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FINDING BALANCE AND HARMONY

Modernity, Food, and the Partaking of the Holy Communion by Converts from Chinese Religious Traditions in Singapore

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Abstract

As Christianity arrived on the shores of Singapore closely following British colonization, Western missionaries introduced their interpretation of the Holy Communion into a foreign land and space that was experiencing its first brushes with Western modernity. Contemporaneously, the movement of modernity continues to make an impact upon an important element of life closely intertwined with religious folk practices and culture of locals: food. In the face of modernizing foodscapes and primordial religious backgrounds, converts from Chinese religious traditions to Christianity find themselves navigating the dissonance of Western Holy Communion theologies with the Chinese philosophies of food. How might churches in Singapore begin to respond to the tensions arising when these two philosophical systems meet, and when Christians and churches seem to appropriate "syncretistic" theologies into their liturgical behavior? This article undertakes an interdisciplinary effort by employing social science to explore the modernizing of food in Singapore, as well as engaging Chinese philosophies of food and the body to explain tensions among converts from Chinese religious traditions, and the resistance of local churches towards Chinese understandings of food rituals in the partaking of the Holy Communion. It will also briefly propose that interdisciplinary studies, including liturgical studies, will be essential in developing a more robust theology of the Holy Communion among churches, thereby enhancing its witness within and without.

Keywords: Holy Communion, Eucharist, foodways, modernity, Chinese religious traditions, Chinese and biomedicine, interdisciplinary studies, liturgy, Singapore

Abstrak

Ketika Kristianitas tiba di pantai Singapura tidak lama setelah penjajahan Inggris dimulai, para misionaris Barat memperkenalkan penafsiran mereka mengenai Perjamuan Kudus ke tanah dan ruang asing yang baru saja mengalami perjumpaan pertama dengan modernitas Barat. Hingga saat ini, gerakan modernitas terus berlanjut dalam memberikan dampak kepada salah satu elemen penting kehidupan yang kait-mengait dengan praktik-praktik religius dan kultural orang-orang setempat, yaitu makanan. Di antara proses modernisasi terkait makanan dan latar belakang agama primordial, orang-orang yang beralih agama dari tradisi-tradisi religius Cina ke Kristianitas kemudian menemukan diri mereka harus menjawab ketidakcocokan antara teologi-teologi Perjamuan Kudus Protestan Barat dengan filsafat-filsafat Cina terkait makanan. Bagaimana gereja-gereja di Singapura mulai merespons ketegangan-ketegangan yang muncul ketika dua sistem filsafat tersebut bertemu, dan juga ketika umat Kristen serta gereja-gereja tampak mengapropriasi teologi-teologi yang "sinkretistik" ke dalam laku liturgis mereka? Artikel ini merupakan sebuah upaya interdisipliner dengan cara menggunakan ilmu sosial untuk mengeksplorasi proses modernisasi makanan di Singapura, sembari memeriksa keterhubungan antara filsafat-filsafat Cina tentang makanan dan tubuh untuk menjelaskan ketegangan-ketegangan yang dialami oleh orang-orang yang beralih agama dari tradisi-tradisi agama Cina, dan juga resistensi dari gereja-gereja lokal terhadap pandangan-pandangan Cina tentang ritual-ritual makanan dalam merayakan Perjamuan Kudus. Artikel ini juga akan secara singkat menyarankan bahwa studi-studi interdisipliner, termasuk studi liturgika, akan menjadi esensial dalam mengembangkan sebuah teologi tentang Perjamuan Kudus yang lebih kuat di antara gereja-gereja, dan dengan demikian memperkuat kesaksian gereja di dalam dan di luar dirinya.

Kata-kata Kunci: Perjamuan Kudus, Ekaristi, *foodways*, modernitas, tradisi-tradisi religius Cina, Cina dan biomedis, studi-studi interdisipliner, liturgi, Singapura

Introduction

Singapore is a fascinating nation that has found its spot on the world's stage after only gaining independence from the British colonial powers for 55 years. Today, it has developed an internationally renowned infrastructure and boasts one of the

world's highest GDP per-capita.[1] Singapore's global position as an international hub for businesses has invited an amazing array of nationalities from all over the world, attracting them to trade and live in this tiny city-state of 5.6 million people.[2] The Republic of Singapore, as it is formally known, has also embraced a cosmopolitan character by having four official languages—English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil—and a broad religious diversity, wherein one can find temples, mosques, and churches in close proximity to one another. This also means that the nation is a cosmopolitan buffet, a kind of island-restaurant where one can easily find a mix of different races eating together in mono-ethnic eateries as well as multicultural public spaces ("hawker centers"). According to Nicole Tarulevicz, who claims to be the first to use *food* as a category for socio-cultural analysis of Singapore, she writes that "eating, the how and the what, provides a unifying experience amid diversity and becomes a metaphor for the fledgling state's multiracialism."[3] However, her work fails to extend beyond food as merely a social activity in Singapore or physical necessity; in addition to these, food is also an important feature in local religiosity—especially in the cultic practices of Chinese religious traditions[4]—and has a unique relationship with the body, according to a complex account of Chinese philosophies.

