

POPULARIZATION AND LOCALIZATION OF SUSHI IN SINGAPORE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Wai-ming Ng

It is generally agreed that sushi is the most popular Japanese food in the world. In the 1970s and early 1980s, sushi started as an expensive and exotic Japanese food only served at luxurious hotels and high-class restaurants in major cities of the world for international businessmen, Japanese tourists and local well-to-do families. From the late 1980s to the present, the localization of sushi and the opening of affordable sushi restaurants have made it increasingly popular in the rest of the world.¹ Global popularization of cultural products like sushi is achieved at the expense of authenticity.² In the United States, many Japanese Americans run sushi bars, serving

* Wai-ming Ng is assistant professor of Japanese studies at the National University of Singapore, teaching and researching Japanese popular culture and Japan-Singapore relations. He wishes to thank Miho Goda, Elizabeth MacLachlan, Leng Leng Thang and two referees for their useful comments.

NOTES

¹ For an overview of the popularization of sushi in Europe and the United States, see Tamura Toyoo, *Kaiten sushi sekai issshû* (Kaiten Sushi around the World) (Tokyo: Sekai bunkaisha, 2000).

² Some Japanese use Japanese food (such as rice, water, beef, etc.) to advocate *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japanese uniqueness and excellence). Authenticity is used here to refer to the taste of sushi in Japan and it carries no *Nihonjinron* implications. For an introduction to *Nihonjinron*, see Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Peter Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London: Routledge, 1986).

localized sushi (such as California roll) at affordable prices for common folks.³ Some sushi chefs are trained in local sushi schools. For example, California Sushi Academy offers three-month courses to train assistant sushi chefs. Sushi has been Westernized, but it also has an impact on Western cooking.⁴ Compared with the United States, many Asian nations are more advanced in terms of popularization and localization of Japanese sushi, thanks to the introduction of the two forms of eating sushi—the *kaiten* sushi (revolving sushi on a conveyor belt) restaurants and take-away sushi outlets. East Asia (such as Taiwan and Hong Kong) is leading this “sushi boom” and sushi is making its way in people’s daily diet. Southeast Asia, due to socio-cultural reasons, is far behind East Asia in this respect. However, it has been catching up fast in recent years, following the rise of Japanese popular culture and consumer culture.

This paper examines the growth of a sushi culture in Singapore from historical and ethnographic perspectives. It discusses the history of sushi and the reasons for its popularity in Singapore, examines the making of the sushi culture and industry in Singapore, and looks into different aspects of localization and their implications. By identifying the characteristics of the sushi culture in Singapore and locating sushi in the context of globalization of Japanese popular culture, it aims to deepen our understanding of the mechanism of global popularization of Japanese popular culture and the interplay of popularization and localization.

History and Reasons

Sushi has a long history in Singapore, but it has only taken root in Singapore in the last decade. It was introduced to Singapore more than a century ago, following the influx of *karayukisan* (Japanese prostitutes) and small businessmen from Japan. In the prewar era, there were many Japanese restaurants in “Little Japan” (now the Bugis

³ See Yang Jeff, Dina Gan and Terry Hong, eds., *Eastern Standard Time* (Boston: Mariner, 1997), pp. 145-146.

⁴ For an interesting case study, see Jeffrey Tobin, “A Japanese-French Restaurant in Hawai’i,” in Joseph Tobin, ed., *Re-made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 159-175.

Junction and its surrounding areas) which served sushi and other Japanese foods for Japanese customers. From the Second World War until the mid-1960s, there were no Japanese restaurants in Singapore.⁵ Several Japanese restaurants were opened for Japanese businessmen in the late 1960s. The number of Japanese restaurants rose to about 10-20 in the 1970s and about 40-50 in the mid-1980s. Until the mid-1980s, Japanese cuisine (including sushi) was mainly for Japanese expatriates in Singapore due to its high prices and Japanese customers-oriented services. Almost all Japanese restaurants were run by Japanese.

A breakthrough came after the mid-1980s, when the number of Japanese restaurants grew dramatically. The number of Japanese restaurants in Singapore increased from 40-50 in the mid-1980s to 60-70 in the late 1980s.⁶ Today there are more than a hundred Japanese restaurants in Singapore. About 70% of them are located in the city (business and shopping districts in central Singapore). Basically, each major hotel and shopping center has at least one Japanese restaurant. About one-third of Japanese restaurants in Singapore are sushi restaurants, and the rest includes family restaurants, *izakaya* (drinking place), *teppanyaki* (hot-plate food) restaurants, *ramen* (noodle) restaurants, and fast food restaurants (like Yoshinoya and Mos Burger).⁷ Except in *ramen* and fast food restaurants, sushi is a must in the menu of all

⁵ A Japanese canteen was opened at the Japan Club (later the Japanese Association) in 1958 for club members. Since there were only a few Japanese restaurants in Singapore in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Japanese canteen was a major attraction of the Japanese Association. See Japanese Association, ed., *Minami jūjisei nijūshūnen kinen fukkokuhan* [Southern Cross: Ten-Year Anniversary Special Issue, Reprint] (Singapore: Japanese Association, 1987), p. 92. The Japanese canteen at the Japanese Club was the first of its kind in postwar Singapore, but it did not open to the public. Okoh of Ginza, opened in 1969, was one the earliest Japanese restaurants founded in Singapore. See Eric Oey, ed., *Singapore Feasts* (Singapore: APA Productions, 1980), p. 92.

