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms (2016) Xoan singing of Pho Tho province (2017) Art of Bài Chòi (2017)
Cambodia	13/06/2006	Royal Ballet of Cambodia (2008) Sbek Thom, Khmer shadow theatre (2008) Tugging rituals and games (2015)
Philippines	18/08/2006	Darangen epic of the Maranao people of Lanao (2008) Hudhud chants of the Ifugao (2008) Tugging rituals and games (2015)
Indonesia	15/10/2007	Wayang puppet theatre (2008) Indonesian Kris (2008) Indonesian Batik (2009) Indonesian Angklung (2010) Saman dance (2011) Noken knotted net/woven bag (2012) Three genres of traditional dance in Bali (2015) Pinisi (2017)
Lao PDR	26/11/2009	Khaen music (2017)
Brunei	12/08/2011	-
Malaysia	23/07/2013	Mak Yong theatre (2008) Dondang Sayang (2018)
Myanmar	07/05/2014	-
Thailand	10/06/2016	Khon Masked Dance Drama (2018)
Singapore	22/02/2018	-

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[3] UNESCO. "Text of the Convention. Article 2.2". <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#art2> (last accessed 2 Sept 2019)
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[6] UNESCO. "Guidance Note for Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage". P. 19. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Guidance_note_on_inventorying_EN.pdf> (last accessed 2 Sept 2019)
[7] UNESCO. "Guidance Note for Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage". P. 13. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Guidance_note_on_inventorying_EN.pdf> (last accessed 2 Sept 2019)
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[54] UNESCO. "Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices". <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?text=&multinational=3&display1=inscriptionID#tabs> (accessed 2 September 2019). This list excludes ICH items separately inscribed in need of 'Urgent Safeguarding', such as Cambodia's *Chapei Dang Veng* and *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet*.

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