This article aims to draw connections between the modernization of Singapore and the condition of its *foodways*, namely the impact that food has upon (and with) the cultic practices of local Chinese religious traditions and, as a corollary, upon Singaporean converts to Christianity. This article also suggests that the modernization of food in Singapore rides on the coattails of a Christianity that arrives from the West and impacts both converts from Chinese religious traditions and other local Christians, alike, in their divine partaking of the Christian food ritual: the Eucharist, or the Holy Communion. Two phenomenological observations will be made: 1) some Singaporean churches and converts from Chinese religious traditions subconsciously foster their own meanings, by embracing teachings that resonate with their pre-conversion beliefs and avoiding traditional, i.e., "Western," theological engagement; 2) conversely, other Christians and churches draw hard lines on teachings that

[1] Trading Economics, "Singapore GDP per Capita," https://tradingeconomics.com/singapore/gdp-per-capita.

[2] Department of Statistics Singapore, "Population and Population Structure," https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-data.

[3] Nicole Tarulevicz, *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 3.

[4] This term will be defined in the section below on "Chinese religious traditions in Singapore."

come across as syncretistic or pagan and avoid seeking any understanding of local faiths or perspectives, thus failing to forge constructive dialogue with such implicit theologies that may otherwise enhance witness and discipleship. Both sides, therefore, miss out on the opportunity to develop a more robust (and "Singaporean") theology of the Holy Communion.

To demonstrate the above aims, this article undertakes the interdisciplinary effort of connecting lines of research in various studies including sociologists, historical theologians, and liturgists. This article will first set out to examine key moments in the development of modernity in Singapore and the general impact of modernizing foodways on the cultus and community of a given convert from Chinese religious traditions to Christianity. Next, through the lens of traditional (i.e., "Chinese") medicine, the article looks at the philosophical relationship between food and body for many Singaporean Chinese, as well as the impact of modern Hippocratic medicine on such a philosophical system. These clashes between modernity and the pre-conversion beliefs of Singaporean Chinese create confusion and even resistance when it comes to Christianity's divine food ritual, the Holy Communion—which serves as a *locus theologicus*, calling for greater reflection upon pre-conversion "theologies" and the development of liturgical practices in pluralistic settings.

Modernization and Chinese Religious Traditions in Singapore

A Singaporean Chinese person's experience with food and modernity should begin with a look back into Singapore's port status during the colonial era. When Sir Stamford Raffles arrived in 1819, there was a small indigenous (mostly Malay) population of about 1,000. By 1827, immigrants from diverse parts of China became the dominant group.[5] As a successful trading entrepôt, early *Singapura* experienced Western modernization and became a fecund seedbed for commodities, peoples, and ideas from all over the world, especially from China and India.[6] Despite highly positive portrayals of Singapore's early cosmopolitanism, including the work of Tarulevicz mentioned earlier, the *dining table* was never truly open in the early stages of Singapore's socio-economic development.[7] In fact, colonialism arbitrated relationships between

[5] Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 33, No. S (2018): S68.

[6] Tarulevicz, *Eating Her Curries and Kway*, 24.

[7] For statistics on Chinese immigrants in 19th Century Singapore, see Zhaocheng Zhou, "New Immigrants from China: Boosting Bilateral Relations,"

ethnic groups by reinforcing stereotypes. For example, immigrant Chinese were seen as being thrifty and hardworking, while indigenous Malays were lazy and lack ambition.[8] The main ethnicities in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, and Indian) gravitated towards their own spaces as well as typified occupations and language schools, until Singapore's first Chief Minister, David Marshall, decided to create a quad-lingual educational system with the intent, according to Michael Barr and Jevon Low, to "dissipate communal tensions and facilitate nation building."[9] Singapore's cultural identity continued to be in flux, as ethnicity became racialized as a political tool for nation building throughout the late- and even post-colonial era.[10] After gaining independence from Malaysia in 1965, the newly-minted Singaporean government decided to focus on a vision of a "highly rational, implicitly contractual multiracialism," in the words of Barr and Low, to avoid "ethnic pride and separatism" and build a modern, capitalist society.[11]

However, toward the end of the 1970's, the government began to shift gears, from "neutral assimilation" to Chinese-ness"—wherein the government would propagate a certain brand of Confucianism as the common value system, to be pragmatically appropriated by the different ethnic groups.[12] While Singapore is portrayed today as an English-speaking, cosmopolitan, and romantic melting pot that embraces a diversity of cultures, this key shift in the development of Singapore's modernization means that Singaporeans usually grow up surrounded by and imbibing what Barr and Low call a "Chinese-generated and Chinese-dominated" hegemonic worldview.[13]

At the same time, religious shifts among Singapore's Chinese denizens are reflected in such socio-political developments and nationalistic movements. For instance, of those

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in *50 Years of the Chinese Community in Singapore*, ed., Pang Cheng Lian (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2015), chapter 8.

[8] Michael Barr and Jevon Low, "Assimilation as Multiracialism: The Case of Singapore's Malays," *Asian Ethnicity,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (2005): 162-163, https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360500226606.

[9] Ibid., 164. These four languages were Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English, which had been decided as the main languages of Singapore.

[10] Ibid., 164.

[11] Ibid., 164.

