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Heart of the Community

The History & Heritage of Singapore Hawker Centers

By Asif R. Chowdhury

There is no better place than a hawker center to get a true glimpse of Singaporean culture, tradition, and pastime. Singaporeans of all shapes, sizes, colors, creeds, status, and ethnicities descend on these community dining rooms to have their meals as a family or with their friends. One will hear people chatting in Singlish (Singaporean English) as well as their native Chinese, Malay or Tamil – the four key languages used here by three distinctly different ethnic groups that make up ninety-nine percent of all Singaporeans.

Then, of course, there are the plethora of local foods and delicacies, as well as western style foods, all available at an extremely reasonable price for a country that has often been listed as one of the most expensive places in the world to live. *National Geographic* rightfully stated that a hawker center is like having “all of Singapore under one roof.” If visitors confuse the hawker centers with Western-style food courts, they will be mistaken. Unlike the food courts, Singaporeans don’t come to the hawker centers simply to get

fast food. Hawker centers are more a way of life here, where family and friends gather for their daily meals, with its history and tradition going back over two hundred years. Of course, compared to the old tradition of hawking on the streets of Singapore, today’s hawker centers are modern and orderly settings, part of a culture that has been inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Origin of Hawkers

The long and somewhat tumultuous history of hawkers in Singapore goes back to the early 1800s, when Lieutenant Governor, Sir Thomas Raffles, established the island as a major port in 1819. His primary objective was to challenge the Dutch dominance in the region. Within decades, Singapore had become a thriving port-city, and along with that came the need for a massive work force attracting people from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and other neighboring countries. Most of these migrants were laborers,

merchants, clerks, cooks, and everyday workers. Some of the new arrivals found street hawking to be a relatively easy way to earn a living requiring very little skill and minimal capital. The foods they peddled were representative of their authentic home cooked meals, hailing from their respective countries and regions. For the vast majority of migrant workers, these street foods not only provided access to cheap daily meals, but also gave them a taste of their original homeland. They simply devoured these street foods, creating a significant demand, and the number of street hawkers only grew. By the mid-1800s, the streets of Singapore were lined with the colors and aromas from hundreds of these street hawkers.

this time they were determined to do something about it. Over the next few decades, the British tried to take several steps to control the hawkers, working alongside with local authorities. In fact, one of those steps is what gave birth to the current concept of hawker centers.

Regulating Street Hawkers

First, the authorities passed a law in 1903 requiring all street hawkers to officially register. To handle the matter urgently, the colonial government also transferred the prime responsibility of addressing the issue from Governor Sir John Anderson's office in London to the local Municipal Commission Committee

in 1906. A separate Singapore Sanitation Commission was formed, which was led by the Chief Health Officer of Calcutta (British India) Sir William John Ritche Simpson.

Sir Simpson published his findings to the Municipal Commission Committee in 1907. Among other key recommendations to improve Singapore's public sanitation conditions, the study recommended the

creation of central back alleys for hawkers to reduce congestion on the main thoroughfares. Interestingly, the Deputy President of the Municipal Commission, a gentleman named John Polglase, suggested that instead of just ushering the hawkers into the back alley, perhaps some sort of centralized "shelters" for the hawkers could be constructed in order to house them in one place. It was a simple idea, providing the street hawkers "shelter" from the occasional rain and the sweltering Singapore sun during daytime. Additionally, water could be piped into these shelters and made available to the hawkers for their cooking and cleaning – this would provide a significant benefit as the hawkers either had



While the migrant workers loved the hawker foods, the local British authorities developed a fundamental disdain towards the street hawkers. They thought of them as nothing more than a public nuisance and a hazard to public health, hygiene, and safety. However, the authorities tolerated them as the British were wise enough to realize that hawkers were a necessary evil, providing very cheap food to the local laborers and workers. By the early twentieth century, the number of street hawkers had grown to a point where they were indeed choking the city's traffic and creating unsanitary conditions by disposing their waste on the streets. The issue made it onto the radar of the local colonial government, and

to carry loads of water or use whatever other source of water they could find. In most cases, those sources were likely unsanitary. In exchange for an allotment of space inside the shelters, the hawkers would pay a nominal rental fee. Unfortunately, at that time the shelters were not built due to cost constraints. But this was the birth of the idea of today's hawker centers.

Though some effort was taken to license the hawkers during the mid-1920s, the issue was basically shelved as the world entered the dark chapter of the First World War (1914–1918). After the war, the local colonial authority again wanted to get the hawkers to the back alley, and this time, they decided to go with the Polglase's hawker shelter idea.



A street hawker in 1920 carrying his food and tools (source: National Archives of Singapore)

The very first shelter was built in 1921 at Kreta Ayer, which is in today's Chinatown. Not surprisingly, most hawkers didn't want to pay the rent and remained peddling their food on the street. Of course, one hawker center was not enough to address the broader issue of street hawking. By this time, the authorities just about had enough of these unruly and uncontrollable hawkers.

In 1924, the local health officer made a radical decision to completely eradicate the street hawkers and recommended to making street hawking illegal. This created an uproar and faced

strong protest from the thousands of hawkers and their many supporters - they were the bulk of Singapore's work force who depended on these hawkers for their daily meals. With the massive support for street hawkers, the authorities had to abandon their plan to stop street hawking. Had they not paid heed to the voice of the masses and indeed stopped street hawking, it would likely have starved most of the working population then, and we most likely would not have the hawker centers in Singapore today.

