

4A Talks: Chu Hao Pei & Keg de Souza in conversation with Mariam Ella Arcilla

This episode of 4A Talks was recorded on 16 February 2026 at Magenta House on the unceded lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The conversation was commissioned by the Tastes of Justice Curatorial Collective, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and Food Art Research Network in partnership with Magenta House, UNSW, LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore, RMIT University and CAST research group. The episode coincides with the launch of *Tastes of Justice: The Aesthetics and Politics of Food Art Practices in Asia and Australia*, a publication co-edited by Francis Maravillas, Marnie Badham, Stephen Loo and Madeleine Collie, and published by Routledge.

TRANSCRIPT

Mariam Ella Arcilla (MEA)

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[Excerpt starts]

Keg de Souza (KDS)

I was looking at this botanical archive that the Portuguese created when they were first colonising Goa that were all medicinal plants that were all in Portuguese. It was about extraction, so there was no access for local people in Goa to be able to use that. And so I created a mirror archive.

Chu Hao Pei (CHP)

I'm a visual artist from Singapore, from a non-rice growing country. As someone who grew up with barely little knowledge of agriculture, this is where my role as a researcher comes in. I've been learning about different rice varieties in the form of cultural, political practices, ritual practices. This is where I started working on the politics and power of seed banks.

[Excerpt ends]

MEA

I'm Mariam Ella Arcilla, and I'm satiated to be in conversation with artists Chu Hao Pei and Keg de Souza about their practices and how they use food as vessels for unraveling global migration and colonial histories, political democracy and trans cultural identities. This episode for 4A Talks is brought to you by the Food Art Research Network and 4A Center for Contemporary Asian art to coincide with the release of the book *Tastes of Justice: The Aesthetics and Politics of food art practices in Asia and Australia*, published by Routledge in early 2026. *Taste of Justice* featured contributions by 14 creatives and cultural practitioners that reveal the ways in which their multi-dimensional practices engender new frameworks for digesting the sensuous, effective, social and material dimensions of art. For full details about the project and the people involved, plus a podcast transcript, please visit the 4A and Food Art Research Network website.

To celebrate the book launch, the Tastes of Justice Curatorial Collective hosted a gathering for contributors at Magenta House on unceded Gadigal land in February. For this discussion today, we'll be focusing on key works presented at the event by Keg and Hao Pei.

MEA

Keg de Souza is an artist of Goan ancestry who lives and works on Gadigal land. With a background in architecture, Keg creates social and spatial environments informed by her lived experiences of squatting and organising with projects that centre plant and food politics, alternative architecture, publishing and radical pedagogies. The artist uses temporary, participatory, and often repurposed architecture as a catalyst for dialogue and collective action, and often focuses on marginalised voices and stories to envision makeshift sites for gathering, sharing knowledge, and generating new social understandings.

Chu Hao Pei is a visual artist based in Singapore. His work examines the intricacies of environmental and cultural loss and its resurgence—and how they are molded by political, economic, and social forces. The artist often interweaves community engagement, documentation, and research to activate aspects of the accidental and the neglected. Central to Hao Pei's practice is this ongoing research on rice - specifically, its cultivation, circulation, and importance to various communities.

And in this episode, we discuss how cooking and harvesting food can become a tool for soft power relations and archival reclamation. What ancestral legacies are left behind, or resuscitated, through food staples such as coconut, bananas, and grains? And how might we be able to rewrite narratives of food sovereignty through fugitive archives and artist-led provocations? Our interview was recorded at the reading room at Magenta House. I'm sitting across the table from the artists and we're surrounded by books and paraphernalia on decolonial art, food, and cultural practices. And so without further adieu, I'm pleased to welcome Keg and Hao Pei to the podcast.

KDS

Hello!

CHP

Thank you for having us.

MEA

Firstly, let's start with the joy of finding a new meal for both of you. What is a memorable dish that you discovered recently and what was so curious and tantalising about this meal. We'll start with Keg.

KDS

I wouldn't say discovered, but maybe revisited or re experienced recently and thought a bit more deeply about...I was thinking about Bebinka in Goa, which is, for those who don't know, it is quite an incredible dessert, which is made out of really thin layers of egg yolk, basically mixed with palm sugar and baked in these layers and layers and layers, at least seven and more. And so you can imagine how much labour is involved in this dessert. Recently, I learnt that it was created by nuns in Goa to use the leftover egg yolks from after they've starched their nuns' outfits with the egg whites. So they had all these excess yolks and they created this dessert. Which is obviously very influenced

by Portuguese, so there's these kinds of entanglements of Portuguese culture and colonisation through it being developed by nuns.