[12] Ibid., 165.

[13] Ibid., 171. This is especially so for the "Pioneer Generation," a term coined by the Singaporean government to describe Singapore citizens who meet these two criteria: "Aged 16 and above in 1965," and "obtained citizenship on or before 31 December 1986." These citizens would have gone through the colonial, post-colonial, modernization, and globalization eras of Singapore. See "Pioneer Generation Package," https://www.pioneers.sg/en-sg/Pages/Overview.aspx#eligible.

who identify as Buddhist today, the majority of these are older adults aged 45 years and over, suggesting a correlation with the propagation of Confucian values and of "Chinese-ness" in the 1970's.[14] Findings from a survey by Guan Thye Hue and Kenneth Dean show that, in the early years of the Republic, the vast majority of Chinese Singaporeans identified with Buddhism or Taoism. However, after the turn of the millennium, a significant shift took place. The proportion of Singaporeans subscribing to Buddhism and Taoism both took a dip, and the former became plurality.[15] Another attributing factor of the decline may also be traced to the rise of Christianity, in addition to other cultural factors, such as the language spoken at home—in which case, Christianity emerges as the most popular religious affiliation among the English-speaking Chinese population, whereas traditional Chinese religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, are "more popular among the Mandarin and dialect-speaking population."[16] Across the entire Singaporean Chinese population, Christianity correlates more strongly with high socio-economic status.[17]

Defining "Chinese Religious Traditions"

It is necessary at this point to briefly define the nature of Singapore's practice of "Chinese religious traditions," before moving into modernity's effects on foodways and Chinese religious food rituals. Rather than "fully reflecting the theology of their canonical traditions in the institutions and practice of Buddhism," Singaporean Buddhists trace their diverse origins beyond the cultural background or national identity of any founding monk or

[14] Barr and Low, "Assimilation as Multiracialism," 171.

[15] "Self-identifying Buddhists rose from 34.3% in 1980 to 53.6% in 2000, but dropped to 43% in 2010. Percentages for Taoists showed the opposite movement, from 38.2% in 1980 to 10.8% in 2000, but increased to 14.4% in 2010. Christianity among Chinese Singaporeans has slowly but steadily risen, from 10.9% in 1980 to 16.5% in 2000 to 20.1% in 2010." In Guan Thye Hue and Kenneth Dean, "Chinese Religious Traditions in Singapore: Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity," in *50 Years of the Chinese Community in Singapore*, ed., Pang Cheng Lian (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2015), chapter 9.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid. Singaporean sociologist Robbie Goh also notes that while not true of all Christians in Singapore, there is enough census data that suggests a sociological basis to the assumption that Christianity is perceived as the "religion of English-speaking, middle-class cosmopolitans who studied at a good school (if not specifically a mission school), had the opportunity to study in a university (possibly an overseas one), and who are now in a professional or managerial position with a comfortable middle-class lifestyle." See Robbie B. H. Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 42.

devoted laity.[18] Using Buddhism as an organizing baseline, V. Wee distinguishes among several Buddhist systems in Singapore, to include those that:[19]

> refer directly to specific Buddhist canonical traditions (Theravada and Mahayana schools), on the one hand, and those which have no direct Buddhist canonical reference, on the other. Of the latter, there are two groups: "*Shenism*" (no canonical tradition of any kind) and "sectarianism" (with each sect having its own canonical tradition).

Following Hue and Dean, the term "Chinese religious traditions" collectively describes the highly eclectic myriad of beliefs to which the majority of the Chinese population held, namely, the more common syncretic and eclectic form practiced in Singapore melding Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, along with other elements, including ancestor worship and animistic folk religions.[20] It is also important to note that the concept of balanced harmony in the cosmos takes center stage in the metaphysics of these Chinese religious traditions. As an integrating relationship that permeates the human world (microcosm) and the "other" world (macrocosm),[21] this cosmic balance is a grand synthesis that subsists of *yinyang* relationships of "mutual interdependence and reciprocity" and cannot exist "in isolation from the other."[22] The desire for balance is extended to an engagement with Chinese notions of purity and pollution. Things associated with death are "polluted" and require rituals to "cleanse" the "pollution."[23] As Terence Heng notes, aesthetic markers, such as "behavior, vestments, and an array of tools," are even employed to create sacred spaces for further rituals to take place.[24] This arrangement reflects the close relationship between worlds and showcases one's desire for harmony with the spiritual realm; it is in this context of cosmic-spiritual engagement that food features so significantly. This article will now look at the modernization of foodscapes in

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Chee Kiong Tong and Lily Kong, "Religion and Modernity: Ritual Transformations and the Reconstruction of Space and Time," *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000): 31, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649369950133476.

[20] Hue and Dean, "Chinese Religious Traditions," chapter 9.

[21] Tong and Kong, "Religion and Modernity," 31.

[22] Pak Wah Lai, *The Dao of Healing: Christian Perspectives on Chinese Medicine* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2018), 125.

[23] Tong and Kong, "Religion and Modernity," 32.

[24] Terence Heng, "Making 'Unofficial' Sacred Space: Spirit Mediums and House Temples in Singapore," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (2016): 217, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2015.12156.x.

