

The Heritage of Singapore Hawker Centres

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Abstract - This research essay aims to explore Singapore hawker centre and the hawking profession as a form of intangible and tangible heritage. Hawker food is unique in Singapore due to the rich multicultural and historical background of the country as an immigrant state in the early 19th century.

Much research, particularly in the field of sociology and heritage studies, has gone into the physical and communal space of traditional eateries as well as the cultural and historical aspect of food study in Singapore. This essay will question the government and external organizations' effort in the protection, preservation, and promotion of Singapore's culinary and hawking heritage as one that will have long-term lasting effects on the future of Singapore's foodscape.

The growth of Singapore as a nation state can be seen in the reflection of food that is consumed, how it is consumed, and where it is consumed. The most common place of food consumption in Singapore is in the local hawker centre littered across the island. This essay will zoom in and examine the 'Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre' as an example of Singapore's hawking scene. It will look at both the tangible and intangible heritage of the physical space, as well as the cultural and communal aspect of this marketplace. The history of the location, as well as the ever-evolving purpose and the people in the market and hawker centre will be examined in focus.

Keywords – Singapore Heritage – Food – Hawker Centre – Street Hawking - Tiong Bahru

1 - INTRODUCTION

Singapore is often called a food haven due to the many choices of food from all around the world available. The most common of these would probably be the multicultural hawker food, which has its roots from Singapore's history as a British colony. But as post-independent Singapore matures and its people's lifestyle changed, so does the hawker food and this presents a major challenge to traditional hawkers as less and less people from the younger generation are willing to take up the mantle to continue the trade.

With Singapore's rich food culture and history as part of its heritage, the Singapore government and related

organizations has put in place a series of programmes in the effort to protect, preserve and promote Singapore's culinary and hawking heritage. This essay will examine such efforts and how it will affect Singapore's foodscape in the future. As it would be impossible to go through the 100 plus hawker centres on the island, this essay will zoom in specifically to the 'Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre' as an example of Singapore's hawking scene.

The Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre is unique as it has a wealth of history and ties in closely with the history of the estate itself, which spans from the late 1800s to modern day. The current Tiong Bahru Market has its roots as an organically-formed market area that spawned from the needs of the residents, while the estate itself was born from development during colonial Singapore, where it continues to evolve after World War II and intersect with major progress in post-war Singapore. This make it a prime candidate as an example of the general hawking scene in Singapore.

This essay will chronicle the history of Singapore through the lenses of hawking as a profession. We will first look at the early history of hawking in Singapore, before delving into the origin of Tiong Bahru Market. Next, we would probe the hawking trade and culture as a core part of Singapore's intangible and tangible heritage, before examining the decline of hawker centres in the last couple of years and the government and other organizations responses to that. Lastly it will consider the possible future of our hawking trade and question if the hawker centre still has a place in this fast-paced metropolis island-nation.

2 - EARLY HISTORY OF HAWKING IN SINGAPORE

When Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles established a trading post in 1819, there was a massive influx of migrants from around the world, with the majority emigrating from "China, India and the Malaya Archipelago" to find work in the growing port (Kong and Sinha, 2016, p. 105). Due to the open nature of the port, people were open to foreign influence from the "spices and ingredients being introduced, creating new dishes" (Tan, 2016, p. 10).

Much of the immigrant hail from Southern China due to civil unrest and the lack of food and sources of income to support their poverty-stricken family. The main catalyst in our hawking heritage can be traced back to the Hainanese dialect group, where their late arrival and small number made it difficult to secure jobs such as “banking, trading and shop-keeping” that has been taken up by the other dialect groups (Tan, 2016, p. 12). Instead, the hardworking Hainanese people turned to working in hotels, European and Peranakan households as cooks and domestic helpers (Kong and Sinha, 2016, p. 108). Working in these kitchens have their perks, as the Hainanese workers learned to prepare Western and Peranakan dishes which will prove to be instrumental in many of the Singapore national dishes in the future.