MEA

That's interesting you say this, because, before we continue, I want to mention that in the Philippines we also have this layered cake called bibinka as well, which is spelt slightly differently to the Goan version, I think. And it was originally a baked rice cake, but when the Spanish colonisers came in the 16th century, they introduced heaps of eggs and milk into the recipe to elevate its creaminess. So bibinka or bebingka, is one of those fascinating culinary loan words that remains interchangeable between Asian food cultures. It's very interesting to note this, considering the cultural interminglings that we chat about. How about you Hao Pei?

CHP

I recently tried Peruvian Chinese food. There's a significant Chinese community in Peru, and there is actually one restaurant in Singapore that sells Peruvian Chinese food. And my mum is a bit more adventurous with different cuisines, but my dad is not too adventurous. And it was my birthday, and okay, let's bring them there, and they have things like steam fish and, you know, typical Cantonese Chinese, southern Chinese food. But what is interesting is that there are certain dishes which I can't really recall, but definitely there's some ingredients and cooking methods that use a lot of Peruvian methods. And I find that very refreshing, and it really shows how this mix of a different cuisine to get it, especially Peru, going big on trying to promote its food as a kind of cultural diplomacy.

CHP

What the article described is basically the writer actually wrote about how Megawati basically used Nasi Goreng, a dish where she's a master, to use it as a way to diffuse tensions with political rivals. Because she is the daughter of the founding president Sukarno. And in this article, he also mentioned that she, in a way, taught politics through cooking, growing for different international diplomats and even student protesters under the order of her late father. For those who are not aware, Sukarno was, of course, a very charismatic president who was neither, or say, part of this larger non aligned movement, whole Cold War politics, and he was one of the founding members of this whole movement, where he wanted a middle way for the global political playground. And then at that point of time, Indonesia also received a lot of international diplomats, and so Megawati was obviously being the first family exposed to all of this. And I think there were also a lot of student protests against Sukarno at the time, because it was a time of quite volatile politics, of decolonisation, independence and things like that.

MEA

Speaking of cultural diplomacy, let's talk about the inspiration for your ongoing project, Nasi Goreng Diplomacy, which started when you came across this article in The Jakarta Post about Megawati Sukarnoputri, who was Indonesia's first female president. It was widely known that she used the humble fried rice as a form of soft power diplomacy. Can you give us the context for this article and what was it about her story that really compelled you to explore these political relations in your practice?

CHP

And I think one of the turning point mentioned in the article was Megawati was very, can I say, trouble or very confused as to why her late father instructed her to cook Nasi Goreng for the student protesters against sokrano, because she was saying, Oh, wait, these students are against you. Why

do I have to cook and feed them? If there's anything, I shouldn't be feeding them. I should maybe not be starving them, but I think you get what I mean. And I think that's the lesson that her late father Sukarno, was trying to teach her, that, "Oh, you know, yes, they are against me, but they are still, after all, my people, citizens of Indonesia". So I think that was a very big learning point. And I guess why she cooked nasi goreng is also because nasi goreng was such a common dish in Indonesia, and doesn't just apply to Indonesia, but pretty much most of the rice-eating regions in at least Southeast Asia, I was looking at the politics of rice. And obviously, when I work on a food item, a crop, in that way, I needed to cook it, eat it right as as part of this larger practice, at least most, if not all, rice eating regions in at least Southeast Asia has their recipes of different nasi goreng, right? So that's where I realised I kind of had this vision of it being possibly a long-term project in a way, and also tap into the different cultural and gastronomical elements of different rice-eating societies

MEA

For the Tastes of Justice launch at Magenta House, Hao Pei staged an interactive cooking and storytelling session with his father Chu Wai Shing. Armed with plates of fried rice ingredients, chopping boards and a knife, the pair tossed together anecdotes and cultural learnings into a hot walk, basically as they discussed the lore of Singapore fried rice through the shared experience of preparing and eating this speculative dish.

CHP

My name is Chu Hao Pei. I am a video artist from Singapore, and this is my dad.

Chu Wai Shing

大家好我是 朱偉成 [Hello everyone, I'm Chu Wai Shing].

CHP

[Translating in English] My dad's name is Chu Wai Shing. Today we're going to be presenting Singapore Fried Rice, which ironically, is a dish that is not found in Singapore, but only outside of Singapore. So how is that possible? When I was visiting London two years ago, I actually went to all the Chinese restaurants in Chinatown and looking through all the menus, what is particularly interesting is that they call it Singapore Fried Rice, and there's always a chili beside it, in a way that is indicating that, you know, it's always spicy, or at least in UK taste Palais, anything that's spicy, is kind of associated with Singapore.

MEA

As they cooked, Hao Pei and his father tell audiences that the closest comparison to Singapore fried rice is Yangzhou or Hong Kong fried rice, because both are categorised by this wok fried rice in high heat, and they use similar ingredients. Hao Pei later tells me about the absurdity of trying to track down a Singapore Fried Rice dish that is non-existent in its own country.

