

# Singapore's hawker culture at a crossroads

Hawker centres have been a key part of life in Singapore, but change is inevitable, and they may take on very different forms in the future.



Lily Kong

Do you know that Singapore's oldest hawker retired only recently at the age of 90, while the average age of new entrants is 34?

These were among the findings that emerged from my second extended exploration into the world of hawkers in Singapore. In 2007, I was the happy author of *Singapore Hawker Centres: People, Places, Food*. I had always wanted to chronicle this evolving institution, and the National Environment Agency (NEA), in inviting me to write the book then, had given me just the opportunity to turn hawker centre trips into "field work".

Friends thought I had written a *Makansutra* guide, but the book was much more about the history, culture and socio-economic significance of a well-loved institution.

I had thought there would nary be a chance of a second edition, as decisions had been taken in the 1980s not to build any more hawker centres in Singapore. This was premised on the belief that, over time, Singaporeans might not prefer hawker centres to myriad other food establishments easily available – foodcourts, fast-food joints, coffee shops, restaurants and so on. Today, I am delighted that a second edition – substantially rewritten and updated – has been published.

So much has happened in the intervening 15 years since I last wrote the first edition. I originally began thinking that some new hawkers might be featured, and some new hawker stalls and hawker centres might be introduced. Instead, whole chapters have been rehauled. I have undertaken much more field work, interviewed many more people in roles that previously did not exist, and addressed issues that were not on the horizon a decade and a half ago.

One key example is the chapter on hawker trade as enterprise. The dramatic changes wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, hastening the use of digital tools, mean that new platforms are now in use where they did not exist previously, new business models have emerged that have enabled some to surge ahead while others have been left behind, and new roles have been created where they were unimagined previously.

### THREE MILESTONES

Singapore's hawker culture has been dynamic. Perhaps one of the most stark manifestations of that struck me when I saw a sign in a hawker centre that said "No hawking please". The irony arose from the slippage between the dual conceptions of a hawker – as itinerant, on the one hand, and fixed and settled, on the other. That evolution of what a hawker means signals the transformative journey that we must continue to expect. Cultures are not static, nor should they be fossilised. The pace and direction of change is what gets debated and negotiated.

In the annals of Singapore's hawker culture, there are several milestones. While itinerant hawkers were known to exist in Singapore's early history, 1923 marks the first known "shelter for hawkers" (in People's Park) – fully 100 years back. These were few and far between, and the itinerant character of most hawking persisted for decades beyond that.

In fact, that very character posed many challenges – traffic congestion, public health challenges and disorderly sprawls, "in defiance of all order and reason", according to a 1950 Hawkers Inquiry Commission Report. Yet, it was the same report that marked the second milestone in hawker culture, for it acknowledged the hawkers' integral place in the Singapore lifestyle, and the role they played in moderating food and produce prices. The resultant policy allowed hawkers to remain in the face of an undeniable disposition among officials to regard hawkers as a public nuisance deserving of removal from the streets.



Hawker stalls in Albert Street in January 1981. These stalls were subsequently relocated under the plan to resettle street hawkers in hawker centres. ST FILE PHOTO



Whether hawker culture will last for long depends on whether we accept that cultures evolve, says the writer. If we recognise they do, we accept that hawker culture will morph over time, and the character of the hawker, nature of food, experience of dining and manner of purchase may transform in evolutionary ways. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

By 1968, a third milestone was marked – the year when an islandwide hawkers registration exercise commenced, bringing hawkers firmly into the formal economy. These early post-independence years were also the time when a concerted building programme commenced for hawker centres within HDB estates as we know them. That era ended in 1986 with the last hawkers resettled into the then new hawker centres, and no new ones were built for over two decades. In 2011, a reverse decision was made to recommence the building of hawker centres, marking a happy turnaround.

### 2020: A DEFINING CHAPTER

Perhaps above all these milestones, the year 2020 will be remembered as a defining time. The onset of Covid-19 and subsequent "circuit breaker" period from April 7 through June 1 severely tested the resilience of all, especially hawkers. Some adapted swiftly by modifying their business models and processes. Others succumbed to the challenging circumstances, particularly those in deserted city centres as remote work became the norm.

Cooking under pandemic conditions also posed various constraints. Hawkers were uncomfortable wearing masks all day, and it was not easy to understand customers speaking through masks. Attempts to pivot to online ordering and delivery platforms were uneven. Some hawkers jumped onto the digital transformation journey while others preferred to shut down during that time, and for some, even beyond. Shortages of supplies created another set of

challenges. Amid these trials, 2020 concluded with an exultant milestone – the successful inscription of hawker culture on the Unesco Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This accolade attests to the resilience of Singapore's hawker legacy and underscores its significance within the tapestry of Singaporean life.

