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Hawker culture and its infrastructure: Experiences and contestations in everyday life

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INTRODUCTION

Hawker foods characterize urban Asia, with similarities and differences across cities that forge both cultural commonalities and distinctions. From the itinerant to the fixed location, from the temporary sites to the purpose- built, hawker foods are served in informal settings, with varying degrees of tradition and innovation, hygiene and squalidness, local authenticity and globalized influence. In the side- streets of Beijing where local delicacies such as scorpion are served, to the abundant food cart vendors on Bangkok streets, to the *warung* (small, typically family- owned eateries) in Surabaya, and the carefully planned and designed hawker centres in Singapore, hawker culture is a distinctive characteristic of Asian urban culture. This usually low- priced food option feeds a consumption culture that is casual, relaxed and pervasive.

The nature of this consumption culture is forged from multi- layers of infrastructure that enable the (re)production of hawker or street food culture. This infrastructure includes physical, social, economic and digital dimensions, with the relative interplay of the various dimensions resulting in distinctive characteristics of hawker culture in different urban contexts. This chapter refers to *physical infrastructure* as the sites and locations, architectures, physical structures and systems that enable the production and consumption of hawker foods. These could be purpose- built hawker centres or makeshift street- side stalls. The latter is intuitive, and indeed, embedded in the very meaning of "hawking", but as this chapter will illustrate, itinerance need not be a requisite physical manifestation, and relative permanence and fixity can also characterize hawkers. *Social infrastructure* refers to the person of the hawker, the quintessential cook, micro- businessperson, purchaser, marketing and sales personnel, often all rolled in one. *Economic infrastructure* takes the form of

economic policies and business models that enable hawker culture, and *digital infrastructure* refers to new models of transaction, including e-payments, online ordering and other practices enabled by digital technologies, which have empowered some hawkers while leaving others behind. These four dimensions of infrastructure are common across cultures and jurisdictions, but the precise expression and manifestation, particularly in relation to hawkers, may differ, in some cases revealing the creativity and innovation that support the continuance of hawker culture, but often also exposing the underlying spatial and cultural politics, including issues of inclusion/exclusion, physicality/ virtuality, authenticity/ mimicry and locality/ globality.

An infrastructural lens is an important means through which to examine the social, cultural and economic practices surrounding hawker foods. Whereas infrastructure and its systems have been typically understood in the global North as material networks that facilitate "flows of people, goods, energy, water, waste and information" (Addie *et al.* 2020: 10) and are held up as the fix for better urban futures, the reality is often quite the opposite: urban decline is real, and it has both physical and social dimensions (Kinder 2016). In contrast, scholarship on the global South contextualizes infrastructure within discussions of political economy, social networks, access, culture, geopolitics, ecologies and affect (Addie *et al.* 2020), detailing how infrastructure encompasses not just the hard/ technical, material artefacts and systems, but also the soft social and cultural networks that enable business and urban life to flourish. Irrespective of whether it is understood in material or non-physical terms, scholars agree that infrastructure enables the urban.

Focusing on the city-state of Singapore, this chapter examines the infrastructure of its iconic hawker centres. Revisiting Kong's (2007) investigation of Singapore's hawker centres, it illustrates how street food culture is (re) produced, and how this sometimes taken- for- granted aspect of urban culture is enabled but also simultaneously challenged by physical, social, economic and digital infrastructure. What follows is, first, an introduction to street food and hawker culture in Singapore, and second, a discussion about the infrastructural (re)production of hawker centres.

STREET FOOD, HAWKER CULTURE: CONSUMPTION IN SINGAPORE

Singapore is a city, island and state all at the same time. It obtained independence from Malaysia in 1965, becoming a sovereign state. Little more than 700 square kilometres, it is entirely urban. Out of necessity, its

urban fabric is composed predominantly of high- rise buildings, the majority of which consists of public housing. State-l ed urban planning is central to optimizing the use of limited land in this hyper- urban and dense context where hawker centres are located.

Hawker centres are an iconic feature of Singapore's cityscape. Deeply embedded in the popular imagination and rhythms of everyday life, they provide a distinctive attraction to curious tourists and a locus of memories for Singaporeans. Hawker centres pulsate with a life and dynamism that was taken for granted until Covid- 19 struck in 2020 and they had to close down for public safety reasons. At no point in time in their history have they been more missed by consumers.