In the coming years, the “changing economic and political conditions during the turbulent pre-and post-war saw the gradual demise of the Hainanese domestic workers” (Kong and Sinha, 2016, p. 108). In the late 1920s and early 1930s there was massive flow of Cantonese single women immigrants due to the tighten restriction the number of male immigrants allowed into Singapore (Koh, 2014). These mostly celibate women were generally known as *majie* and they work in professions that were in direct competition with the male Hainanese workers as domestic helpers.

Besides the competition, the 1930s Great Depression also made matters worse. However, the experiences and skills the Hainanese workers learned while working under others’ employment proved to be useful for their continued survival. Eventually, the Hainanese workers turned to back what they do best – food, beverage and service (Kong and Sinha, 2016, p. 108). This saw the rise of *kopitiam* (coffee shops), confectionaries, eateries along with street food hawking where the other dialect groups also soon follow suit, forging a path of self-employment in the process.

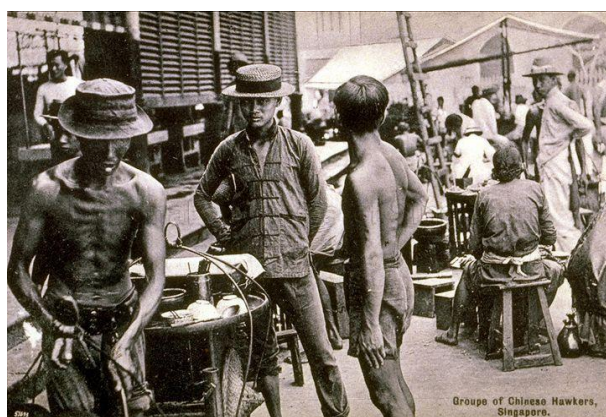


Figure 1. Chinese street hawkers plying their trade outside Telok Ayer Market or Lau Pa Sat, Singapore (c. 1915). Image reproduced from a postcard by The Continental Stamp Company, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Meanwhile, back in the early 1800s, there were “evidence suggests that market places or bazaars emerged organically wherever there was trading” (Tan, 2013). These made up of a loose collection of peddlers and hawkers setting up make-shift shops by placing their goods on the ground, much like the current soon-to-be closed Sungei Road Flea Market (also known as Thieves’ Market).

In the 1820s, Sir Stamford Raffles ordered a construction of a market that will later be known as Telok Ayer Market. It was constantly being rebuilt due to violation of safety regulations (“Former Telok Ayer Market”, 2015) and was eventually demolished in 1841 for being “unable to meet the marketing needs of the growing population in Chinatown” (Tan, 2013). Other markets were also built to serve the needs of different villages and towns that came up as a result of the growing population, with Tiong Bahru Market being one of them. These markets would come to be known as “wet market”, coined in 1970s to differentiate the new air-conditioned “supermarket” (Tan, 2013).

It should be noted that wet market and hawker centre technically serve different function, one for buying grocery while the other for eating meals. However, in the present-day they are usually located in the same building and are commonly named as “market and food centre”. While “market” or “pasar”/“巴刹” (Malay for market) is used in everyday language as a blanket term for both wet market and hawker centre (e.g. *I am going to eat chicken rice at the market later*), it is not uncommon to see stand-alone wet markets and stand-alone hawker centres.

3 – ORIGIN OF TIONG BAHRU AND TIONG BAHRU MARKET

The words Tiong Bahru, much like many words that originates in Singapore, reflect the multicultural society of the country. ‘Tiong Bahru’ combines the Hokkien word ‘冢’ ‘Tiong’ which means ‘cemetery’, and ‘to die’, with ‘Bahru’, meaning new in Malay. Hence, Tiong Bahru means ‘new cemetery’ and that suggest there was another old cemetery before then (Tan, 2013, p. 2).

Indeed, Tiong Bahru, then known as ‘Teong Baru’ or New Chinese Burial Ground “had been in use for 16 years (since 1859)” and was an extension to the already existing ‘Teong Lama’ or Old Cemetery (Tan, 2013, p. 4). Tiong Bahru was undeveloped before the early 20th century, consisting of mainly the cemetery, farmlands and “military personnel from the Sepoy Lines fortification at Pearl’s Hill” (Chua, 2010).