Singapore, how these developments affect one's engagement with food, and the communal, individual, and spiritual aspects of food in the daily life of Singaporean Chinese.

Food, Chinese Religious Traditions, and Modernity

When Singapore was colonized in 1819, the land was predominantly forested. Accelerated agricultural development led to rapid deforestation, and the country transitioned to urbanization upon gaining independence in 1965.[25] Back in the 1930's, more than 50% of Singapore's land was devoted to agriculture, although that produce (e.g. rubber, coconut, pineapple, gambier) was mainly for export. By the 1970's, half of all vegetables consumed in Singapore were locally grown, yet land profits favored urban development, edging out agricultural production. Today, only 7% of vegetables are grown locally, and approximately 0.9% of contemporary Singapore's land area is used for agricultural purposes.[26] The process of bringing food from-farm-to-table today is almost hidden from view, with the average Singaporean far removed from participation outside of consumption.

As urban planning initially saw the city-state "dramatically redrawn along modernist lines," the country's efforts at nation building reflected the character of modernity in numerous way, being "informed by efficiency, discipline and 'rationality' of land use."[27] Such plans included the restructuring of food spaces. Food "hawkers," who used to line the roads and clutter alleyways with pushcarts, selling street food, were relocated into "hawker centers," a centralized structure where each hawker sells their dish within their own designated stall space.[28] A sense of "neighborhood" developed, and the hawker centers became "de-territorialized" spaces that drew clientele into a new kind of market, transforming relationships between hawkers, hawker food, and consumers.[29]

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[25] D. A. Friess, "Singapore as a Long-Term Case Study for Tropical Urban Ecosystem Services," *Urban Ecosystems* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2017): 278, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11252-016-0592-7.

[26] Ibid., 281-282.

[27] Tong and Kong, "Religion and Modernity," 33.

[28] Chua Beng Huat, "Taking the Street out of Street Food," in *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes: Culture, Community and Consumption in Post-Colonial Singapore*, eds., Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2015), chapter 1.

[29] Ibid. See also Lai Ah Eng, "The Kopitiam in Singapore: An Evolving Story about Cultural Diversity and Cultural Politics," in *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes: Culture, Community and Consumption in Post-Colonial Singapore*, eds., Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2015), chapter 5. Lai Ah Eng provides an insightful ethnography on how smaller versions of "hawker centres", or the *kopitiam,* captures the social history of the struggles and progression of Singapore's multiculturalism and identity.

With their new brick-and-mortar locations, however, these hawkers no longer had the ability to gather in neighborhoods or at temples during festivals—such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, where street operas are performed for the dead and the living, alike. Without the bustle of hawker food at these rites, live audiences began to dwindle.[30] The reconfiguring of food spaces, thus, created both centrifugal and centripetal effects. On one hand, it allowed multicultural communities to gather in a "de-territorialized space." On the other hand, such displacement led to declines in participation for communal gatherings and traditional religious events—though this is not the end of the story.[31] Other aspects of food still feature widely throughout the Hungry Ghost Festival. The festival is a month-long religious occasion, where it is believed that ancestral spirits are released from the netherworld to roam the earth. To appease the hungry ghosts, various rituals of offerings are performed to feed them. Disembodied spirits are thought to have assumed certain anthropomorphic qualities, viz. feeling hungry and able to taste or eat corporeal food (despite not having a corporeal body to touch it). Foods, along with incense and paper effigies, are thus offered to ancestral spirits, as well as to other spirits that may be wandering around. These offerings range from small, makeshift altars to large cages for offerings located at what Heng describes as "strategic transitory points," e.g., outside one's home, around business premises, along pavements, or even in places where fatal accidents have happened.[32] Food and drinks, in particular, are offered for the nourishment of wandering spirits and "must be presented properly because spirits lack the corporeal ability to open sealed packets"—such that drinks have a straw in them and cutlery are placed in order.[33] Child ghosts have a special altar of milk, sweets, and toys placed on the ground. These food offerings have a two-fold purpose: to remember ancestors whose spirits may have yet to be reincarnated, and to entice satisfied spirits to bring luck and protection in various ways to the altar owner(s).[34]

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[30] Beng Huat, *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes*, chapter 1.

[31] Tong and Kong conducted a fascinating sociological and geographical study on the effects of modernity on Chinese religious practices, especially regarding the notions of space and time. Their work demonstrates that traditional Chinese rituals are constantly being reinterpreted to complement modern living, as opposed to rituals being static. It is on that premise that this article bases its argument, agreeing that both divine and traditional food rituals are also being reinvented and reconstructed, within modernity and amid shifting circumstances. See Tong and Kong, "Religion and Modernity," 30.

[32] Terence Heng, "Hungry Ghosts in Urban Spaces: A Visual Study of Aesthetic Markers and Material Anchoring," *Visual Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2014): 148.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

Modernity impacts such rituals performed for harmony and *feng shui*[35]—since offerings to the divine are displaced from their sacred locations, in light of the disciplined use of public space.[36] What can be observed from the example of the Hungry Ghost Festival, therefore, is that the spiritual and physical realm continue to be deeply intertwined, in life and in death. Humans, their kindred, and other spirits continue in a symbiotic relationship—not merely as a memory but in propitiatory action and transaction.[37] Food serves as a conduit for maintaining harmony and balance with the spirit-world, a belief necessary for the welfare of the individual and the community, alike.