CHP

I've been trying to find Singapore fried rice in Singapore. I really can't find it. Maybe I'm not. I'm not a good enough foodie to go around looking for it, but so far, all the Singapore fried rice I found is overseas, and it's really more of a framing of what others identify as Singapore. So I think what was presented earlier in Magenta House, I was also looking into my family history. Of course, my dad

was a Hong Kong born and naturalised Singapore citizen. I myself, I was Singapore born, and the whole presentation was conducted in Cantonese. For those who could understand Cantonese, one might actually identify the different accents that we have, because he speaks with a very strong Hong Kong accent, Cantonese, whereas I speak with a more Singapore Malaysian accent, Cantonese. So it also shows our different upbringing. But I think that's the other layer. Is also because of how my dad was a brief cook in Hong Kong with his brothers, who are all in the food and beverage industry, or what we call the more color and also more common food eateries in Hong Kong called Cha Chaan Teng (茶餐廳). I guess that's where Singapore Fried Rice came from. It really piqued my interest, and I was very curious about how it actually evolved. And there is no one singular recipe. In fact, if you just quickly Google online 'Singapore Fried Rice', so many different food bloggers come up with different ingredients, and all these food bloggers are not even Singaporeans. So that makes it even more interesting. It's a little bit tricky. It's a slippery slope here, but it is such a malleable recipe, but yet it resonates so much, especially with people outside of Singapore.

MEA

In that case, let's talk about what's in the fried rice! I assume most people in the world have tried fried rice. So for the uninitiated, can you share some of the ingredients that you'd commonly find in this dish?

CHP

Usually, some are just using seafood or shrimp. In some cases they use chicken. They use char siu, which is a kind of BBQ sauce pork. There are a lot of variations, and I think it depends on where this food is found, and it's always almost overwhelmingly associated with Chinese food. And this brings in a very complex dynamic of ethnic diversity in Singapore. Like, why is Singapore Fried Rice almost overwhelmingly found in Chinese food overseas. You know, Singapore doesn't just consist of the Chinese community. You know, we have diverse ethnicities.

MEA

Speaking of intermingled ethnicities, I want to turn to Keg to talk about your 2024 publication, *If a coconut falls*, which is a bilingual zine that reclaimed ancestral medical plant knowledge while also reckoning with the fusions of colonial histories. So there's this line in the book in which your mother tells you that if a coconut falls from a tree in Goa, it'll either land on a pig, a priest or a de Souza. Can you talk about the historical and cultural collisions behind this line?

KDS

Yeah, of course. So this is kind of an adage that my mum used to always say ever since I was really little. She was speaking to the commonality of all these things found in Goa, including the many de Souzas that exist over there, which is the surname. And then as I got older, I realised that all these elements have these legacies of colonialism tied to them very strongly. So 'the pig' through the influence of our food, 'the priest' through enforced Catholicism and 'de Souza' being my surname. Through loss of language and the fact that I have a Portuguese name, oh, it just took this whole different turn of the meaning of what this kind of common saying that she used to say that would be

like, Oh, haha, yeah, those things are everywhere. That's like, wait a second, they're everywhere because of the Portuguese colonising.

MEA

During the *Tastes of Justice* event, Keg contextualised the scene for audiences and talked about why it was important to preserve and distribute these archives of medicinal plants in her home state. Here's an excerpt.

KDS

Goa is my ancestral lands, colonised by the Portuguese in the 1500s until the 1960s, so there's over 450 years of cultural loss, and I think that kind of history, as well as being a settler here on these lands (so-called Australia) really shapes the way that I make work. I was invited to do a project in Goa, and it was about archives. And I was looking at this botanical archive that the Portuguese created when they were first colonising Goa that was all medicinal plants. And so they'd got a local Goan artist to do these beautiful watercolour pictures of medicinal plants alongside the medicinal uses written out, but it was all in Portuguese. So it was about extraction. This archive now exists in a collection in Europe, so there's no access for local people in Goa to be able to use that, and so I created a mirror archive.

MEA

For Keg, the mirror archive was not only a way to monumentalise this pre colonial knowledge system, but it also became an elegy to continue the work that her auntie started through her own relationship with medicinal flora.

KDS

I did my own drawings of all these watercolour plants and compiled medicinal knowledge, partly through my own research, but partly using my Auntie, who was medical doctor, but then spent most of her life just working with different art of Adavasi Indigenous tribes and learning and documenting the uses of different medicinal plants. And so she created a kind of similar archive in the 90s that is really beautiful because it has a description of the use of a particular plant, and then who told her that, and what tribe they're from. And so some of them might have three or four different tribes and people who've shared knowledge, and there's sometimes overlaps and sometimes new and different uses. And so in this, in my one I've done the text or in Konkani, which is our native language, and then in English, and, you know, so it's able to be distributed through the libraries in Goa, like the village libraries, and the bookstore has it, and things like that. And it's a paperback. So it's this quite humble object. It's not this precious thing locked up in a climate-controlled archive somewhere (laughs). It can sit on a table. It can circulate and disseminate these kinds of ideas and this kind of knowledge throughout. I think it's interesting, because in that process, working with the translator, we realised that some of these plants are actually hard to access and go on out. And it was kind of like, "Oh, this used to grow here. We didn't even know this used to grow here because it's really hard to find in Goa now." So it's kind of interesting that you know you can look at these archives and you can kind of learn about your own culture through this mode that was all about extraction and all about what we can take from these plants to make our own medicines.