There was also a nearby hospital, known then as the General Hospital, the predecessor of the Singapore General Hospital, and by 1920s, settlers move to live in the low-lying area around the hospital area. This area would later be known as Kampong Tiong Bahru. The overcrowded unkempt settlement would later be

developed in 1930s by the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), a predecessor of the current Housing and Development Board (HDB), and would continue to do so after World War II when there was an intense shortage of housing. By 1950s, there was “an estimated 17,000 people living” in Tiong Bahru flats (Chua, 2010).

Before World War II, two shophouses alongside Tiong Poh Road were converted into a wet market, and this attracted many itinerant hawkers. However, due to the small size of the shophouses, only a few vendors could sell their items indoors, with the rest of the hawkers setting up outside the market (Tan, 2013). By March 1950, the number of hawkers has grown so much that most of the stalls moved to an open area nearby at Seng Poh Road. According to an oral record of Nicholas Tang (1939-2012) from the National Archives of Singapore, the market was made of a wooden structure and the roof made of woven palm leaves and “the place still small and unhygienic”.



Figure 2. New Market Site at Seng Poh Road (1950). Image from Singapore Press Holdings, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

A proper market was eventually opened on 21 January 1951 by the Municipal Commission. Named Seng Poh Road Market, it takes up the space of the current Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre. Publicized as the “most up-to-date market in Singapore” by the Municipal Commission, it bolsters “white tiles, red quarries and white mosaic flooring” (Tan, 2013, p. 13). However, the young market faces a rocky start, with problems such as hawkers being allotted a different stall than what they applied to sell and the lack of stall space. This caused many hawkers to sell their goods outside of the market, and resulted in arguments and discord as hawkers compete for the best spot to setup their stalls.

The hawkers also face the risk of regular police raids where it was more prominent in 1970s when hawker licensing was introduced to deter illegal hawkers. This caused a strain in relation between the people and the police as they try to uphold the law, with “probably only a quarter to a third of the hawkers were licensed in the early 1950s” (Kong, 2007, p. 26). Hawkers would

try to bribe the police or resort to protection from gangs and secret societies, which would lead to corrupted police and more power to gang members. The public sided with the hawkers as they believe they were just poor people trying to earn an honest living. Yet despite the hardship from competitors and the authorities, the hawkers remain steadfast where their “integral place in the Singapore lifestyle was acknowledged, and their role in moderating the prices of food and produce was recognised” (Kong, 2007, p. 27).

Much like the previous make-shift market, Seng Poh Road Market was made of wood but it has a zinc pitched roofs instead. The market was organized based on goods, with a row dedicated to cooked food. Many of these food hawkers were once “been itinerant hawkers or had moved there from nearby coffee shops” (Tan, 2013, p. 13). Aside from the replacement of the roof, nothing much changed physically in the next 50 years in terms of structure, but the market has grown in popularity as a popular spot of eating out. It was also during this period that there was a public health education programme aimed to “discourage unhygienic hawker fare” (Kong, 2007, p. 28), along with a post-independence island-wide Hawker Registration Exercise in 1968 and 1969 where many street hawkers were relocated and given temporary licences (Kong, 2007, p. 30).



Figure 3. Revamped Tiong Bahru Market (2017). Image from author’s collection.

A complete reconstruction of the Seng Poh Road Market took place in 2004 and the stallholders were shifted to a temporary market at Kim Pong Road. The new market reopened in 2006 and was renamed Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre (Tan, 2013, p. 13), with the first floor consisting of the wet market, the second floor made up of hawker food stalls and the third floor as an open-air carpark. The market was closed once more for 3 months starting on 20 February 2017 to “undergo repairs, redecoration and renovation works” and was reopened on 20 May 2017 (“Tiong Bahru Market Reopens”, 2017).

4 – HAWKER CENTRE AS INTANGIBLE AND TANGIBLE HERITAGE

As mentioned by Kennie Ting in *Singapore Chronicles: Heritage*, heritage is a big and complex thing that has a multitude of ways to define it (2015, p. 23). But for the purpose of this essay, tangible heritage refers to something that can be felt by the human senses and exist in a fixed physical form – buildings, physical space, objects and media (such as paintings, photography, and oral records), while intangible heritage are events that had to be experienced in time. These range from the languages and dialects we use to communicate to each other, the trades and practices of hawking, the culinary arts of cooking traditional dishes, as well as our collective memories and nostalgia of our national identity as a whole.