⁶ See Kawamura Masanobu, *Shingapōru seikatsu jiten* [A Dictionary of Living in Singapore] (Tokyo: Hakuba shuppan, 1988), p. 180.

⁷ See Leng Leng Thang, "Consuming 'Things from Japan' in Singapore," Working Paper for Sumitomo Foundation Project 1998/1999 (Singapore: 1999) pp. 4-11. See

Japanese restaurants. Now Singaporeans have replaced Japanese expatriates as the main consumers of sushi in Singapore. The sushi business is booming and its growth is phenomenal. The general manager of Sakae Sushi said:

Our business has continued to expand, showing that the sushi market in Singapore is still growing. I believe that the growth [of the sushi business] should be double-digital this year. The total consumption of sushi in Singapore should be around 2,500 to 3,000 million dollars a year.⁸

Why there are so many sushi restaurants in Singapore? Why have Singaporeans become the main consumers of sushi? How should we explain the birth of a sushi culture in Singapore in the 1990s?

At the socio-economic level, the expansion of the Japanese community and the impressive economic growth in Singapore have helped increase the popularity of Japanese cuisine.

The appreciation of yen after the mid-1980s created a “hollowing out” phenomenon. The number of Japanese in Singapore has increased more than triple from the mid-1980s (about 8,000) to the present (about 27,000), making the Japanese community one of the largest foreign communities in Singapore. The majority of Japanese expatriates and their families are culturally exclusive, trying to maintain the Japanese way of life in Singapore.⁹ As a result, Japanese restaurants, supermarkets, groceries and various servicing and retailing shops have mushroomed. While targeting primarily Japanese customers, they also appreciate the business of Singaporeans. The number of Japanese restaurants, like the Japanese population, has

also Beng Huat Chua. “Where got Japanese Influence in Singapore!” in Eyal Ben-Ari and John Clammer, eds., *Japan in Singapore* (Surrey: Curzon, 2000), pp. 133-149.

⁸ *Lianhe zaobao*, 5 November 2000, p. 33.

⁹ Wai-ming Ng, “The Japanese Community in Singapore: A Comparative Study of the Japanese Association and the Kowloon Club,” *Senri Ethnological Studies*, No. 49 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), forthcoming.

tripled since the mid-1980s. Today the number of Japanese restaurants in Singapore can match that of McDonald's (118 outlets) and Japanese sushi is as popular as American hamburger, serving as a reminder that Japanese mass culture is competing with and gradually overtaking its American counterpart in Asia.¹⁰

Singapore is one of the fastest-growing and most vibrant economies in Asia and its GNP is the second highest in Asia, preceded only by Japan. People have more money to spend on good foods, and dining out has become very common. The Singapore government has been promoting Singapore as a "gourmet republic" or "food paradise," where residents and tourists can enjoy different kinds of ethnic and foreign foods. The latest edition of the official guidebook on Singapore reads: "In Singapore's multi-racial melting pot, all the various cuisine compete in the battle of taste buds: Malay, Chinese, Indonesian, Peranakan, Indian, Thai, Japanese and Korean."¹¹ All of these make Singapore an attractive place for investment in the food business. Hence, more and more Singaporeans as well as Japanese have become interested in running Japanese restaurants.

At the cultural and personal level, the growing popularity of sushi among Singaporeans in the 1990s and early 2000s is by no means coincidental. Neither the Chinese nor the Malays/Indians have a tradition of eating cold and raw fish in their daily menu.¹² When some Japanese attempted to promote sushi among Singaporeans

¹⁰ See Brian Moeran, "Commodities, Culture and Japan's Corollanization of Asia," in Marie Söderbery and Ian Reader, eds., *Japanese Influences and Presences in Asia* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 25-50. See also Brian Moeran, "The Orient Strikes Back: Advertising and Imagining Japan," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13:3 (1996): 72-112.

¹¹ *Singapore: Official Guide* (Singapore: Singapore Tourism Board, 2001), p. 82.