MEA

From coconuts to bananas, Keg continued to explore the sociopolitical and ecological entanglements of fruits in her new text and illustrative zine *Bananas: A Wild Story*, which was

commissioned as part of the *Tastes of Justice* book launch events at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore and Magenta House on Gadigal. Through this project, Keg looked at globalisation, labour, extraction, mono-cultural dominions and myth making through the everyday fruit that is the banana. At these events, the artist distributed banana lollies to the audiences, which are these thumb-sized pale yellow candies that have this kind of, like, chalky residue about them. She also gave an interesting anecdote about these treats. Here's what she had to say:

KDS

When we taste artificial banana flavouring, such as in these banana lollies, we're actually tasting a piece of history. This flavour was modeled after the Gros Michel banana, a variety that once dominated global banana production. Gros Michel bananas were sweeter and more intensely flavored than the Cavendish variety that we typically have today in the supermarkets. But in the mid 20th century, a fungal disease called Panama disease, which was best discovered in Australia, by the way, swept through plantations and devastated the Gros Michel monoculture. Because the industry relied so heavily on a single variety, the crop was nearly wiped out. Producers eventually replaced it with the more disease resistant Cavendish banana. Even though Gros Michel is no longer the standard supermarket banana, its distinctive taste lives on in this artificial banana flavoring. So these banana lollies are really a chemical archive of the Gros Michel.

MEA

During our chat, I asked Keg why the banana? What was the impetus for researching it?

KDS

That's an interesting question, because I think there's so many plantation crops that have these really interesting and parallel, but kind of slightly different stories. I guess my interest in the banana peaked when I was even doing research for another project, the amazing curator I was working with, Emma Nicolson. I'd met this botanist who was a ginger specialist there, and he was growing all these ginger plants in his office. And Emma was like, "Did you know that the ginger is related to the banana?" And I was like, "Oh, I've never thought about that!" And because the banana is actually a herb, right? And ever since then, Emma and I always are like... bananas! And like, talked about, you know, wild origins of bananas, because the bananas we today are nothing like wild bananas. They're all hybridised and so bananas, which they stem from, all the wild ones, have these giant seeds that are pretty inedible, unless you cook it and then use it as a paste, really. And so it's very different. So all bananas today are grown from clones. So it's very different just even thinking about that, and thinking about like even the Cavendish and how that comes from one particular tree in one greenhouse in the north of England. And that was kind of hybridised by the Duke of Cavendish's gardener, Joseph Paxton, who is actually quite a well known architect, because he designed the Crystal Palace. And so because I studied architecture, when I was researching the banana, I was like, Joseph, he couldn't be him as well. And then it was like, oh my goodness, he was a gardener and he took a little career turn (laughs).

MEA

Your take on royalty actually reminds me of this Filipino rumour of the previous Queen of England who apparently only ate mangoes sourced from this particular island in the Philippines called the Guimaras Island. I mean, I've gone to the island I've eaten the mango sand; they are pretty elite. But imagine the Queen having this enlarged power to demand crates of island mangoes be delivered to

London, straight to Buckingham Palace. So the fact that, like, she didn't do this for commercial, trade or economic expansion, but just for like, self-satisfaction is crazy work.

KDS

You know that showiness of power that is so embodied in so much of those tropical fruit stories. Like, you know, the pineapple used to be like a center piece and on, you know, fancy people's tables, because they'd have to grow it was like, "We can have a pineapple." It's not even to eat. It was just to be like: "We grew this magical fruit in a greenhouse." Or the cucumber, you know, for the cucumber sandwiches. Yeah, it was brought from South Asia, and then it sort of represents this thing that is like cucumber sandwiches was like this embodiment of them saying "We don't actually need any sustenance in our food, because we've got other people to do the labour for us. So we just have this white bread with this thinly-sliced cucumber and butter." Not much nutritional value in that! (laughs)

MEA

Speaking of food that travels, Hao Pei, your 2022 project *Seeding Sovereignty*, which you presented in multiple sites, including the Singapore Art Museum, looked at the movement and cultivation of rice across Asia. You had all these narratives and visuals that invited people to engage with your research by taking home their own rice seeds. And I think at one point you had a scarecrow in this work as well. So you looked at the ways that seed distributions represented mutuality and community fostering, and how rice became like a symbol for decentralised ways of thinking. I'd like to know what led you to pursue this particular crop, besides the fact that you love eating rice?