To put into perspective, hawker centre is considered a national heritage, even though it is seen as many as a commodity in many Singaporeans' lives that are often taken for granted. As an example of a tangible heritage, Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre is considered a national heritage due to the significance of the space which holds the memories of it from a pre-war makeshift market to Seng Poh Road Market and to the current Tiong Bahru Market. While today's Tiong Bahru Market resembles little to its predecessor, senior stallholders still hold on to the memory of the place where they would keep memento from the yesteryears, such as the traditional shop sign or an old photo in their phone. It is also interesting to note that the community shrines that features Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist deities in the current market are thought to be the very same shrines that was used in the past.



Figure 4. Tiong Bahru Market during the late 80's (c. 1980s). Image from Tiong Bahru Estate Facebook Page.

As discussed earlier, the history of hawking and its evolution from make-shift street hawking to permanent buildings for selling food is one that is deeply rooted in our national narrative that entitles the hawker centre as a national heritage. Besides the historical aspect, the hawker centre also has a social and cultural aspect attached to it.

As the epicentre of Singapore's food culture, street hawking was "greatly influenced by its geographical location and its diverse population" (Tung, 2016). Not just in Seng Poh Road Market, street hawking in general remains a popular employment option in the years after World War II, which could be attributed to high unemployment rate coupled with "low capital investment and skills" required in the trade (Tung, 2016). Street hawking is characterised by its colourful, vibrant atmosphere, with a distinct aroma and a diverse multicultural cast of hawkers and customers. The imagery of pushcarts, baskets and floor mat filled with goods, food and refreshments in a dynamic street life root deeply into the nation's collective romantic nostalgia. The origins of different dishes, the way it is prepared and consumed also contribute to the intangible heritage of our traditional culinary arts.

The interactions between hawkers and customers, along with congregation of people is what defines the intangible heritage of street hawking that is still prevalent in today's hawker centre. Even in early post-war Singapore, English was not yet a common language shared by all ethnic groups with most opting to speak in their native dialect and language. Yet it was in this unusual situation that people from different race and ethnicities were still able to communicate with each other, and even going so far to speak in others' mother tongue. Banter and shop haggling were also common sight, with mothers passing down the shopping skills to their daughters and these were seen as invaluable skills to be a good housewife (Tan, 2016, p. 28).

It is perhaps the longing for the slow, simple, mundane life that encapsulate the hawker centre as a time bubble of an age long past as Singaporeans rush to meet the demands of the gross domestic product (GPD) growth set by the ruling party. It would prove to be a futile attempt as the Tiong Bahru estate has changed drastically over the years, from the colourful Great World Amusement Park to the modernising of the estate, where high rise apartments, western cafes, and hotels surround the area. This is evident in the number of foreigners, mostly expatriates, that frequent the Tiong Bahru Market.

The evolution of hawking as a profession itself is also seen as oxymoron, and thought to be puzzling to people not aware of Singapore's culture and history. Itinerant hawkers used to set up shop in place where there are crowds, usually near residential areas or places many would go to, such as amusement parks or theatres but nowadays with the legalising of hawkers and purpose-built facilities, the crowd would go to them instead. This changes the way people interact with each other, as hawker centre now also serve an underlying function of social cohesion, much like the *kopitiam* during the colonial era, where Chinese workers would gather to listen to the radio or to chat with each other before being called for work.

5 - RESPONSE TO THE DECLINE OF HAWKING

According to a survey by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports in 2005, about two in ten youth felt that hawker centres were losing their appeal (Kong, 2007, p. 159). It is thought that due to being born in better circumstances, younger Singaporeans would prefer food outlets with air-conditions or places that are considered “modern” such as restaurants in shopping malls (Kong, 2007, p. 163). Some of the hawker food are also seen as less healthy.