¹² Chinese Singaporeans eat *yusheng* (raw fish [usually salmon] with local vegetables and pickles) during the Chinese New Year. However, this is only a festive menu and the portion of raw fish is very small.

by introducing *kaiten* sushi in the 1980s, they met with cold responses.¹³ It took many years for Singaporeans to get used to eating sushi. Even now, the Malays, Indians and some Chinese (especially the elderly) still shy away from it. In the 1990s and early 2000s, sushi has become quite popular among young Chinese Singaporeans (especially females)—a group of strong consuming power and high adaptability.

There are a number of reasons for the birth of a sushi culture in Singapore in the 1990s and early 2000s. Localization is a major factor in the sushi boom. Sushi has been transformed from an exclusive and exotic Japanese food into an affordable and localized Japanese food. A sushi meal in a *kaiten* sushi costs about \$20-40 per person (unless stated otherwise, all money matters in this paper are in Singapore dollars. 1SD=1.28NZD or 0.57USD) and a piece of sushi at a sushi take-away outlet, food court or hawker center can be as cheap as 40-50 cents. Hence, everyone including students can afford to eat sushi. The flavor and content of sushi in Singapore have been altered to accommodate the local taste. Now even Singaporeans who cannot eat raw fish can enjoy sushi.

Exotic appeal is another factor of success. Sushi in Singapore has been localized enough to suit the local taste, but not too much to undermine its exotic appeal. To Singaporeans, sushi is still Japanese. Young Singaporeans think it is an “in” thing to eat sushi. Sushi is more than a food or a commercial product, it also carries cultural and national meanings. Eating sushi itself can be a cultural encounter. Singaporeans are impressed by many things they experience in a sushi restaurant, including the display of plastic sushi in the window, the use of beautiful Japanese utensils, the Japanese greetings and hospitality, the conveyer belt, and of course the colors and the taste of sushi. As a matter of fact, eating sushi not only can make Singaporeans feel Japanese, but also metropolitan or international. The presence of sushi and other

¹³ Invented by an Osaka chef in the late 1970s, *kaiten* sushi revolutionized the sushi culture in Japan and the world. It has made sushi a plebeian food by cutting down the running cost, increasing customers' turnover and keeping a user-friendly atmosphere.

foreign foods strengthens the status of Singapore as an international city with a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

The boom of Japanese popular culture in recent years has boosted the consumption of things Japanese.¹⁴ Sushi itself can be seen as a form of Japanese popular culture. Various forms of Japanese popular culture reinforce each other. For instance, popular Japanese works in comics (e.g., *Shôtai no sushi* and *Oishimbô*), animated series (e.g., *Mr. Ajikko*), movies (e.g., *Tampopo*) and television dramas (e.g., *Oishii kankei*, *Miracle of a Restaurant*, *Shôtai no sushi* and *The King of Chefs*) about Japanese cooking have enhanced people's interest in sushi.

Sushi is an eating-out culture in Singapore. Although there are increasing number of sushi classes organized by community centers and other voluntary organizations, most Singaporeans do not know how to make sushi. They do not have to do it anyway, because sushi is available everywhere from five-star hotels to hawker centers. There is even a Genki Sushi outlet at the Changi Airport and a sushi counter in the Venom Disco. Sushi is ideal for party or light meal, being a good alternative for sandwich or *dim sum*. Now sushi is a must in high-tea, buffet and reception parties in hotels and luxurious restaurants.

Culture and Industry

There are three major kinds of sushi restaurants in Singapore. At the top are high-end sushi restaurants located at five-star hotels (e.g., Pan-Pacific Hotel and Shangri-La Hotel), luxurious shopping malls (e.g., Takashimaya Shopping Mall) and exclusive clubs (e.g., Japanese Association). While targeting Japanese and foreigners who appreciate Japanese taste, they try their best to make things 100 percent Japanese.

¹⁴ For a study of the boom of Japanese popular culture in Singapore, see Wai-ming Ng, "A Comparative Study of Japanese Comics in Southeast Asia and East Asia," *International Journal of Comic Art*, 2:1 (2000): 44-56, "Japanese Video Games in Singapore: History, Culture and Industry," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 29:1 (2001, forthcoming), and "Japanese Animation in Singapore: A Historical and Comparative Study," *Animation Journal* (2001, forthcoming).

Unless specially requested, they do not add local flavors to their sushi. To them, sushi is not only a food and a business, but also an art and a tradition. They are usually more demanding than their customers. They import all the ingredients from Japan by air, and insist serving customers with their hand-made *wasabi* (green horseradish). The interior design is Japanese and all utensils are made in Japan. Most of the chefs, managers, waiters and waitresses are Japanese. Non-Japanese staff can speak Japanese. Waiters and waitresses wear *kimono*, speak Japanese, and offer a very warm service to make their customers feel like they are in Japan.