CHP

I think the whole reason why I really fell into this topic of looking at rice, a large part of it was looking at the whole idea of how a lot of rice varieties are being vanished. I mean, similar to what you just talk about, how and the bananas, is only this one particular variety that's been preserved. The right word, but I think you get what I mean. So likewise, it's also got to do with a lot of the whole like Green Revolution, how new modern agricultural techniques come in, and then removing a lot of the native varieties. And so this struck me a lot. I'm a visual artist from Singapore, from a non rice-growing country, as someone who grew up with barely little knowledge of agriculture. This is where my role as a researcher comes in, and I've been learning about different rice varieties in the form of cultural, political practices, ritual practices. This is where I started working on the politics and power of seed banks.

CHP

Of course, seed banks function at a more institutional, national level, where they have more resources and power, but seed libraries function as a more communal, grassroots communities, where we are preserving and also, in a way, decolonising this type of archiving infrastructure. Then I was just thinking, hey, since I'm working on rice, why not look at rice varieties? And also there's activism around advocating for rice seeds. So this is where it struck me, and I realised that this is something that I find very interesting. I wanted to work on it. And therefore, when I was approached for the library, it really makes perfect sense to show a seed library in a library setting. And I think also the other, maybe a metaphor I would like to draw on, is that every seed is a knowledge, because I also attempted growing rice myself. And of course, no one rice has the same growing period, growing conditions, and whatever. And every variety of seeds require different care, knowledge, conditions, weather, water level, whatever you name it, to grow them. And so these are

embedded knowledge that a lot of different farmers in different regions actually possess. But yet again, I was presenting to, like I said, a non agriculture society. So this is something very important. So this is where I decided to come up with this installation, where I commissioned a carpenter to help make this multiple cabinets. And then every time you open this cabinet, you do read, like a small, what I call the anecdotes of fun facts. And there are three tiers. The bottom tier is always with more visual references, so it's more an appeal, more to the kids. The middle one is a bit of a mix. I'm kind of basing it on differences of the people visiting the library. And of course, the uppermost here is something that's more text-heavy. And then inside all of them, they also have, like, all these seat packets, actually, which I've also brought together with me here. But no seeds [brought to Australia], because Australia is very tight with, how do I say...

KDS

Bio-security?

CHP

Bio security, thank you. Yeah, these are all these different seeds. They actually have instructions on how to grow the rice. But of course, I don't give away the native varieties of rice, because I understand that this is the protection for all these local farmers whom I got the seeds from based on mutual trust. And these seed packets are actually inspired from a lot of vintage or old rice packets that are actually not from Singapore. Also, this is how I kind of came up with the design and commissioned an artist friend who's a designer to design all of this. And they [the visitors] bought them. The art is actually not so much about the installation, but more of the call to action to grow the rice. And what I find very resonating is going back to the installation every time, and the gallery seat tells me that, oh, a lot of the Republic, especially the kids, came and said, "Oh, the rice really can grow." And I also feel, in a way, I'm happy that they really try and grow the rice. I mean, these are hybrid rice. And very quickly going to the scarecrow part there is also another part of my research that, like I mentioned earlier, there's this whole activism advocacy about protecting rice, or not just rice, but any seed sovereignty. That's how the title of this work came about, 'Seeding Sovereignty'. And again, I saw these images of farmers and agricultural workers coming out to protest against all these big conglomerates who are controlling the seed market. And it's also in the context of Singapore, where we rarely see this kind of protest situation, and I thought, and especially more so with this agricultural advocacy, protest activism, that I really think that I should bring this out to the Singapore public. And again, on those banners, there are actually certain quotes. And all these quotes are taken from what I found, pretty much on the internet about all this, what they're writing. I remember one particularly is like saying no to bio piracy. You know, these kinds of quotes. But what I did is that I didn't really 100% replicate them. What I did is, you can say it's an artistic gesture, or however you want to read it, it's like I painted, like white on white and on the brown on cardboard pieces. I wanted to grab the attention by painting it, but not painting it so you can see, but not really see, I'm forcing, or rather, I'm attracting, appealing to people to see what is written on this. So of course, a bit of mixed results, but at least people did read what are in some of the quotes, and I guess this is probably no pun intended, planting the first seed of agricultural activism.

MEA

While you're speaking, it made me think about something interesting in your practices, and that's the nuance of language and code-switching that you both use. For Keg, this stems with your personal relationships with language revitalisation while living in the diaspora. Can you speak about that experience?

KDS

So it's that cultural removal of growing up in Boorloo, and even the kind of generational things so Portuguese were there from the 1500s Konkani has always been around, but it's not so readily spoken. So I remember my dad saying that when he was a boy, the street signs were in Portuguese. Then, like, more recently, it's like English or Hindi, and it's those kinds of shifts. And the amount of Konkani speakers is not so dominant. People still speak it, and it's definitely still very alive, but yeah, for myself, it's like learning certain words and learning certain things. But my parents aren't even fluent Konkani speakers, but their parents were and so there's this kind of like removal of that, which is amazing to sort of learn it. And also, because we don't have our own Konkani script. The script is a bit invented from three different ones to make the sound. So, Hindi speakers can read the script, but it doesn't make sense, because they're developing, they can read it, and they're like, "What is this?" but yeah.