What constitutes this familiar, sometimes taken for granted everyday hawker culture in Singapore? It is that melange of hawker centre, hawker food, "uncle" and "aunty" and hipster hawker stallholder, the multitudinous and varied customers, and the cleaning crew. A hawker centre refers to a collection of stalls selling different types of inexpensive cooked food, predominantly, but not exclusively, local fare (essentially Chinese, Malay, Indian), with drinks and desserts. The hawker stalls are housed in covered, non-a ir- conditioned, open complexes where there are common seating areas for customers (Figures 9.1 and 9.2). Although sometimes hot and

Figure 9.1 A hawker centre located in a public housing estate in Clementi, Singapore: in the background are two tall public housing blocks, and in the foreground, a small open plaza where temporary bazaars are occasionally held *Source*: Aidan Wong.

Figure 9.2 Tables in hawker centres are arranged to facilitate interaction and sharing, designed to accommodate four to eight diners together, with only a small handful of tables for two diners *Source*: Aidan Wong.

noisy, the quality and affordability of hawker food draws crowds of locals and tourists. Whereas their antecedents were itinerant street traders, hawkers in Singapore now have proper amenities and facilities, including potable water, electricity, sewerage and drainage systems, toilets, lighting and garbage bin centres for waste disposal. Today, many hawker centres have Wi- Fi and barrier- free access. The name "hawker centre" is so familiar in Singapore that its irony is not always apparent. A hawker, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is someone who travels about selling goods. But Singapore's hawkers have permanent stalls; they are no longer itinerant.

Hawker centres serve affordable food for executives with demanding schedules as much as they cater to families with busy routines. They are community places where neighbours meet, and casual places where all social types gather – the CEO and the office cleaner, grandparents and juniors, different races and genders, nationalities and cultures (Figure 9.2). Hawker centres are a microcosm of Singapore society and have mirrored the changing Singapore life and urban landscape over time. They are a window into consumer culture in Singapore – more than consumption *per se*, they reflect and reproduce

particular values and express Singaporean identity while responding to, reproducing and simultaneously challenging the physical, social, economic and digital infrastructure that enable their production. In this sense, they illustrate how infrastructure reproduces consumer culture and consumer society.

HAWKER CENTRES AS PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The *physical infrastructure* that enables the continued existence of street food is a fundamental component of hawker culture. Singaporean hawker centres are products of urban planning and policy initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s to clear the streets of itinerant, unlicensed hawkers operating in barely regulated and less than hygienic conditions, and frequently obstructing traffic. In an effort to further order and regulate the built environment, the state relocated hawkers to purpose-b uilt structures with clean water supply, electricity, gas, seating areas for customers, ventilation, fans, crockery collection points and, in some cases, interesting architecture with culturally inflected decorative features.

Singapore's hawker centres are part of a larger urban planning paradigm in this city- state, anchored in public housing estates and woven into tightly regulated planning parameters and regimes. Public housing estates are planned, organized and designed to provide easy access to amenities, from schools and clinics to hawker centres and retail shops. For every designated number of public housing blocks and households, requisite amenities are planned, assigned and built, including hawker centres. In other words, hawker centres are deliberately planned into the making of new towns and public housing estates. After three decades of careful planning and dedicated inclusion of hawker centres into town planning regimes, in the 2000s, as fast food took root and air-conditioned comfort in the equatorial heat enticed customers into the food courts of shopping malls, the government halted construction of new hawker centres. In response to local resident requests for proximate and affordable food, it reversed this policy position in the 2010s, again building new hawker centres in housing estates.