Food and the Chinese Body

Within the modern Chinese imaginary, food continues to be a source for maintaining balance and harmony within a person and amid their surroundings. Apart from it being an important element within the communal meal, the health benefits of food are understood in a symbiotic relationship with the body.[38] In his seminal work, *The Dao of Healing*, Singaporean Chinese theologian Lai Pak Wah does the heavy lifting of exploring in-depth the histories and philosophies that have shaped both Western biomedicine (henceforth "biomedicine")[39] and Chinese medicine, in order to seek out meaningful conversations across the divide.[40] He lays out the fact that Chinese medical discourse differs from its Western counterpart, in that the former "lacks a concern for ontology."[41] Medical theories such as *yinyang* (阴阳), *qi* (气), and

[35] *Feng shui* emphasizes equilibrium with nature, or 'geomantic harmony', positing the underlying belief that humans must *harmonise with,* rather than disrupt, nature in matters such as space, place, and even time. See Tong and Kong, "Religion and Modernity," 32.

[36] Even so, practitioners of Chinese religious traditions have also found ways of maintaining harmony and balance in the adaptations they make. See ibid.

[37] John R. Clammer, ed., "Studies in Chinese Folk Religion in Singapore and Malaysia," *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography*, no. 2 (Singapore: Board of Editors, Dept. of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1983), 4.

[38] This article intends, not to be an extensive treatise of Western biomedicine versus Chinese medicine, but to highlight the tensions that Western biomedicine has created among Chinese regarding the view of the body.

[39] In this article, "Western biomedicine" refers largely to Greek, i.e., Hippocratic-Galenic medicine that dominated the West up until the 18th century, ironically, due to Christianity. See W. F. Bynum, *History of Medicine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 69-86.

[40] On the use of the term "Chinese medicine" as opposed to the modern form popularly known as "Traditional Chinese Medicine" (TCM), see Lai, *The Dao of Healing*, 7-8. The term "TCM" will be used in this article when in reference to the modern counterpart.

[41] Ibid., 178.

wuxing (五行) reflect key concepts, found in Chinese religious traditions, that are philosophical in orientation, rather than derived from either spiritual or ontological concerns.[42] For example, according to Lai, *yin* and *yang* are motifs based initially on one's spatial experience—*yang* as the side of one's body that is exposed to the sun, and *yin* being the opposite—and are seen to be employed in Chinese literature as relational categories and not absolute ontological referents. The concept of *qi* is primarily understood as "denoting process or functional flow between entities,"[43] and its logic is extended toward the interiority of one's body as well as the body's externality in relation to the environment. There is a functional impact on the body, albeit never as a discrete or ontological element.[44] As for *wuxing* or the five phases, these phases refer to the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth (*jinmushuihuotu* 金木水火土) and commonly denotes one's body type or organs. At first glance, these elements seem to be ontological, yet according to Chinese medicine the physician's engagement with *wuxing* is focused on how each element or organ mutually "generates" or "opposes" one another.[45] These categories are concerned with balance and harmony, which in Lai's words describes "the relationships and interdependence between multiple entities in space and time."[46] Food thus finds itself privy to such categories, as one's dietary habits are prone to cause disharmony in the body, by shifting the balance one way or another. How one eats or eating the wrong types of food—even eating the wrong thing at the inappropriate season or in an inauspicious climate—can be damaging to the body. For example, a spleen *qi* deficiency may be due to an irregular diet.[47] Food, as opposed to drugs, is also the preferred pharmacological means to treat the body's illness and improve the flow of *qi* or restore balance in the body.[48] For instance, the Chinese herb, *mahuang* (麻黄 or *Herba Ephedrae*), has been shown to be a good source of natural ephedrine for treating colds and allergies.[49]

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[42] Ibid. See also p. 115, where the philosophy of *yinyang* was adopted by astrologers and eventually practitioners of folk religion.

[43] Ibid., 181.

[44] Ibid., 182.

[45] Ibid., 182-183.

[46] Ibid., 179.

[47] Ibid., 215-216.

[48] Audrey S. H. Lim and George D. Bishop, "The Role of Attitudes and Beliefs in Differential Health Care Utilisation among Chinese in Singapore," *Psychology & Health*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2000): 966, https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440008407361.

[49] Lai, *The Dao of Healing*, 261.

In a study by Audrey Lim and George Bishop that examined the attitudes and beliefs of Singaporean Chinese individuals toward "mono-" and "dual-utilization" of Chinese medicine and biomedicine, they discovered that Chinese medicine was most likely used for diseases not perceived as "having a viral origin" and are "low in psychological or spiritual etiology," whereas Western biomedicine was likely favored for diseases having a "viral origin or considered to be serious."[50] Those who indicated a greater propensity to consult a Western doctor over a *sinseh* (Chinese medicine doctor) were also largely found to have been educated in the English language.[51] The study also showed that, while Chinese health concepts are still in use in Singapore, they were perceived as "somewhat less relevant," reflecting biomedicine's dominant status at the time.[52] Lim and Bishop weigh in on this phenomena, distinguishing the reductionism and dualism of the Western "biomedical model," on the one hand, from the search for balance and harmony in Chinese medicine, on the other—as follows:[53]

> Fundamental tenets of the biomedical model are the doctrine of mind-body dualism, in which the mind and body are seen as separate entities, and reductionism, which attempts to reduce the phenomena of health and illness to their most basic biochemical level. Hence, in contrast to Chinese medicine which views disease as being a result of imbalance or disharmony in the body, Western medicine explains disease primarily in biochemical terms and as often resulting from influences outside the body.