MEA

Hao Pei, you usually present your works to an English-speaking audience, but at Magenta House you took a bilingual approach with your Nasi Goreng Diplomacy cooking session by engaging in a conversation with your father in Cantonese and then you translated this for guests in real time. What made you decide to structure it in this way?

CHP

Cantonese is my mother tongue, and I am presenting this Singapore Fried Rice storytelling with my dad. Cantonese is a new territory for me, because, in fact, to the point where one of the contributors was even telling me that, "Oh, Hao Pei, I didn't know you speak Cantonese." I was like, ah okay. Because yeah I never saw the need to talk in Cantonese about Cantonese food or rather, my family history. But I think that, for this iteration, it really makes sense.

KDS

I think it's that element of you and your dad speaking in Cantonese really added this extra layer to the story. Like, you know, this very around-the-home kitchen-feel of the narrative of the story. And I think, but like, speaking in language actually adds to that.

CHP

And actually, it's funny that you bring this up. It's also because my dad is not really good at English. He's also not that well spoken with Mandarin Chinese. I was put in a situation where I needed to be in a language environment that he's comfortable with. So I didn't want him to be speaking in, like, broken English, where, you know, a lot of mistranslations come in. I needed to be in a language environment that he's comfortable with. So you can say, this is my first time trying to present something publicly in Cantonese. I grew up speaking Cantonese with my family, only my family, and maybe family friends and I wouldn't say the most confident speaker. And yeah, this [experience] is a big push, I would say.

MEA

Keg, I'd like to rewind back to your earlier works because I'm interested in what I call the knowledge bacteria behind your practice. And, you know, like, how your ideas become fully fledged works. I remember this in earlier work of yours, where you had these, like, pull out maps and an inflatable tablecloth dome that was used to host picnic events, and how this explored, you know, the social structures of food waste and the environment through conversation and intervention. Was the process behind that particular work?

KDS

I guess there was a series of those events, and that was, it was called 'Temporary Spaces, Edible Places.' And is really looking at, basically how food really speaks to place. So even some of those things that I mentioned earlier about the cucumber in the glass house and things like that, so that was related to one of these events that I did in London. So I was invited for a residency at Delfina Foundation, and it's in Victoria, which is like Central London. It's quite commercial and corporate, and quite void of people, except for people going to the office during the day. And so it was like, How do I do this? This is a very strange context for me to develop work, because I usually sort of walk around, observe things, talk to people. And I was like, Oh, this is such a strange thing. There's a lot of empty buildings because they're owned by oligarchs, so you have them as their, you know, holiday houses and all this, like, there's a lot of strange economical things in London. And so I was like, oh, maybe the way we can talk about place in this way is to cook, like "traditional English food" and I say that with inverted commas in classic sense of cucumber sandwiches, as I mentioned, or the Ploughman's platter, or the Eton Mess, those kind of things. So, and it was really interesting, because, like all the things, they seem to have these really strong ties to the empire, right? So, like the cucumber that had come from South Asia, or in the Ploughman's platter, which was actually invented by the milk board to boost cheese sales after the war. So it was like these strange economic ties. But then all the pickles and chutneys on that are all from South Asia, but they're made milder and sweeter for the English palette. All these stories. Like even the Eton Mess was supposedly invented at Eton, which is like such an elite school. Tony Blair went there. And there's these weird kinds of themes of, like power, empire and labour, class... You can talk through all these topics, through these particular foods, or even, like, learning about the Cornish pasty, which was like the edges were crimped so the miners could eat the pasty and hold on to the crimped a bit and then discard that and so they wouldn't get toxic dust onto their food.

MEA

Wow, how considerate! [laugh]

KDS

Yeah and there was, there's also superstition, so they used to stash those little crimped edges into the mind, keep away the bad spirits. And they're meant to be so tough that they could just be dropped down and hit the ground. And they had their initials carved into the bottom, so everyone would know who was who. And then you think about that form of a Cornish pasty, and you think about how that form crosses so many different cultures, like an empanada or a samosa, or, you know, like all these different forms, that it's like the form is very similar, but it's just like these different cultural foods that so you can have quite a simple picnic menu, and then you can end up talking about these things. So in that project, it was like...the inflatable was all made out of picnic cloths, and then inside the floor was a giant picnic cloth that. As we had a picnic, I mapped out the conversation and sort of moved around plates and bodies and things and mapped it all onto the ground. So at the end of the picnic, which went for many, many hours, I stepped out of the inflatable. And there's this giant sort of mind map of these conversations, which is also because I did this project in the Isle of Skye as well. And it reminded me a bit, Hao Pei, of you talking about rice and Singapore being not a rice producing place and not quite the same, because Scotland has that history.