When the Covid-1 9 pandemic struck, the enabling physical infrastructure of hawker centres became a barrier and challenge. The

openness and porosity of the hawker centre made it difficult to regulate the flow of visitors. Makeshift barriers were erected so that single points of entry and exit would be enabled, and digital records kept of the identity of those entering and exiting for tracing purposes, if and when necessary. The cosy settings with proximate seating could not be fully utilized as safe physical distancing between diners became a necessity. Hawkers also found it difficult to operate their businesses all day wearing masks. Delivery personnel had few suitable pick- up points. All these physical design challenges – notably ventilation and spacing – are now taken into consideration when new hawker centres are built.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE: CONTESTATIONS OVER AUTHENTICITY, LOOKING BEYOND HAWKERS

The success of Singapore's hawker centres also hinges on a robust *social infrastructure* anchored in the person of the hawker (in interaction with policymakers, planners, cleaners, food bloggers, hawker association chiefs and delivery service providers). The hawker is the quintessential micro-entrepreneur – the purchaser, marketing and sales representative, cashier and cook all combined into one person. In colonial and early post-independence years, the barriers to entry into this occupation were low. Considered a socially respectable trade, hawking was a means of making a living (not just for the urban poor) that required relatively little start- up capital. Overheads were also affordable, and there were no constraints on what hawkers sold or the hours they worked. Hawkers were, by and large, their own bosses and made independent decisions. Originally an informal trade, hawking gradually became licensed in the 1930s (with only partial success) and in a more concerted way from the 1960s onwards, with island- wide exercises conducted to bring the large number into the formal sector economy.

As Singaporean society has matured and globalization has shaped every facet of life in the city- state, both the character of hawking and the profile of the hawker have changed. The variety of foods sold has expanded dramatically. Mexican chicken skewers, German bratwurst and wiener sausages, Vietnamese beef noodles and rolls, Italian pasta and Japanese don sets are increasingly common along with more traditional Chinese, Malay and Indian fare. With new food offerings has come a savvy breed of younger hawkers, more educated and cosmopolitan. There are also hawkers who have dropped out of school and use their entrepreneurialism

and hard work to establish their businesses. Together, these "hipster hawkers", or "hawkerpreneurs", reflect the changing character of the hawker.

As competition for customers increases, hawkers have become ever-savvier with promotion. The battle for customers has extended to online promotions with food bloggers building loyal online followings. Social media platforms have also provided opportunities for many hawkers to post reviews and images of their food offerings, or their friends and children have done so on their behalf, especially during Covid- 19. Young and new hawkers also often undertake their own social media marketing and even work with influencers to help promote their food. The social infrastructure supporting hawker culture has thus extended beyond the hawker as a lone operator with a menial helper or two at best, to an infrastructure that extends to the digital world.

Hawkers and their occupational skills form part of the country's intangible cultural heritage, that is valorized and celebrated, but also contested and debated. The key sites of contention centre on who constitutes the legitimate socio-cultural bearer of this urban culture, and the imagined authenticity of their edible cultural products. Government policy dictatesthat only Singaporeans and permanent residents (PRs) are permitted to operate hawker stalls managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA). Stallholders may operate their stalls with the assistance of their spouses, some of whom may be foreigners, subject to NEA's approval. This is largely because some of the stalls pay subsidized rentals as a means of keeping food costs manageable, with the subsidies directed towards Singaporeans and PRs rather than foreigners. Quite apart from the policy objectives, however, the public imagination is one that excludes foreign nationals, even naturalized ones, from assuming an "authentic" location, whatever their skills may be. Critics have argued that non- Singaporeans who serve local fare have somehow adulterated the original taste with their labour. Constructions of authenticity, then, are tied up with questions of citizenship rather than, necessarily, culinary skill.

Just as food bloggers and influencers are now part of the social infrastructure in Singapore's hawker culture, delivery riders have become important partners. As customers begin to use online order platforms, riders and walkers are hired to undertake local deliveries. Again, migrant opportunities are largely locked out, as hiring is based on nationality (only Singaporeans and PRs are accepted). Riders must

be aged 18 and above, have a valid licence and a mobile device that can access their computer application. Those who choose to be walkers are based at home, and their radius is small, unlike those with cars or bikes. Cyclists and motorcyclists make up the majority of delivery crews. Just as traditional hawkers found the entry barriers to the trade to be low, the new business operations have offered employment to many people as riders who deliver food. These delivery personnel serve as intermediaries between hawkers and customers, and now form part of the social infrastructure that enable the consumption of hawker fare.