Lai notes that Chinese medicine is a philosophical inheritance, while historical Christianity's embrace of Hippocratic medicine does suggest that a medical tradition can be embraced even when it is based on non-Christian philosophy.[54] Nevertheless, debates still continue among Singaporean Chinese—converts from Chinese religious traditions, academics, and laypersons, alike—on whether the practice of Chinese medicine could also be compatible with Christianity, despite reliance upon non-Christian philosophy.[55] Epistemologically unreflective as most Singaporean

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[50] Lim and Bishop, "The Role of Attitudes and Beliefs in Differential Health Care Utilisation Among Chinese in Singapore," 967.

[51] Ibid., 975.

[52] Ibid., 974.

[53] Ibid., 967.

[54] Lai, *The Dao of Healing*, 9.

[55] For an earlier publication showcasing a contrasting view—one that rejects the practice of any activity assumed to arise from Chinese religious traditions as being unscientific (viz. Daoism)—see Daniel Tong, *A Biblical Approach to Chinese Traditions and Beliefs* (Singapore: Genesis, 2003). In my

Chinese Christians may be regarding the influence of modernity on pre-conversion cultus, food, medicine, and the body, when influenced by this "Western" faith to take on a Western point of view, they may be faced with a crisis when encountering mind-body dualism, the biochemically reductionist notion of the body, or a disruption of relationships with people who hold to differing views and backgrounds. Any Christianity that requires a Chinese convert to indiscriminately renounce their pre-conversion views further reinforces a Westernized impression of Christianity, thus impacting the witness and relevance of the faith.

These movements in medicine, in conjunction with the urbanization of land use and the modernizing of Singapore's food industry, may continue to reinforce a distinctly Westernly dichotomized sense of food and body—let alone the disjoining of food from the divine, as the diminishment of agricultural land space and the truncation of participation in farm-to-table processes only marginalize and trivialize the human and the divine in the co-creation of foodways.

As we have seen, modern capitalism through consumerism drives the average Singaporean's consumption of food, and food becomes a commodified symbol that is absorbed into the infrastructure of Singapore's cosmopolitan ambitions. To develop a cosmopolitan identity in a globalizing world, an influx of foreign cuisines are embraced on consumption and production levels.[56] Together with Western education and information, one is being shaped to eagerly embrace Western trends as "first-world" and "modern," while "unscientific" beliefs remain for the uneducated and the superstitious. The harmonious relationship of food with the divine, the community, and the body, as regarded in a Chinese worldview, therefore, is ruptured by the clashing of metaphysics and philosophies brought about by Western modernization. Food is, thus, increasingly being handled and consumed as a manufactured product, devoid of relational quality (outside of the transaction, of course), rather than as a dignified subject with qualities that lend itself to a symbiotic relationship of balance and harmony within the individual and amid their community.

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personal experience, opposing views on the matter have also come up in conversations with friends and family, with conclusions usually remaining unsatisfactory for both sides and each continuing to adopt practices however one prefers.

[56] Lily Kong, "From Sushi in Singapore to Laksa in London: Globalizing Foodways and the Production of Economy and Identity," in *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes: Culture, Community and Consumption in Post-Colonial Singapore*, eds., Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific, 2015), chapter 9.

The Holy Communion as Divine Food Ritual

Within the contemporary Christian faith, a relationship of food, community, body, and the divine is most clearly discernible in the Holy Communion ritual. Interestingly, not unlike in the case of converting from Chinese religious traditions, within Christianity itself there remains a pluriform tension as to how to approach the Holy Communion elements of bread and cup (food), whether it is necessary to partake of it as an entire congregation (community), what effects there are on the individual who eats of it (body), and the engagement with God in the ritual (divine).[57] For example, a certain popular Singaporean male pastor teaches of communion elements to his Charismatic megachurch in quasi-magical terms. He encourages his congregation to bring home ready-made communion elements and take them to ensure good health. "[I]f you are sick, I would recommend that you have Communion daily. . . . I know of people who are so radical that they take it like medicine—three times a day. . . . They get radical results."[58] There is also an ascription of "blessedness," wherein none of the leftover elements after a worship service should be thrown away but rather consumed.[59] Singaporean theologian Simon Chan cites another case where an old Teochew[60] convert saw the Holy Communion wine as a tonic for physical and spiritual health, since "precious blood" (宝血 *bao xue*) in Mandarin sounds similar in the Teochew dialect as "tonic for the blood" (补血 *bu xue*).[61] It is not uncommon

[57] When this article was first being drafted, the COVID-19 global pandemic had yet to happen. With the pandemic currently taking place, it is necessary to mention that most current relationships of food, community, body, and the divine are surely being disrupted. Churches may now face challenges regarding their theological emphases concerning the Holy Communion ritual, as sharing food and holding communal gatherings may not be ideal or encouraged, both by circumstance and by governmental directives. It will be valuable to explore the responses of churches and denominations to the pandemic regarding liturgy and Holy Communion and to examine their "lived" sacramental and embodiment theologies.