In the Isle of Skye, I did this project with young people. So I was based at a primary school, and it was really interesting to do a project that you've done with adults, then with children, and their

connection to place and land was so vast. For this one, they all brought in their recipes, and I cooked them, and pretty much every recipe had oats, whiskey or a combination of the two in them, which is kind of amazing (laughs)! And then I cooked these recipes sans whiskey, because I didn't think that [using whiskey for a kid's project] was quite appropriate (laughs). Then we had these conversations and it was really interesting, because I was doing a lot of research into this idea of the commons and things like that. And so I started talking about the commons with him, and I was like, "Do you know?" And they were like, "Oh, yeah, we know what the commons is: we take our sheep to the common grazing and you know, it's fine. You can take them on anyone's property. You just have to close the gate after." And it was like, of course, they know. And I'm like, do you guys forage for anything? And there were 12 different types of berries...elderflower...six different types of seaweed. And their connection and understanding of land and place was so deep because they all come from crofting families. And like subsistence farming, where, you know, the land is shared equally in these sorts of slices where everyone got a section of the fertile land really close to the ocean, and then the less fertile land for grazing and things like that. But it was also interesting, because I asked them what they grew on their crops, and most of their parents actually had to have other jobs to sustain themselves now. So it's like that subsistence economy is sort of not possible anymore. And it was interesting because I said, Who so, who grows oats on their crops? And not one of them did. Because if you think about it, it's like the kind of calorie intake versus the labor involved in farming oats doesn't pay off. You can't really compete with an industrial level and your labour and your time. And they're like, "Oh no, you just go to the co-op and buy them."

MEA

Oh this is so interesting when you think about Scotland, when you think about oats, and also all the recipes they brought in to kind of think about how economies work and how food culture changes over time in that way. Something you said about oats and farming made me think about this region in Pampanga that I visited in the Philippines recently, where I got to try this green gold rice, or Duman. Which is an heirloom glutinous rice that actually tastes like oat-mealy and milky. It has a bit of a nutty flavor, and it looks like this, golden-green pellets. And you know, it's really super laborious to make, because the rice is harvested from immature grains, and then it's roasted and pounded by hand, which makes it super expensive. I think it was like \$200 for like, a handful or a bag, you know. But this tradition is now in decline because of urbanisation and modern farming. So only a few Filipino families continue to make Duman once a year. And it makes me think about all the marketing tactics that come with, you know, promoting commercially farm greens and even bananas, you know, to get that dominion in the market, I mean, Keg you explored how the UFC campaign set out to monopolise banana production. It's so dodgy.

KDS

It's so innocuous, like you just sort of think about all those tactics they were doing, like the United Fruit Company was sending out textbooks to schools, and all these, like really insidious ways of promoting bananas, and then also just the way that they were just doing these massive land grabs, and it's so layered. There's so many, like wild stories in that publication. What was one of the wildest ones was when they were shipping so many bananas back to Western markets from all the places they grab land from, like throughout Latin America, etcetera, the Caribbean... And these boats were going back empty. They were like, oh, what can we do? And so they ended up starting these Caribbean Cruises. Oh, my God. Like the birthplace of the cruise industry is through these banana boats that were going back empty. So they started advertising these cruises to sort of, you know, be like, how can we monetise empty boats?

MEA

Is that why the Banana Boat SPF brand is called Banana Boat?

KDS

I'm sure it is, because otherwise it's just about enslavement. Harry Belafonte is singing 'Dey-O' like, and it's such a heavy, powerful song. And he's saying, "Come, mister tally man, tally me banana" and it's about like the dock workers working all night harvesting bananas. And they're like, come and count these bananas so I know how much I get paid, so I can get paid and go home. And it's such an intense, powerful song. This is actually such a heavy, you know, he's singing about this, like, the weight of these labourers, these Black labourers doing hard gruelling work.

MEA

We've really unpeeled the legacies of rice and banana today. There's so much to think about. I wanted to leave you with one last question so you both use, you know, eating, imaginaries and food, ways and serenity in your practices as a world building spoon. What project do you have coming up that you'd like to share with everybody today?