On the flip side, the older generation such as working adults and senior citizens would prefer hawker centre as it offers a wide variety of dishes at affordable price and are often located at convenient places near offices and residential apartments.

Fast forward a decade later, the root issue in the decline of hawking would come from the hawkers themselves. In an oral interview with Assistant Professor Liew Kai Khiun, “more people have been moving from blue collar to white collar jobs in the past four to five decades, so hawker trade has still been seen as a manual low-skill profession”. This reflects the shift of the major industries in Singapore from one that relied heavily on factory production in the past to office job in the information technology, engineering, service and finance sector where younger Singaporeans would prefer a steady income working in a comfortable environment. Long working hours and the need to work on weekends and public holidays were also often associated with the hawking profession, which only further deter younger Singaporean from taking up the hawking trade.

Another barrier for new would-be hawkers would be the issue of money. Rents were heavily subsidised in the past to encourage street hawkers to move into hawker centres. These people are known as the “first-generation hawkers” (Kong, 2007, p. 141). For new hawkers, besides the high rental cost they will also need to amass a huge sum of money for the license and the stall before even able to sell their first plate of food in one of the world most expansive cities. To complicate matters, the new hawkers would be put at a disadvantage as they not only have to compete with first-generation hawkers on the price of their food, but they also compete against upmarket Food and Beverage (F&B) outlets that has increasingly becoming more prominent and popular with the younger generation.

While there are indeed youth, which includes university and polytechnic graduates, who has taken up the mantle of becoming a next-generation “hawkerpreneur” (Mendoza, 2016), they are more of an exception than the norm. This caused many senior hawkers, where their medium age is around 59 (Boh, 2017), to be unable to find a replacement to carry on their trade. This has alarmed food bloggers, hawkers, academics and the government. Food critic K.F. Seetoh phrase it as such - “every old master who is calling it quits is like a

few million living cells dying our body without regeneration” (Seetoh, 2012).

Much like Daniel Yap’s quirky line in his opinion piece in Today newspaper, “we have to take action to preserve it. I hope it does not mean pickled and on display in a museum, or as a tourist gimmick, like the trishaw” (Yap, 2013), the protection and preservation of our hawker heritage should not be to do nothing until the traditional trade becomes extinct and be reduced to nothing but an empty husk of its former self. To that end, the government and many other organizations has implemented programmes and ideas to ensure our next generation will be able to enjoy what our forefathers did.

In Lily Kong’s 2007 *Singapore Hawker Centres*, she outlined several measures that were used at that time. These includes the promoting hawker centres, promoting cooking as a career and improving hygiene and service (Kong, 2007, p. 165-170).

The promotion of hawker centre revolves around teenagers, with a focus on channels such as the Internet and blogs. This happened at the time during the infancy of social media, where Facebook and YouTube were just starting out and MySpace and Blogger were youth’s platform of choice. For the promotion of a cooking career, K.F. Seetoh recommended the need to “position street food as a craft, culture and culinary art” (Kong, 2007, p. 167). He proposed the promotion of cooking courses as an alternative education option for youth. Lastly, to address the concern of hygiene in a crowded food centre, the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) has a compulsory course on basic food hygiene where “the cost of the course is borne by WDA and Community Development Councils (CDCs)” (Kong, 2007, p. 169).

In the 2010s, there was a resurgence of popularity in Singapore heritage as the nation prepares to celebrate the 50th year of independence, also known as “SG50” or the “Golden Jubilee”. These includes initiatives such as the Singapore Memory Project that started in 2011, where they published a photobook called “Pasar: The Personalities of Singapore’s Wet Markets” in 2014; the setup of “Heritage Trail” by National Heritage Board (NHB) around different landmarks and places of interest, of which Tiong Bahru Market is one such location; the Singapore Chronicles series in 2015 and 2016, which includes “Singapore Chronicle: Food” and “Singapore Chronicle: Heritage”. The annual Singapore Food Festival, organised by the Singapore Tourism Board, also incorporate hawker food and hawker centres as part of their line-up of events.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) and NHB, along with the partnership of National Arts Council (NAC) and Nippon Paint Singapore also organized an initiative called “Our Hawker Centres - A Heritage & Art Project” in 2015 where “more than 70 schools and organizations” created “133 wall murals and art installations” in 44 hawker centres island-wide (“Our

