

Milo Dinosaur: the life and times of a Southeast Asian national beverage

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Long before COVID-19's spread, Southeast Asia was already struck by the strange ailment known as food heritage fever. Tensions have erupted among citizens in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore over national claims on dishes like chilli crab, *rendang*, and *chendol* over the past decade. Accusations of cultural appropriation have been fuelled by concerns that globally connected urban centres like Singapore are more adept than their neighbours at commodifying food heritage for soft power and tourist dollars.

Less discussed but equally important is the relationship between consumer brands and Southeast Asia's food heritage. It is now commonplace to see 'home-cooked' 'Asian' foods being marketed under established brand names overseas, whether in the form of pre-made spice mixes or restaurant chain offerings steeped in nostalgia. But what about Asian food cultures based on established Western mass consumer brands? How does Western mass manufactured food become Asian national heritage? We can explore these questions in the Southeast Asian context through the curious case of Milo Dinosaur – a concoction whose identity rests on a brand belonging to Nestlé, the world's largest food company.

Milo Dinosaur is a chilled beverage commonly found in casual eateries across Singapore and Malaysia. Vendors blend Swiss multinational Nestlé's chocolate-malt Milo powder with sugar, water, milk and ice, before adding more Milo powder on top. Some recipes even include rainbow sprinkles (fig.1).

Milo Dinosaur's name appears to have originated in Singapore-based Indian-Muslim eateries during the mid-1990s. Eateries claiming credit include A&A Muslim Restaurant, Al-Ameen Eating House, and Al-Azhar Eating Restaurant, all popular with youth and young adults. Many of these open-air outlets were already serving sweetened milk-based beverages like *teh tarik*, ice Milo and *bandung*, as staples. Labelling a turbo-charged version of ice Milo as Milo Dinosaur may have been a way to riff on Singapore's cinema culture, which during the 1990s was saturated with the exploits of giant reptiles in *Jurassic Park* and its sequels.

A second origin story looks towards Malaysia. Singaporeans themselves remember a similarly cloying drink called Milo Shake being served at Malaysian roadside stalls by the mid-1990s. Today, many in Malaysia continue to insist that Milo Dinosaur is a Malaysian creation.

A third line of enquiry focuses on Nestlé's shifting global presence since the colonial era. The essential ingredient in Milo Dinosaur/Milo Shake – Milo powder – was developed by Nestlé chemist Thomas Mayne in Australia during the early 1930s. Milo was initially manufactured in Australia and marketed in British Malaya as a fortified tonic food for aspirational households and professionals. Following independence, Nestlé began manufacturing Milo in both Malaysia and Singapore, persuading consumers on both sides of the causeway to picture Milo as their respective national drink. Present-day Malaysia is believed to have the world's highest per capita consumption of Milo, with Singapore running a close second. In this telling, Milo Dinosaur was ultimately a child of Singapore and Malaysia's joint colonial legacy and openness to Swiss capital.

A fourth narrative enhances Milo Dinosaur's regional popularity from below. Commercial eateries may have gifted Milo Dinosaur its catchy title, but families in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia were preparing versions of the drink at home in all but name beforehand, sometimes unintentionally. Part of Milo's historic charm lies in the powder's unusually coarse and crunchy grain, giving it an



Above: A Milo Dinosaur. Image taken from The Prata Shop website: <http://www.enaqprata.com.sg/milo-dinosaur>.

attractive mouthfeel when consumed 'raw'. Even in the hands of children, Milo was a relatively easy beverage to prepare. One interviewee remembers having enjoyed cold Milo with extra powder on top while growing up in Singapore during the 1980s. As a child he was introduced to the concoction when visiting his neighbours who happened to be Australian immigrants. His parents also allowed him to make his own Milo at home, resulting in occasional happy accidents when the powder was unable to fully dissolve in refrigerated milk.¹

Part of Milo Dinosaur's initial allure thus stemmed from past culinary practice, recalling previous generations of children who furtively gobbled Milo straight from the tin like candy, or sprinkled it on bread as a sugar substitute. Whether at home or outside in each other's company, later generations found in Milo Dinosaur an ideal concoction for recreation. As one Singapore vendor observed, "[the Milo powder] falls all over the ice and they can lick it, roll it over their tongues and enjoy its texture".² We are essentially witnessing the emergence of a super-sized mocktail, occupying the grey space between childhood and the adult world.

Spontaneous play nonetheless co-exists with Nestlé's guiding hand, though it is difficult to gauge the extent of the multinational's influence from public records alone. Nonetheless, in 2009, Nestlé Singapore's managing director openly stated that Milo Dinosaur's earlier development in Singapore coffee shops was partly due to input from a Nestlé sales team. Nestlé has in fact long promoted alternative Milo consumption practices

in Singapore and Malaysian households. Since the late 1950s, Nestlé's Malayan advertisements have occasionally urged consumers to sprinkle Milo powder over bread. Nestlé even advertised a recipe for 'Milo Milk Shake' in 1940 bearing similarities to today's Milo Dinosaur.

Many Southeast Asians appear sanguine that their taste preferences have been remade by a Swiss multinational over several generations. In both Singapore and Malaysia, Milo Dinosaur has been embraced as a socially unifying food item. The beverage's most high-profile episode in Singapore to date came when Joseph Schooling, Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold medallist, drank his childhood beverage at his favourite hawker stall during his victory parade in 2016. Before Schooling's performance, musicians in Singapore were already enrolling the beverage in songs channelling coffee shop cultures and nationalism. A Kuala Lumpur-based rock band went even further, naming itself Milo Dinosaur.

Milo Dinosaur's popularity can ultimately be traced back to Milo itself. Promoted in Malaya since the 1930s as a hygienic, nourishing, yet relatively affordable beverage, Milo insinuated itself into breakfast and night-time routines for time-scarce families. Cups of chilled Milo from roving Milo Vans remain a fond childhood memory for many. With each successive generation, Milo-drinking increasingly brought people together through space and time.

Milo's image, however, is increasingly marred by biological and health concerns. Roughly one-eighth of Milo consists of lactose, limiting its consumption by lactose-intolerant individuals. In Singapore, Malaysia, Australia

and beyond, public concerns about rising levels of diabetes and obesity have helped stigmatize Milo and other sugary drinks. It is perhaps for these reasons that Milo Dinosaur's main clientele have been Asian youth, who sometimes still produce the enzyme needed to digest lactose in large amounts, and are probably less restrained in their consumption of sweetened beverages than grownups. Rather than dwell on its unhealthy physical effects, fans of Milo Dinosaur can take comfort from its more palliative qualities. Eating and drinking remain unrivalled ways to socialize, celebrate, reminisce, and escape the drudgery of everyday life, not least during these coronavirus-laden times.

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Notes

- 1 Interview with Kung Chien Wen, 29 August 2019.
- 2 Dawn Lim. 'Reviving Milo and the Beatles'. *The Straits Times*, 1 May 2006.