Coming Around to Hawker Shelters

Over the course of the next decade, six hawker shelters were built in People's Park; Carnie Street; Queen Street; Balestier Road; and Lim Tua Tow Road. All still exist today, obviously redeveloped. Slowly, the hawker shelter idea started to work. Realizing the advantage of a central location with access to clean water, some hawkers started to move into these shelters. However, these shelters failed to address the main issue of street congestion and unsanitary conditions as the sheer number of hawkers far outstripped what these limited number of shelters could house. It was estimated that there were more than 10,000 hawkers,

many still unlicensed at that time, while the six shelters could only accommodate 383 hawkers. Building the required number of shelters would be prohibitively expensive. So once again, the authorities found themselves looking for other solutions to solve the issue of Singapore's street hawkers. In the early 1930s, another committee was formed to investigate the issue further, but with the dark shadow of another world war looming, not much was accomplished.

During most of the Second World War, the Japanese forces occupied Singapore (1942–1945). They allowed the street hawkers go about their

business. In fact, the Japanese authorities reduced the rent to encourage more street hawkers to move into the shelters. But the number of hawkers dropped during the war due to food shortages. The post-war period saw a significant resurgence in the number of street hawkers along with the population boom. A few other hawker shelters were built in the 1950s, but to a large extent, the hawkers remained unregulated, working along the streets of Singapore providing meals for the masses.

The real effort that ultimately resulted in moving all the street hawkers into the hawker centers we

experience and enjoy today started in the early 1970s. In 1972, the relatively new Ministry of Environment came up with an ambitious plan to settle over twenty-five thousand street hawkers in permanent shelters to be built around the island. During the same period, Singapore also started its grand vision of providing low-cost housing for every Singaporean who needed it, through

the efforts of the Housing Development Board (HDB). The vision of HDB housing was to build basic-style, high-rise, low-cost apartments all around the island and to ensure that the residents had easy access to most of their daily needs, including shops, public transportation, recreational facilities, and food. So, the Ministry of Environment teamed up with HDB, as well as Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC), to find suitable locations for hawker shelters. The shelters would be built around the HDB flats, at various shopping areas and strategic locations all around the island. They changed the name from "shelters" to "hawker centers."

It wasn't an easy task to accomplish. It took the government about 15 years to build all the

necessary hawker centers and to move all of the hawkers off the street. During the early years, many street hawkers didn't care for being licensed and refused to move into the hawker centers. There are many stories from the seventies where scuffles broke out between the street hawkers and the health inspectors, resulting in injuries. But slowly, the hawkers started to move into these centers as they realized the many benefits they provided. Aside from providing shelter from the elements and access to water, having a loyal customer base from the local HDB was a welcome change.



Children enjoying street hawker food at Trengannu Street in 1971 (source: National Archives of Singapore)

Over the years, these centers have become the dining rooms for the local community. During the 15-year period, from 1971 to 1986, a total of 108 hawker centers were built. With the increase in Singapore's population, the government has built an additional seven hawker centers since 2011, and plans to build more during the coming decade.

Hundreds of years of street hawking has given rise to some new food innovations, as well as some delicious fusions, which have now become part of the mainstream local cuisines. Apparently, the famous Fish Head Curry was invented here in Singapore by an Indian hawker. Originally from Kerala, he noticed that the local Chinese people liked fish heads. So, to attract Chinese customers,

he started to cook fish head using Indian spices and curry. We also have the famous Hokkien Mee (Prawn Noodles), developed by a couple of brothers, cooking on brick stove by the side of the road. There are other more recent and popular fusion foods, such as the Satay Burger, Chili Crab Pasta, Orange Kaya Cream Brulée, and Liu Sha Bao Doughnut (lava salted egg custard inside a sugar glazed doughnut).

In a 2018 poll conducted by National Heritage Board, “food heritage” was highlighted as the key element of Singapore’s cultural heritage. Many of the three thousand participants in that poll highlighted the importance of hawker center and hawker culture for the country. The government decided to undertake an effort to nominate hawker

centers for UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was submitted by the Singapore government in March of 2019, was inscribed on the list on December 16, 2020.

Despite the fact that only one hundred year ago, the British considered eliminating hawker from the streets of Singapore altogether, many British visitors, and tourists from around the globe, visit hawker centers today as part of the local experience. Indeed, the hawker culture of Singapore has come a long way since it began over two hundred years ago. Today one can dine on MICHELIN starred hawker food – in fact the world’s first street food to receive a MICHELIN Star was awarded to Singapore’s

hawker Chan Hon Meng, for his famous chicken rice dish. Renowned culinary experts, chefs and critics visit hawker centers regularly, including the likes of the late Anthony Bourdain, who did an episode of his television show on Singapore’s hawker food.



Present day Newton Food Center, opened in 1971, in what was first a garden setting (Photo credit: Asif R. Chowdhury)

Hawker centers remain a humble hallmark of Singapore’s food culture, offering daily meals for the masses with all kinds of clean, good, local food and delicacies for very reasonable prices. They are truly the heart and soul of Singapore life.

Don't forget! It is now compulsory to clear your tray at hawker centers. First-time offenders will receive a warning, while second-time offenders will face a \$300 fine.



Asif is part of the executive management team of a global semiconductor company and has written for various magazines and trade journals. Asif spent four years as an expatriate in Tokyo, Japan, and three years in Seoul, South Korea, which led him to travel extensively in those countries and across the region. He currently lives in Singapore with his wife and son, while his daughter is working in his home state of Texas.

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