Hawker Centres”, 2016). Tiong Bahru Market and Food Centre contains one such mural by Jolyn Kang, a graduate of Singapore Polytechnic’s Design School. After the renovation of Tiong Bahru Market in May 2017, non-profit organisation *SCAPE organised a photo exhibition named “Zoom Out” of photographs by youths and guided by professional photographer Edwin Koo. During the photo exhibition period, *SCAPE also organized Photo Walks where members of the public are encouraged to join. The positive responses from events like these shows that social engagement does indeed make the stale hawker centre a much more enjoyable experience rather than just a place to do grocery shopping and having a meal.



Figure 5. Zoom Out Photo Exhibition organised by *SCAPE (2017). Image from author’s collection.

In 2017, it was announced in Parliament the setup of a ‘Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee’. It will “review and make recommendations to the Government on the management and design of new hawker centres, as well as provide suggestions to sustain and promote our hawker trade” (“Cooking up Hawker Centre 3.0”, 2017). It does so by examining four main areas – sustaining the hawker trade, improving hawkers’ productivity, enhancing hawker centres as a social space, and promoting graciousness.

As part of the programme, the NEA has partnered with the People’s Association courses where members of the public can “learn to cook hawker fare from veteran hawkers” (Neo, 2017). The NEA will also set up more than 10 incubation stalls for aspiring hawkers to where they have half a year to learn the ropes. A short course on hawker business management with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) will also be developed. To make it easier to obtain information, the NEA will also set up a one-stop information centre to provide information and guidelines on the hawking profession.

The NEA will also upgrade existing hawker centres by having free Wi-Fi, a centralising dishwashing service, cashless payment systems, as well as automation equipment to “raise productivity and keep costs low” (Boh, 2017). Tiong Bahru Market undergo such upgrade earlier in 2017, where it is now equipped with

energy-efficient LED lights, flat-screen televisions, large fans, as well as movable seats for wheelchair patrons. It will also come fitted with solar panels in the latter half of 2017.

Public perception and usage of the wet market and hawker centre has changed over time, where it used to be a place where one would do most of their shopping and daily meals, with today’s competition of attention from supermarket and shopping malls, hawker centre also need to evolve and change with the times. With the government planning to build 20 more hawker centres by 2027, it might come at a time too late as even in current hawker centres, many stalls are either empty or closed.

6 - THE FUTURE OF HAWKER CENTRES

In an interview with Mr Loh Teck Seng, the chairman of the Tiong Bahru Market Association, he spoke with an optimistic enthusiasm that “wet market will still be around and would die for the next 20-30 years at least” as the market is not just a place for shopping and eating, but also “a platform for community to come together and bond”, and will continue to be relevant in the future (Zheng, 2013). The question of youth’s participation in a community came up again as a second-generation fishmonger from Tiong Bahru Market hopes that more youth would come to the wet market.



Figure 6. The first VendCafe at Anchorvale Drive was set up in August 2016. (2016). Image from MediaCorp.

In August 2016, JR Food Group opened the first-of-its-kind food vending machine café, called VendCafe, in Singapore. It consists of “a cluster of vending machines that serves hot meals” (Lee, 2016) which serve not only local dishes but also western meals such as pasta, sandwiches, and orange juice. This might seem like a threat and an addition competition to traditional hawker centre, but Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam emphasised that the government “should never do away with our hawker centres, because there you have individual hawkers, proprietors with their own special touch and their own special recipes” and that “it’s just part of the daily routine” as vending machines that offer food are already present in hospitals and tertiary schools (Lee, 2016). Health expert

Mr Louis Yap from Parkway East Hospital also warn that ready-to-ear meals have higher salt content that “could put people at risk of hypertension or cardiovascular diseases” and that time-strapped consumers should “opt for healthier choices at food courts or hawker centres” (Chia, 2017).

