

## ***Aunty Lee's Delights Lesson Plan 2***

Aunty Lee's Little Bites: Understanding Food in the Mystery

Created by Sarah Jaran and Mickey Lula Hernandez

**Overview:** This lesson builds on the previous lesson's introduction to the cozy mystery: A mystery narrative that takes place at a location one may not usually expect for a mystery, led by a character who is (typically, but not exclusively) a woman and an amateur detective, usually unscathed by the end of the novel, and with a reliance from the novel on some "gimmick" or convention (e.g. food, being a cat lady, etc.).

This lesson will explore how Ovidia Yu uses food as a means of depicting Peranakan culture as well as communicating certain qualities about the characters that eat them. Class will begin with an activity to recap the previous lesson and will then move on to an activity designed to help students consider the role of food in the novel. The class will end with a brief, general lecture on Southeast Asian and Peranakan food.

Parts of this lesson have been adapted from the "Sixty Second Game" and "Object Lesson" exercises included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason's *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 3-5, 321-24).

### **Objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Better understand the cozy mystery genre, in particular how its food convention works to enrich the text
- Know that the depictions of certain cultural staples (in this case, food) can inform their engagement and appreciation of a text
- Achieve a better understanding of Southeast Asian/Singaporean food culture

### **Class Structure:**

*10 minutes:* Introduction & Recap

- For this exercise, each student will have 30 seconds (and no more!) to quickly answer one of the following questions. Each student will answer, and it's important to note that student answers can build on one another but should not simply restate or repeat what another student has already shared.
  - What do they remember of our definition of "cozy mystery" OR
  - What is a memorable dish in this section? Students will be given 30 seconds to share with us any motifs, thematic developments, notable characters, and so on that they noticed while reading
- If they somehow do not mention food, motivate a focus on the novel's attention to food by asking whether food plays a similar thematic role in our covered section of the work

*15 minutes:* Object Lesson

- Divide the class into three groups (or 6 groups, if class size requires). Assign each group one of the following food items (instructor notes included at end of lesson plan):
  - Group 1: *bubor cha cha* (p. 53)

- Group 2: Chrysanthemum tea with ginger (pp.60-61)
- Group 3: Cordyceps tea with ginseng (p. 83)
- Give the students 10 minutes to research their assigned food. Ask students to answer the following questions:
  - What are the cultural associations of the food you're researching?
  - What ingredients might it involve?
  - Are there any special contexts in which this food is served?
  - Does this food serve any particular purpose (comfort, medicinal, etc.)?
  - **Instructor Notes for Food Object Lesson:**
    - Group One: *Bubor cha cha* (53)
      - “Bubur” = porridge; “cha cha” = well
      - Asian sweet soups tend to be “healthier” than Western desserts
      - Usually served at Chinese New Year
      - Usually street food at any time of day
      - Vegan, gluten-free, nutritious and nourishing dessert (rich dish though)
    - Group Two: Chrysanthemum tea w/ ginger (60-61)
      - Chrysanthemum might lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels; calming properties; liver detoxification (traditional Chinese medicine); popular in East Asia
      - Ginger is seen as a natural cleansing and purifying agent (trad. Chinese medicine); antidote for nausea
    - Group Three: Cordyceps tea w/ ginseng (p. 83)
      - Cordyceps is used to treat fatigue, sickness, kidney disease, and low sex drive in traditional Chinese medicine
      - Ginseng is used to regulate blood sugar levels and reduce fatigue
- Reconvene the class and discuss the results of student's research. Ask students to connect the food item they researched with its use in the particular passage in which it appears. How does better understanding this food item help us better understand the novel?

*10 minutes:* Discuss the Role of Non-Descriptive Food

- Direct students to look over page 112 in the text. In this passage, *Aunty Lee* once again serves tea, this time to SSS Selim, but the tea being served is *not* explicitly described in this passage. Ask students to consider the role of non-descriptive food in the novel and compare it to previous descriptions of food.
  - After comparing two scenes where the type of tea is as important as the presence of tea, what might we infer from the fact that Yu does not describe the kind of tea Nina gives to Selim when they are discussing the case?
  - What might this scene demonstrate about Singaporean culture?
  - What larger cultural values can we infer from this scene (e.g. importance of oral history/stories, custom, etc.)?

*10 minutes:* Food culture of Singapore and Peranakan Cuisine

- Provide students with an overview of general Southeast Asian food culture.
  - “To live well is to eat well” mentality

- Strong emphasis on lightly prepared dishes with strong aromatic components
- Focus on stir-frying, boiling, and steaming as cooking methods
- Often contrasted with ingredients from East Asian cuisine, substituting fish sauces for soy sauces
- Peranakan food is inherently fusion cuisine
- Focus on two major culinary heritages in Singapore, matching with previous lecture on Singapore population demographics
  - Nyonya style cooking comes from Peranakan people, a fusion of Chinese immigrants and native Malaysians. Nyonya style cooking, which is at the center of Singaporean cuisine, combines traditional Chinese ingredients with Malaysian and Indonesian spices and cooking techniques.
  - Food is essential to Singaporean culture. The question “have you eaten?” is used as a greeting. Singaporeans tend to eat five or six meals a day.
  - Singapore is a nation full of contradictions. It balances a post-colonial drive to be Western with a patchwork of immigrant cultural traditions that cannot be ignored. Local food is defined by what is borrowed and how that fits into something new.

#### 5 minutes: Wrap-Up

- Provide students with Ng and Karim’s definition of Peranakan: “The word Peranakan is originated from Indonesia or Malaysia and comes with multiple meanings. It signifies locally born or the offspring of intermarriage between and local and a foreigner” (Ng & Karim 2016).
- Suggest to students the following: That Peranakan food can be thought of as an inherent “fusion” gives us the opportunity to think of the novel’s multi-cultural elements. Does the novel’s focus on fusion cuisine represent a sincere attempt at presenting an multicultural demographic with Singapore’s culture? Is it instead playing into a marketing technique meant to rope in tourists? Or does it represent something in between?

#### Sources:

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[a%20Cha%20is%20a%20creamy%2C%20sweet%20Malaysian%20dessert%20originating.%E2%80%9Cmo%20mo%20cha%20cha%E2%80%9C.](#)

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