CHP

Yeah, I will be heading to Dubai for two months, doing artist residency in Alserkal Arts Foundation. And in fact, I will be exploring more into what exactly is this Singapore Fried Rice. Again, not trying to be patriotic, nationalistic, because this is the last thing I want to be. But it's really looking at the politics of it. And again, looking at how in Dubai, I've already identified a couple of restaurants that serve Singapore Fried Rice. And I also like to attend because to do something a little bit different, because the third iteration of Nasi Goreng Diplomacy was, actually, was shown last year in the Singapore Museum, where I had this component where part of the installation where the public man is allowed, or public contribute their own recipes of nasi goreng to the installation. So I've basically collated hundreds of nasi goreng recipes from different people so, of course, the most obvious way is to kind of cook it, but I don't want to just kind of do it myself. But I'm hoping to create something, a program, or whatever, or an open kitchen. It's kind of like an open mic. You know, these are the recipes. Please try and cook according to someone's recipes. What if I invite the public to cook another public recipe from two different regions? What kind of connections, nuances, and yeah, even if it fails, so what? But it's an attempt. Maybe it's a kind of "diplomacy" in inverted commas. Let's see what incubates out of this.

MEA

It's really interesting, you know, the inter-cultural and inter-archipelagic way of like, "This is my version of making the fried rice; this is my version of method-making." How that would actually imbue all these different ways of expanding what we know is fried rice. That would be really interesting to follow.

KDS

Yeah, because I feel like there's certain things that you do in the kitchen that you just naturally do. So even if you're following a recipe, you sort of ad lib a bit, well I do a lot. But you notice how, even if you try to follow a recipe, there's going to be different styles and ways that you cook, even like what you're cooking on or with, and it changes how flavours and other things happen.

MEA

How about you? What have you got coming up next? One of the many things you've got going...

KDS

I think the thing that I'm deep into at the moment is I'm working on a project for the new Powerhouse in Parramatta, which is really, it's such a lovely project with everyone involved in it. It's like a big collaborative project, even though I initiated it. But it's called 'Got by Dan', and it's based on, this series of herbarium specimens that were in the New South Wales herbarium that was "collected", and I also say this in inverted commas, by George Cayley, but he worked with a Burramattagal man called Dan Moowattin, who was a really good climber, and he would climb to the top of the eucalyptus trees to collect the buds and the flowers to create what botanists call like a 'full specimen'. So you can really identify which species of eucalyptus they were. And it's really curious, because on some of these pages, he's noted 'got by Dan', but it's not on the official herbarium label, which sits in the bottom right hand corner of a herbarium sheet. It's sort of noted somewhere else on the sheet, and sometimes Dan would share, like a local language name or things like that. It really opens up how much knowledge is lost within these Western archives like you know, when you try to reduce a particular tree or species into these Western taxonomical scientific ways, and it doesn't. It doesn't give nuance. It doesn't give this layeredness of meaning. And you just think about all the knowledge that isn't recorded and is lost by this gesture of Got by Dan. And so what we've been doing is we've worked with some really great botanists, Hannah McPherson and Andrew Orme at the Mount Annan Botanical Gardens, and Uncle Chris Tobin, a Dharug Elder.

We've gone out on Dharug Country and collected mirror specimens of these particular species to create our own herbarium sheets that would exist in parallel to these ones that George Cayley and Dan Moowattin collected, but with these ones, they'll prioritise working with a group of Dharug language specialists, including by our team from Bayala to prioritise like local language, name, location, like in Dharug Country where that is, and these kind of important aspects of what is often missing. And it'll prioritise Indigenous knowledge. It'll prioritise these kinds of stories. And hopefully we're thinking about how this could maybe set a precedent. Botanists in the future will think, okay, how can we, you know, acknowledge what Country we're taking these, or this part of the Country, from, right? And how can we just acknowledge that within these Western archives? These exist as this intervention into the archives and it kind of has these other spin offs, which all sort of try to draw attention, because it's quite a subtle work, right? So these will be accessioned into the botanical archive at the herbarium, and it has these other resonances. So there will be an exhibition at Government House in Parramatta, and then on Eucalyptus Day in 2027 there will also be a symposium. So we can expand these dialogues and have these dialogues about Indigenous knowledge within archives, highlighting these learning and stories.

MEA

This is going to be such an extraordinary, artistic multiplexed project that you're, you know, looking at through this, this Powerhouse collaboration that's incredible.

KDS

Yeah, so many amazing people. It's just a full, incredible constellation of making.

MEA

The legacy building of that project itself is so crucial. What a gift of future generations to have this.

MEA

Thank you both so much for joining us today. I really, really appreciated learning so much from each of you with your practices, and I'm going to be eating a lot of bananas and rice and different types of fruit knowing all of this new knowledge from the both of you. You've been so generous and I look forward to following your practices.

KDS

Thank you, Mariam, thank you Magenta House for always being such generous and incredible hosts.

CHP

Likewise, thank you so much.

MEA

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Episode Resources

- [Tasting Justice: Cooking the Coda \(Gadigal\)](#)
- [Tastes of Justice \(Publication\)](#)
- [Tasting Justice: Singapore](#)
- [Temporary Spaces, Edible Places](#)
- [If a coconut falls](#)
- [Singapore Art Museum: Chu Hao Pei](#)
- [Instagram: @secretricesociety](#)
- [The Jakarta Post: Megawati's Fried Rice Diplomacy](#)
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