Regardless, the vending machine café has proved to be very popular, to the point that the machines has overheated due to continuous usage and popular dishes were sold out early (Leow & Oh, 2016). The appeal of being able to eat a hot meal anytime, convinces of being located just below residential apartments, and similar pricing with what consumers are used to in hawker centre will seem to only increase its patronage.

Another trend in the F&B sector is the use of automation. In 2017, a high-tech coffee shop - Chang Cheng's "FoodTastic" was launched at Choa Chu Kang. Consumers are literally able to purchase and consume a meal without any contact with any staff. This is made possible by digital ordering via kiosks and mobile app that allows for cashless payment. Another high-tech coffee shop in Tampines also boast having an automated floor cleaning robot and dish sorting and washing machine. These measures were done due to “manpower constraints” and the need to reduce the reliance on manual labour (Ramchandani, 2017).

In addition to that, to combat the lack of locals running hawker stalls, permanent residents from other countries such as Philippine and China open stalls “bravely try to produce foods they may not have even taste before” (Tan, 2016, p. 85). They could be a glimpse of what hawker centre could become in the near future as less and less Singaporeans are willing to take on manual labour jobs.

The drawback of such automation come at the cost of personalise service. Whereas in hawker centres you could build relation with the hawker and they would eventually know the kind of special order for your dish. It could also be argued that personalise service comes with a kind of “human touch” and “warmth” that lacks in non-contact services.

There is also a risk of traditional dishes being extinct and “lost totally to the younger generation” when a person with the knowledge and skill cannot pass them on to the next generation (Tan, 2016, p. 87). On the flip side, certain dishes can be found pre-packaged in supermarkets or have a more amped up version in extravagant restaurants.

In the past few years there has also been cafes and eatery that bank on the idea of heritage, one such café is the Tian Kee & Co café in Dakota Crescent (that has since closed due to redevelopment of the estate) that not just physically resembles a traditional provision shop as it is refurbish from one, but the food being served were inspired by nostalgia of yesteryear. Channel NewsAsia report John Leong suggest that even though the owner of the café is not considered a hawker, the hawker scene could be redefined as more about its evolution and less

about what is being served, as some of the younger generation would like to create new dishes, and having a diversity of different dish is “what makes Singapore very special” (Leong, 2016).

Perhaps the future of hawker centres might not be so bleak, if we were to consider the changes to hawking and hawker centre as a natural evolution instead of treating them as being phased out and replaced by something completely different.

7 – CONCLUSION

In summary, this essay has brought us from the founding of Singapore in 1819 till today and having a glimpse of the future through the lenses of hawking and hawker centre.

We first look at how the Hainanese were the catalyst of our early hawking profession and the organic growth of market from the desire to trade and sell goods. Next, we examine the in-depth history of Tiong Bahru and Tiong Bahru Market (formerly Seng Poh Road Market) as the nation developed from colonial period, to World War II and post-independence as the struggle between hawkers and authority rage on. In the next section, we discuss the tangible and intangible aspect of hawker centre and the idea of nostalgia and longing for the past. We are back in the present for the next section as we delve into the reasons to the decline of hawker centre and how does the government react to it, along with support from other organisations such as *SCAPE. Lastly, we took a peek into the future by predicting how our hawker centre and the hawking culture might change and evolve base on the direction the nation is heading.

Some questions to ponder would probably be related on the effectiveness of such government’s action. As the name ‘Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee’ implies, this is not the first time such committee were setup, yet the situation of our hawking heritage has only worsened. Is disappearance, becoming a trishaw gimmick or preservation inside a museum the only path it will go? Or could we classify the evolution of hawking such as heritage café as being part of the hawker scene?

Maybe we are looking too far into the future and we should instead take one step at a time and enjoy what our hawkers have to offer before many more disappear from our food map.

To conclude, Singapore has come a long way from a humble free-trade port to a first world metropolis, yet along the way, in our quest for hasten growth and globalization, we might have forgotten and left behind pieces of what made us what we are today. With the renewed interest and longing for a slower past, perhaps one day even if hawker centre were to vanish from our little island, it might still live on in one form or another, reminding our grandchildren of a beautiful and vivid past that we all share as Singaporeans.

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