The Keyaki Japanese Restaurant at Pan-Pacific Hotel (which is a Japanese enterprise) is an example of excellence in taste and design. Customers can sit at the sushi counter or in a private *tatami* room, enjoying the view of a rooftop Japanese garden (which is the largest in any hotel in Asia outside Japan) in front of them and traditional Japanese music in the background. Many Japanese executives dine with their customers or colleagues in this restaurant.

Customers of high-end sushi restaurants are mostly Japanese business executives, international tourists and well-to-do Singaporeans. Most Japanese expatriates and their families do not patronize them often, because they think these restaurants are overpriced (\$100-200 per person a meal) and the taste is not as good as their counterparts in Japan. A Japanese remarked: “It cost me \$150 for a little beer and a few pieces of sushi at the sushi counter.”¹⁵ They usually make their own sushi or dine at middle-level sushi restaurants in Singapore. Most Singaporeans have never visited high-end sushi restaurants either. They are satisfied with localized sushi and do not have an appetite (or the money as well) for more “authentic” sushi.

At the middle level are some sushi restaurants which serve mainly Japanese expatriates and middle-class Singaporeans. These restaurants are located in shopping and business areas. Orchard Road has a number of middle-level sushi restaurants, such as Sushi Akatsuru (at Orchard Shopping Center), Yoshida Sushi (at Lucky Plaza) and Sakaru Sushi (at Cuppage Plaza). Compared with high-end restaurants, they are

¹⁵ *Shingapôru seikatsu jiten*, p. 180.

smaller and more affordable (\$50-100 per person a meal). They are still very Japanese in their menu and interior design. Nevertheless, a certain level of localization is added in order to cut cost and to attract local customers. For instance, some chefs and waitresses are Singaporeans who speak little Japanese and have not received formal training. Some ingredients (such as eggs and vegetables) are from the local market and some hybridized or localized items (e.g., California roll and Singapore maki) are included in the menu.

Sushi Akatsuru is an example of the middle price range sushi restaurant. The decoration is half Japanese and half Western. There is no *tatami* room. The main chef, one of the bosses, is a Malaysian who has learned how to make sushi in Japan. Most of the employees are Singaporeans who do not understand Japanese. The ratio between Japanese and Singapore customers is half and half. Like most sushi restaurants in Singapore, besides sushi, it also serves other Japanese foods and even has a karaoke lounge!

To many Singaporeans, high-end or middle-level sushi restaurants are out of reach. They do not find them affordable and some feel uneasy about the atmosphere (for being too high-class and Japanese). The most important development in the sushi culture in Singapore in recent years is the popularity of *kaiten* sushi restaurants which target Singaporeans by offering localized sushi at very affordable prices (\$20-40 per person a meal). *Kaiten* sushi has become the most popular form of sushi restaurant in Singapore. Most of these *kaiten* sushi restaurants are located at shopping or business centers, serving primarily young people and working adults. Singaporeans like *kaiten* sushi because it is affordable, interesting and care-free.

Singapore has a number of *kaiten* sushi restaurant chains, including Fiesta Sushi (eight outlets), Genki Sushi (six outlets), Sakae Sushi (five outlets) and Sushi Tei (four outlets). Fiesta Sushi was founded locally in 1992 by a Japanese who has lived in Singapore for more than two decades. It runs five *kaiten* sushi restaurants and three sushi take-away counters in local supermarkets. The philosophy of Fiesta Sushi is “to marry the authenticity of Japanese food with the understanding of Singaporean

needs.”¹⁶ Besides sushi, its sushi restaurants also include other Japanese foods in their menu. The design is Western and it even serves cheese cake for dessert. It offers take-away sushi packages. Genki Sushi is a Japanese franchise which started its business in Singapore in 1993.¹⁷ Its design and menu are more Japanese than other *kaiten* sushi restaurants in Singapore. Sakae Sushi, despite its Japanese name, was founded by a Singaporean. Sushi Tei is owned by the Japanese and has a very Japanese interior design. Unlike its competitors, Sushi Tei imports some ingredients from Japan.¹⁸

In order to cut cost, everything has been localized in *kaiten* sushi restaurants in Singapore. They have many Singapore-style sushi items in their menu. Chefs and staff are Singaporeans who have received little training and basically do not understand Japanese. Japanese is not used except for one or two phrases of greetings. Ingredients are from the local market. Cheap substitutes are used if some ingredients are unavailable or expensive in Singapore. Automation is promoted to cut labor cost. Some (e.g., Fiesta Sushi) use “sushi robot” to make sushi and *wasabi*. In addition, they also serve other Japanese foods. Many of these *kaiten* sushi restaurants offer take-away and delivery services.