[58] Joseph Prince, *Health and Wholeness through the Holy Communion* (Singapore: 22 Media, 2006), 45; Simon Chan, "Folk Christianity and Primal Spirituality: Prospects for Theological Development," in *Christian Movements in Southeast Asia: A Theological Exploration*, eds., Michael Nai-Chiu Poon and Simon Chan (Singapore: Genesis Book, 2010), 12.

[59] This practice may be more familiar within transubstantiation and perhaps consubstantiation communions (e.g. Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran), although I have witnessed more than one Presbyterian church practice this.

[60] A Chinese dialect group.

[61] Chan, "Folk Christianity and Primal Spirituality," 12. I too have personally witnessed an elderly lady force her adult son to eat the Holy Communion elements, despite his refusals. She insisted that it was good for him,

knowledge that the institution is practiced and understood differently by churches of different theological leanings, but it is lesser noticed that even within the same church, members ascribe their own meanings to the practice. While such teachings and understandings may illicit shock and immediate denouncement by a large number of Christian denominations and churches, it is plausible that these views arise from the pre-conversion concerns of converts from Chinese religious traditions, with resonances concerning food, the body, and the divine.[62] These examples may reveal an implicit theology among believers that regards the Holy Communion as a food ritual that contains *power*—power that one can infer to be less present on a "regular Sunday," i.e., without the rite.[63] The pastors and churches that I have engaged would largely agree that worship service attendance is almost always at its highest on Holy Communion Sundays—hinting at the pre-conversion practice of temple worship whereby one may enter into deeper transaction with the divine presence through sacred space, religious materiality, and specially approved personnel. Even when worshippers are told as part of the Holy Communion sacramental act that the rite is a commemorative "sign and symbol," [64]

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and when he did not comply, she publicly shamed him for disrespecting the body and blood of Christ.

[62] The incorporation of "pagan" devotional practices was not an uncommon feature in early Christianity; the metaphysical shifts that were also happening then are definitely worth exploring. For example, Augustine has reported in *Confessions 6.2.2* that his devotedly Christian mother Monica still continued to provide food for the departed. In *Mystagogical Catechesis 5.21–2*, Cyril also notes that eucharistic elements were treated as highly reverent in their consumption, being "objects of power which could be used to confer blessing on a person's body and protect it against evil and sickness." See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221.

[63] In Singapore, this understanding of consumable *power* may stem from a folk *Shenist* practice wherein practitioners ingest "charm papers" that are burnt and its ashes, mixed with drinking water as a form of a cure. See John Clammer, "Studies in Chinese Folk Religion in Singapore and Malaysia," 220-221.

[64] One is helped by an awareness concerning Platonism-laced debates centered on the Holy Communion. Such spats, particularly during the early Protestant Reformation, bear memorialist if not also dualistic articulations, which are also attributable to the "modern" worldview. During their pivotal "Marburg Colloquy" of 1529, Luther and Zwingli came to a head on "whether the blood and body of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine," as Zwingli held that the sacrament is no more than "a sign of the thing signified." See Matthew Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: Calvin on the Lord's Supper," The Theologian, http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/calvinonthelordssupper.htm. As understandings of material and immaterial, visible and invisible, and immanent and transcendent were revised, an externalized sense of food ("Body of Christ") as purely symbolic and devoid of any physical affect (viz. body) began to arise. Although Zwingli eventually moves away from a memorialist position and

worshippers who carry pre-conversion tendencies may wish to "refill" their spiritual tanks, understanding the Holy Communion to be supernatural food.

It can be seen from the foregoing that Singaporean converts from Chinese religious traditions experience in Christianity forms of dissonance in the ritual of the Holy Communion, especially regarding the relationship of food, body, community, and the divine, at times, spontaneously ascribing their own meaning and relevance to the rite. These pre-conversion theologies, conscious or subconscious, are inevitably influenced and impacted by Singapore's movements toward modernity, post-colonialization, post-independence, and rapid urban development in a globalizing world. The traditional Chinese religious beliefs of the earliest immigrants became the nation's dominant religion, which, in turn, also found itself having to adapt its rituals to the modernization of the nation. However, as Modernity's tentacles continue to reach and grasp by means of globalization, philosophies of biomedicine and Western consumerism dominate the social imaginary and contribute to tensions among Singaporean Chinese of various religious identification. This tension itself out as we see the growing numbers of Western educated Singaporeans easily adopt and endorse modern Western practices and theologies of the Holy Communion, the older generations of converts from Chinese religious traditions pragmatically continue to find ways to harmonize their implicit beliefs and practices amid a new world order.