Yet, amid the jubilation, there were murmurs about whether this was a wise step for Singapore to take – inscription obliges the country to adopt policies and establish institutions to monitor and promote the intangible cultural heritage, as well as take other appropriate safeguarding measures. Can Singapore "hold on" to hawker culture and not witness its demise over time?

### HAWKER CULTURE ANXIETIES

Anxieties about safeguarding the long-term sustainability of hawker culture revolve around a few questions: Will young people still want to dine at hawker centres in time to come? Will the younger generation take on the mantle that senior hawkers throw off as they retire? Will the type of food change beyond recognition? Will costs go up so much that they can no longer serve the function of providing affordable fare? Will delivery options leave behind the experience of community dining?

One study – the 2021 NEA Hawker Perception Survey – offered cause for optimism. Overall experiences of and attitudes towards hawker centres were positive. Among the respondents, 72.4 per cent ate at hawker centres or said they take away food from a hawker centre

at least once a week. Satisfaction remained high across all aspects of the hawker experience – 93.5 per cent overall satisfaction, 96 per cent food affordability, 97.3 per cent food quality, 96.2 per cent food variety, and 85.6 per cent dining environment. An overwhelming 96.8 per cent responded favourably to "I am proud of our hawker culture", and 87.3 per cent agreed hawker centres are places that promote interaction among people from all walks of life.

Notwithstanding these positive sentiments, the other questions raised above remain. Whether hawker culture will last for long depends on whether we accept that cultures evolve. If we recognise that they do, then we accept that hawker culture will morph over time. This means that the character of the hawker, the nature of the food, the experience of dining and the manner of purchase may transform, not in big radical turns, but in evolutionary ways.

### WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Important efforts have been put into trying to encourage young Singaporeans to enter the hawker trade. For example, in 2021, NEA introduced the Hawkers Succession Scheme to help veteran hawkers with at least 15 years of experience operating hawker food stalls pass down their skills. Over a three-month apprenticeship and a two-month mentorship after stall takeover, aspiring hawkers learn from veterans, inherit recipes, and access an established clientele.

These endeavours appear to have borne some fruit. The number of younger hawkers among new entrants appears to be slowly growing. While the

median age of existing hawkers is 60, that of new entrants is 34.

While the Hawkers Succession Scheme pairs entrants with old hands, and recipes are inherited, there is also another emerging cohort of "hawkerpreneurs", driven by a pursuit of excellence in culinary craft. They resonate with notions of "honouring brands" and accentuating "authentic flavours". They recognise the "importance of plating", and seek to elevate "heritage food with finesse". These savvy young people also adeptly navigate social media platforms, notably Instagram, leveraging their online presence to build a customer base that inspires patrons to venture beyond their immediate neighbourhoods.

Might hawkers be given better recognition and valorised more for their efforts? Might hawkers no longer be called hawkers, who are, after all, no longer itinerant, but chefs in their own right? Might there be established Singapore's own culinary awards, pairing with the Michelin Bib Gourmand awards to elevate and acknowledge "star" culinary artists? More controversially, would non-Singaporeans be able to set up stall, and therefore introduce more and different cuisines?

Improving working conditions is another key consideration in safeguarding hawker culture. Can the hot and sweaty environment, sticky tables and dirty toilets be turned around so that patrons and prospective hawkers are not put off?

The Hawker Centres Transformation Programme introduced in 2021 by NEA seeks to make the environment more salubrious, with wider aisles and more airiness, enhancing crowd

management and sustainability practices. There is a pressing need for ongoing innovations to make hawker spaces more conducive.

Meanwhile, the digitalisation journey at hawker centres is also under way. Its effect has been uneven thus far, but moving ahead, minimally, would all payments be cashless? Could all ordering be done online in advance of making one's way to a hawker centre?

More radically, is it conceivable that a physical hawker stall is not a necessary part of hawker culture, which is built on food delivery systems instead? Might we go to a hawker centre for its communal experience, but have hawker food delivered from anywhere? Might there even be a future where the preparation and cooking of hawker food are achieved with the help of artificial intelligence and robotics, and how might this challenge perceptions of the traditional hawker?

What forms future hawker culture should take stokes passionate discussion and debate. For those who cherish and desire longevity for the current form of hawker culture, radically reimagining a well-loved and familiar aspect of Singaporean life evokes strong reactions to the potentially iconoclastic innovations. Only time will tell what the future holds.

Lily Kong is president and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor at Singapore Management University. The second edition of her book, *Singapore Hawker Centres: People, Places, Food*, published by the National Environment Agency and the National Heritage Board, will be launched on Dec 18 at the Peranakan Museum.