Sakae Sushi is an example to show how a *kaiten* sushi restaurant is run in Singapore. Founded in 1997 by a young Singaporean businessman, it has become one of the most beloved sushi franchises in Singapore. It has five outlets in Singapore and they are big and conveniently located in busy business and shopping districts. The price range is from \$1.90 to \$6.50. The \$1.90 menu includes more than seventy

¹⁶ Information about Fiesta Sushi is provided by its general manager, Raphael Chan, on 17 November 1999 and Fiesta Sushi website at www.fiestafood.com.

¹⁷ Genki Sushi is the only international sushi franchise in Singapore. It has outlets in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia and the United States and is preparing to launch its operation in China, Thailand and Australia in the near future. See *Business Times*, Singapore, 5 October 1998, p. 5 and *Asahi Evening News*, 3 September 2000, p. 6.

¹⁸ Nagai Kazuo, *Singapore Gourmet Guide 2000* (Singapore: Shin-Nichi Communications, 2000), p. 46.

items, such as *tamago* (egg) sushi, California roll, and sushi with some inexpensive raw fishes. The \$6.50 menu includes jellyfish, *tako* (octopus), *ikura* (salmon roe) and other expensive seafood. Different kinds of localized sushi can be found in its menu. One of its outlets (in Hereen) has the longest conveyor belt in Asia which has the capacity to make 230 dishes and to serve 150 customers. Customers can make special order of their favorite sushi or side dishes, such as udon and tempura, through a mini speaker in front of them. They help themselves to water and green tea by using the nearby hot water tap. Chefs prepare sushi in the kitchen and put them on the conveyor belt. Sakae Sushi is packed during lunch and dinner hours and weekends, but is quiet in the afternoon. In the afternoon, some customers actually come to chat with their friends while having a few pieces of sushi and a cup of green tea. The business of Sakae Sushi is very good and it will open outlets in Indonesia and Thailand.

Besides sushi restaurants, sushi has been adopted into a street food, take-away food and local food for low-income Singaporeans living in the public housing estates. There are many mini sushi counters in supermarkets. The first sushi counter in Singapore opened in October 1993 in the Cold Storage Supermarket at Takashimaya. It was an instant success and attracted many people (some Japanese but mostly Singaporeans) into this lucrative business.

Edo Sushi is the largest sushi take-away company in Singapore. It has 11 sushi take-away counters located in NTUC and Cold Storage Supermarkets—the two of the largest supermarket chains—in the public housing areas. One can buy a piece of sushi for 55 cents. Edo Sushi offers delivery service. For any order over \$15 plus \$5 delivery fee, it will deliver sushi to any corner of the island. Edo Sushi counters have a long queue after eight every evening, because all sushi are sold at half price. Sushi Deli (9 outlets) and Fiesta Sushi (3 outlets) also run a number of sushi counters in supermarkets. Sushi are wrapped and displayed nicely in these take-away counters. Most customers are housewives and young people who buy sushi for themselves or for a party.

Sushi has also become a street food, being available in food courts, hawker centers and neighborhood stalls. Most patrons are students and housewives. Sushi is not very popular as a street food, because sushi stall keepers make sushi their own ways. As a result, many customers complain that the taste is terrible and the hygiene is a problem. In principle, sushi has to be consumed within four hours of thawing. Sushi restaurants use fresh fish and only slice sushi upon order. *Kaiten* sushi restaurants discard unsold items on a regular basis to maintain the freshness and hygiene. However, most sushi counters in food courts, hawker centers and neighborhood stalls do not follow this rule. This is not uncommon to find their sushi exposed under the tropical sun for a day. Critics point out that unclean or rotten sushi can cause health problems, like food poisoning or hepatitis A.¹⁹ People of sushi stalls in food courts and hawker centers told us that their business is no good due to strong competition and the upgrading of taste among Singaporeans.

Localization

Singaporeans like some exotic elements but they do not always appreciate Japaneseness in sushi. Localization makes sushi appealing and affordable to Singaporeans. Sushi in Singapore has been localized tremendously in various aspects. Localization has been so strong that Japanese residents in Singapore seldom patronize *kaiten* sushi, sushi counters in supermarkets, and sushi stalls in food courts or hawker centers.

¹⁹ *Lianhe zaobao*, Singapore, 6 June 1999, p. 3. In November 2000, the Singapore government made a rule that all sashimi (this also applied to sushi) must be refrigerated in restaurants, food courts, hawker centers and take-away stalls. This forced many food court and hawker center keepers out of the sushi business. Regarding the importance of freshness in the sushi industry in Japan, see Theodore C. Bestor, "Wholesale Sushi: Culture and Commodity in Tokyo's Tsukiji Market," in Setha M. Low, ed., *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 201-244.