Future Trajectories

What does participation in the Holy Communion mean for generations of Singaporeans today, especially in the face of globalization and an increasingly urbanizing nation? Those who hold to Chinese religious traditions may continue to distance themselves from Christianity, so as to avoid giving up their cultural identities, practices, and beliefs for a religion, perceived as infiltrating from the West, that encourages disharmony within the family, body, community, and the divine. Christians in Singapore may continue to uncritically practice particular liturgical approaches that do not reflect local and global theological developments, which would otherwise enhance their witness and unite them holistically with creation and the wider universal

towards Calvin's views of the Holy Communion being eaten "sacramentally and spiritually"—the popularized Zwinglian view comfortably finds consonance with a modern and dualist understanding of food and body. See also Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 8-9.

Church. Implications go beyond the boundaries of the city-state, even as Singapore was once declared by the late Billy Graham to be the "Antioch of Asia."[65] The Singaporean church must reckon with the effects of modernity, in addition to the cultural dynamics within and around. Doing so would help to avoid re-importing theologies and behaviors that are devoid of reflexivity in the face of other cultures, particularly in the evangelistic and missional efforts of these congregations and their members.

More concrete research, therefore, needs to be done to explore the theologies behind various liturgies–especially the place of the Holy Communion ritual–as these are developed and practiced by numerous denominations and churches in Singapore. However, as this article has highlighted, clashes of "primary theologies" and "pre-conversion theologies" reveal instead a subconscious resistance towards the Holy Communion among Chinese converts. Yet the challenges regarding responding to these theologies via contextualization ought to go beyond merely straining out the biblical equivalent in a non-Christian culture. As Malaysian theologian Hwa Yung points out, there is an urgent need to develop[66]

> a fully satisfactory theology of cultural and religious plurality, as opposed to one of religious pluralism, [a theology] which takes seriously Christian and biblical distinctiveness on one hand, and recognizes both evil and goodness in human cultures and religious pursuits on the other.

As this paper has endeavored to demonstrate, a deeper awareness of localized history and sociological developments is necessary for churches to gain empathy and understanding for what may seem like "unbiblical" practices. There is also great need for liturgical competency, via an informed understanding of how rituals were historically understood and developed, in addition to cultural competency, namely, in being able to assess phenomena in a "foreign culture." Bridges between the past and present can, thus, be built. For example, in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, an important piece of work that describes the shape of early liturgy by historian and theologian Paul F. Bradshaw, one will learn that the ritual of the Lord's Supper was not a monolithic practice. In

[65] This adulation appears to have been due to Singapore's wealth of resources and unique socio-economic location. See Melody Zaccheus, "Christians in Singapore Pay Tribute to Billy Graham," The Straits Times, February 23, 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/christians-in-spore-pay-tribute-to-billy-graham.

[66] Chan, "Folk Christianity and Primal Spirituality," 97.

fact, the primary material available on ritual in the early church remains what Bradshaw would consider as pieces of "living literature"[67]—in that, while a faint picture of a Jewish-Christian communal meal is discernible,[68] it is almost impossible to determine a singular pattern, origin, theme, or even elements (e.g., what was actually in Christ's cup) of the ritual.[69] The early church thus understood symbols and signs not as different from reality but a participation in reality itself—not unlike general Chinese philosophical approaches. The developments of the Holy Communion had its particularities and movements that have brought to bear on what we have today as traditions of an institution. Theological aspects of the Holy Communion, such as celebrating unity and making visible the community of the Body (i.e., Church) over a meal, may play crucial roles in reaching Singaporeans who also place great importance in the communal partaking of meals as a ritual that brings body, community, and even the divine together. Delving into these will, therefore, potentially create sufficient space at the table for even guests to discuss how the Holy Communion might reflect local needs and theologies. In turn, such openness would lead churches in Singapore forward in building bridges and creating spaces for folk religious converts, within and without, while being carefully reflective of traditions and remaining faithful to God's word.

Conclusion

While recognizing that interdisciplinary studies requires expertise on many levels which the author is barely making headway into, this article seeks to be a cursory effort that employs research done in the area of social sciences, theology, and liturgical studies, so as to demonstrate the impact of global and local developments upon the practices of the Holy Communion in pluralistic Singapore. It has sought to highlight how Western modernization's influence on food, society, and Christianity in Singapore entered into local primordial Chinese religious practices and Chinese philosophies of food and the body, and, in turn, contributed to tensions arising especially among Christian converts from Chinese religious traditions in the Christian food ritual of the Holy Communion. This article argues that, on one hand, failing to recognize such movements and the lingering affect of primordial religious practices misses out on the opportunity to address the implicit theologies and needs of Singaporean Chinese Christian converts on a deeper level as they approach the Lord's Table. On

[67] Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 97.

[68] Ibid, 61-71.

[69] Ibid., 5. See also p. 69-70 of Bradshaw's work regarding discussion of cup and wine.

the other hand, matters of witness and discipleship around the Holy Communion will be affected if Singaporean churches do not consciously begin to reflect upon their respective current practices vis-à-vis local or global theological developments. Therefore, through this preliminary study of the Holy Communion in Singapore, this article hopes to urge churches towards deeper reflection upon its history, context, and even current assumptions and practices, so as to develop relevant and robust theologies for their localities and beyond.

About the Author

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