Localization of sushi in Singapore can be seen from the following three aspects—forms of eating sushi, the content and taste of sushi, and the management of a sushi restaurant.²⁰

Whether in restaurants or not, Singaporeans eat sushi differently from the Japanese.²¹ Sushi is a proper meal in Japan, but is an appetizer, light meal or snack in Singapore. In Japan, sushi restaurants only serve sushi, whereas sushi restaurants in Singapore serve many other Japanese foods, such as *ramen*, fried *tôfu* (bean curd), *chawannushi* (steamed egg), udon, and tempura. Some even serve green tea ice-cream, mango pudding and cheese cake as desserts. Singaporeans usually order these side dishes along with sushi. The lack of specialization is indeed a characteristic of the Japanese food culture in Singapore. Sushi restaurants serve other Japanese foods, whereas Japanese family restaurants like Hisatomo and Hoshigaoka have sushi in their menu.²² Hence, the line between a sushi restaurant and an ordinary Japanese restaurant is not always clear in Singapore. The similar thing also occurs in sushi stalls in supermarkets, food courts and hawker centers. People usually only buy a few pieces of sushi and order other foods. Few want to fill their stomach only with sushi.

The customers' behaviors are also different from the Japanese. In Japan, if money is not a concern, most people would definitely prefer sushi bar to *kaiten* sushi for better taste. Singaporeans, however, prefer *kaiten* sushi to sushi bar due to economic and cultural reasons. Even many well-to-do Singaporeans who can afford

²⁰ Localization can also be found in other kinds of Japanese cuisine. Japanese restaurants in Singapore have invented localized items, like curry *ramen*, Japanese-style chicken rice (Japanese omelet rice with chicken), seafood *tonkatsu* (fried meat cutlet) and shark-fin *chawannushi* (streamed egg).

²¹ Regarding the Japanese way of eating sushi, see Tsuji Shizuo, *Japanese Cooking: A Simple Art* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1980), pp. 285-289.

²² In Singapore, many people eat sushi in Japanese family restaurants and not necessarily in sushi restaurants. Fiesta Sushi regards Hisatomo and Hoshigaoka, the two most popular Japanese family restaurant chains in Singapore, as its major competitors along with Genki Sushi and Sakae Sushi. Data is from a correspondence with the general manager of the Fiesta Sushi dated 17 November 1999.

eating sushi in hotels or restaurants feel uneasy in the sushi bar. After entering a sushi restaurant, they usually go straight to the dining table to order from the menu, and few sit at the sushi bar to make their order to the chefs. Moreover, in Japan, customers usually drink green tea after they finish their meal so that green tea would not dilute, cover or damage the taste of sushi. Sake can be drunk before eating. In Singapore, there is no rules at all regarding drinking in a sushi restaurant. Singaporeans drink whatever they want, including beer, coke, mineral water and juice.

The content and taste of sushi are very Singaporean, making sushi in Singapore “Singapore sushi.” In terms of content, a sushi is a piece of vinegared rice with a slice of meat (usually fish) on the top. In Singapore, both the rice and the topping are different from those used in Japan. Sushi should use best-quality Japanese rice. However, Japanese rice is not an exporting item and its substitutes such as California rice and Australian rice are expensive. Hence, sushi restaurants in Singapore (except a few high-end restaurants) use long-grained Thai rice instead of short-grained and sticky Japanese rice. Thai rice is several times cheaper than Japanese rice and its substitutes, but sushi made from Thai rice lacks the texture and flavor of what a sushi supposed to have and also easily falls apart. Singapore does not offer a good variety of fish for sushi. Many kinds of sushi are seldom available in Singapore, including *karei* (flatfish), *hatahata* (sandfish), *tai* (sea bass), *awabi* (abalone) and *seigo* (sea bass). *Uni* (sea urchin roe) and *hamachi* (yellowtail) are very popular in Japan, but are unpopular in Singapore for being too exotic. Similarly, more bizarre sushi like *nattô* (fermented soybeans) maki, sushi with raw chicken or horse meat have no market in Singapore.

Sushi in Singapore sometimes tastes more Singaporean than Japanese. It tends to be salty, spicy and oily to suit the local taste. Singaporeans like to dip the entire sushi, both the topping and rice, deeply into the soy sauce. Chili, curry, black pepper and other hot local flavors are added to make new kinds of sushi, like spicy tuna maki, spicy salmon maki, spicy cheese maki, chili salmon maki, chili prawn maki, chili shrimp maki, curry sushi, and black pepper crab sushi. Singaporeans have also made

some deep-fried sushi, such as tempura sushi, soft-shell crab sushi and deep-fried *tôfu* maki.

Some Singaporeans do not like raw fish and thus sushi restaurants in Singapore have more variety of sushi with cooked ingredient toppings than their Japanese counterparts. Cooked or non-meat sushi are quite popular, such as *kappa* (cucumber), *tamago* (sweetened thick omelet), *kampyo* (pickled gourd), *oshinko* (pickled radish), boiled canned tuna, tempura, salad and mayonnaise. Some of these sushi are combinations invented in Singapore, such as Singapore maki (*achar* filling), Merlion sushi, corn mayonnaise sushi, *otah-otah* sushi, century egg sushi, burger sushi and cheese sushi.²³

The way Singaporeans use *wasabi* and ginger also reflects localization. In Japan, sushi chefs put *wasabi* in every piece of sushi with raw meat. In Singapore, many sushi restaurants (except high-end restaurants which serve mainly Japanese customers) add little or no *wasabi* in the sushi, because some Singaporeans do not like its strange flavor. Instead, customers are given or have to order a small plate of *wasabi* for their personal consumption. For those Singaporeans who like *wasabi*, they put it in any kind of Japanese foods, such as udon, *ramen*, tempura and even miso soup.²⁴ The Japanese always put vinegared ginger slices in the soy sauce, but few Singaporeans do so. Singaporeans do not know that *wasabi* and ginger not only give a special flavor, but also have the important function of killing germs.

With the exception of some high-end restaurants, the management of sushi restaurants in Singapore are more Singaporean than Japanese. Most of them are owned and managed by Singaporeans. In Japan, in sushi restaurants with a long tradition, many sushi masters have received many years (about 8-10 years) of training

²³ *Achar* is a local pickle which mixes cucumber, carrot and pineapple with vinegar and sugar. *Otah-otah*, a salty fish paste, is a popular Malaysian snack. Century egg is a kind of Chinese preserved egg used commonly as appetizer.

²⁴ Siew Yong Lee, *Japanese Food in Singapore: A Case of Cultural Assimilation?* Honor thesis, Department of Japanese Studies, National University of Singapore, 1997/1998, pp. 28-29. Japanese only put *wasabi* in sushi and *soba* (Japanese noodle).

in Japan to work all the way up from apprentices (who wash dishes and do other chores), assistant chefs (who assist senior chefs) to chefs.²⁵ For those who prepare particular sushi (like the poisonous blowfish), they have to acquire a special license from the Japanese Sushi Association. In Singapore, local chefs are hired instead of Japanese chefs in most sushi restaurants. Not only local chefs are much cheaper to hire, but also they are more flexible in changing the menu to suit the local taste. Most of these local chefs have received neither formal training nor a sushi license. A small number of them have finished a three or six-month intensive course at cooking schools for foreigners in Japan. The majority of them learn from Japanese or local chefs in Singapore. Hence, they are not qualified sushi chefs by the Japanese standard. Likewise, captains, waiters and waitresses are Singaporeans. This applies even to the Japanese franchise Genki Sushi. These local employees know little about the Japanese language or customs. They do try to say a few greetings in Japanese, such as “welcome” (*irashaimase*) and “thank you” (*arigatô gozaimasu*), but few can pronounce these phrases correctly. For instance, instead of “irashaimase,” you will hear something like “irashaisasen,” “imasen,” (not in), “sumimasen” (sorry) and even “irimasen.” (do not want it).

Concluding Analysis

Although Singapore is experiencing a sushi boom, the sushi culture in Singapore is still in its early stage of development. It has not yet become a national culture, embraced only by particular ethnicity, age, and gender groups. In terms of ethnicity, sushi is a Chinese subculture in Singapore. Non-Chinese Singaporeans seldom eat sushi because of cultural and economic reasons. They feel that sushi is only for Chinese Singaporeans. Malays and Indians do not like cold and raw foods and it takes

²⁵ Nowadays, some sushi chefs are trained in cooking schools in Japan. For instance, the graduates of the prestigious Tsuji Cooking School can work as sushi chefs in high class hotels and restaurants.

time for them to get used to sushi.²⁶ They usually stick to their own diets. They seldom try Chinese, not to mention Japanese. The Malays worry that pork or pork-related products might have been used in the preparation of sushi and Japanese foods. The other concern is the price. Sushi restaurants are not cheap in Singapore. Most Malays and Indians belong to the low-income groups and thus many cannot afford having sushi in a restaurant. In terms of age and gender, sushi in Singapore is largely a youth and female culture. The middle-aged and elderly are less acceptant of new eating culture. They find sushi too exotic to try. Among young Singaporeans, females like sushi more than males because they think sushi is a cute and healthy food. It is considered cute for its size and colors. Singaporean females have become increasingly health-conscious. Sushi is regarded as a healthy food, because it is digestible, fresh and hygienic. It contains very low fat, sugar and calorie, but is high in protein and vitamins. Some females eat sushi for diet. Many males, however, feel that sushi is too fancy and not substantial. Many eat sushi with their female friends.

In the globalization of Japanese popular culture, Japanization and localization should be seen as the two sides of the same coin. In the context of sushi in Singapore, eating sushi is a form of Japanization of Singapore food culture. Critics are, however, too fast to point this out as a form of cultural imperialism or colonialism, overlooking the fact that we are consuming Singaporean sushi and not Japanese sushi.²⁷ Sushi is

²⁶ This is wrong to think that the Malays are prohibited from eating sushi. As long as there is no pork, Muslims are allowed to eat meat, raw or cooked. Not a few Malays and Indonesians (especially businessmen, technicians and students who have first-hand experiences in Japan and youngsters who are crazy about Japanese popular culture) eat sushi in Malaysia and Indonesia. However, due to cultural, economic and psychological reasons, many Muslims still keep a distance from it. For a discussion on the reception of Japanese food in Indonesia, see Kurasawa Aiko, "Ajia ha Wakon no juyo dekiruka," (Can Asia be Japanized?), in Aoki Tamotsu and Saeki Keishi, eds., *Ajia teki kachi to wa nan ni ka* (What is Asian Value?) (Tokyo: TBS Buritanka, 1998), pp. 183-184.

²⁷ Friedemann Bartu is one such critic, who uses sushi to criticize Japanese cultural colonialism. See Bartu, *The Ugly Japanese* (Singapore: Longman, 1992), p. 183.

re-made and consumed in Singapore. To the majority of Singaporeans who do not know sushi, they take localized sushi as Japanese sushi.²⁸ Hence, culturally, the acceptance of sushi in Singapore and overseas should be viewed as the result of culinary hybridization, cultural interchange, and an interplay of Japanization and localization.²⁹ As a commercial and cultural product, sushi has been localized to a certain extent in different nations. In Singapore, localization is the key to the birth of a sushi culture. Without the localization of sushi, sushi would not have become so popular.

As long as the Japanese community and the popularity of Japanese popular culture continue to grow, sushi will be well-received in Singapore. As localization progresses, its Japaneseness will further dilute. Now when we have a cheese burger in McDonald's, we no longer feel that we are consuming American pop culture.³⁰ Likewise, sushi is on its way to become a universal food or global mass culture without a clear national boundary.³¹ Sooner or later, Singaporeans eat sushi because

²⁸ Ethnic and foreign foods are re-made in Singapore. For instance, Singaporeans believe that their way of eating sashimi (*yusheng*) during the Chinese New Year (*lauhei*) and long cheering (*jemsin*) are Cantonese customs, not knowing that these are actually re-made in Singapore and cannot be found in Hong Kong and the Kwantung province. This kind of myths about food is quite common in Asia. In Hong Kong, Kobe beef steak and Singapore fried *mee hoon* are popular, but we can never find them in Kobe and Singapore.

²⁹ For a study of culinary hybridization in Singapore, see Beng Huat Chua and Ananda Rajah, "Hybridity, Ethnicity and Food in Singapore," Working Paper, No. 133, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1997, pp. 1-24.

³⁰ See James Watson, *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³¹ Stuart Hall has identified Westernization and homogenization as the two characteristics of global mass culture, but stressing that they are never absolutely complete. See his "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in Anthony D. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 28. In the context of Japanese popular culture in Asia, these two characteristics are debatable. In Asia, Japanese mass culture is as strong as its American counterpart. See Leo Ching, "Imaginings in the

of sushi itself more than its national and cultural label. In the realm of global mass culture, the Japanese have provided the form or hardware for foreigners to add the substance. For instance, the Japanese invented the instant *ramen* a few decades ago. Today everyone in the world eat their own localized versions of instant *ramen*. Few associate instant *ramen* exclusively with Japan anymore. Karaoke is now experiencing a similar transformation. People sing their songs in their own languages in a Japanese karaoke machine.³² Sushi may become this kind of global product one day. Globalization of culture is not a one-way traffic and that a cultural product in the process of globalization is bound to be hybridized.³³ In the future, we may have satay maki, fishball sushi and anything Singaporean that we can imagine. Globalization of commercial and cultural products will fuse different cultural traditions and tear down national and cultural barriers.³⁴ It seems that this is an inevitable trend which characterizes popular culture and mass consumption in the post-modern world.

Empire of the Sun: Japanese Mass Culture in Asia,” in John W. Treat, ed., *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (London: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 171. The idea of homogenization is challenged by Joseph Tobin in his “Introduction: Domesticating the West,” in *Re-made in Japan*, pp. 1-41.

³² See Mitsui Toru and Hosokawa Shihei, eds., *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing* (London: Routledge, 1998).

³³ See Jan N. Pieterse, “Globalization and Hybridization,” in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, eds., *Global Modernities* (London: Thousand Oaks, 1995), pp. 45-68.

³⁴ See Roland Robertson, “Mapping the Global Condition: Globalization as the Central Concept,” in Mike Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 18-21. See also Ulf Hannerz, “Scenario for Peripheral Cultures,” in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, p. 119.