In many cities, public hygiene concerns surrounding street food are common. In Singapore, policymakers have introduced cleanliness regimes and grading systems to ensure that a basic level of hygiene is kept, and indeed, cultivates a culture that aims for exemplary performance. Cleaning regimes are regular and monitored, even while hawker centre cleaning and maintenance provides many senior citizens and migrants in Singapore a source of livelihood. Hawker centre associations, led and populated by volunteers and emergent, grassroots leaders among hawkers in each location, are a means by which hawkers can provide feedback to authorities, and work to promote, enliven and otherwise improve their hawker centres.

Clearly, the social infrastructure that enables hawker culture to continue, if not thrive, has expanded well beyond the lone itinerant hawker. The profile of hawkers is more varied now, a source of simultaneous lament and hope – lament for the imagined or real loss of authenticity and hope for the continuance of a cherished urban culture. Beyond the hawker, the additional social infrastructure – food bloggers, influencers, delivery riders and walkers, cleaners, hawker association chiefs and policymakers are essential ecosystem actors that enable the continuation of hawker culture.

ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE: EVOLVING MODELS

The third aspect of enabling infrastructure is *economic* in nature, referencing the economic policies and business models that provide the framework for hawkers to make their living, enabling access to livelihoods and moderating costs of living. The shift from low subsidized rentals to ownership to market rentals to experiments with social enterprise models and the contested politics around each shift

demonstrate the simultaneous enabling and constraining effects of economic infrastructure.

Historically, when hawkers were itinerant, licensing was the main way of managing the number of hawkers. When a policy decision was made to relocate hawker stalls from the streets to hawker centres, hawkers needed encouragement to make the shift, and those who did, enjoyed cheap rentals as "first- generation hawkers". The rental subsidy policy was also important because hawker centres played, and continue to play, an important role in moderating increases in food prices, thereby performing an important social service. Hawkers needed only to pay for utilities, service and conservancy charges, and licence fees. The subsidies were in place until 1993 when a stall tender scheme was introduced, which allowed the public to tender for vacant stalls and pay tendered rent. Today, all hawker stalls are rented, and about one- third are subsidized. The early economic incentive has been an important factor in the infrastructural equation, enabling hawkers to make a viable living.

While subsidized rental schemes enabled some hawkers, others found it constraining. Where stalls were subsidized, strict restrictions were in place to govern their use. For instance, the hawkers could not be employed in other occupations, nor could they sublet their stall. They must also personally operate their stall and cannot assign it to others to run on their behalf. In the past, stallholders have had their licences revoked for being continuously absent from their stalls and relying on assistants to maintain them.

Reflecting perhaps the changing economic conditions, the mid-1990s was when a Stall Ownership Scheme was introduced for selected hawker centres across the island. It allowed incumbent stallholders in selected hawker centres to purchase the stall they were operating. Stall owners could enjoy the freedom that came with ownership – they could sell their stall or rent or sublet it. If they wished, family members could also be made co- owners. In 2013, however, it was announced that the scheme would be discontinued once the ownership term for existing owned stalls was over because of a wider economic slowdown.

As the subsidized rental scheme works its way out of the system, the tender scheme, where rental of hawker stalls is based on market rates, will become the dominant mode of leasing. Hawkers will increasingly need to have the business know-h ow to run their stalls, in addition to developing culinary skills. At the Institute of Technical Education, a vocational college, for example, courses like "Introduction to Managing a Hawker

Business" have been introduced, as they offer training on establishing and managing a food stall.

In addition to ownership and rental models, in 2012, a Hawker Centres Public Consultation Panel recommended that to better meet changing demographic needs hawker centres should offer all-day dining options so that they can more effectively function as vibrant cultural hubs. In response, alternative management models for hawker centres were proposed and subsequently piloted. This entailed a social enterprise or cooperative model, with stalls set aside for the lower- income and special needs persons to enter the trade, in effect giving them a chance of earning a livelihood in a relatively low-cost business. The model was introduced with the aim of ensuring food prices were kept low, thus making the hawker trade sustainable.

Over the years, across a range of different management models, hawker culture and infrastructure has persisted as an elemental part of Singapore's urban fabric. Most hawkers have remained small businesspeople, whether their stalls are rented or owned, subsidized or not. A few have expanded the number of stalls they manage (up to a maximum of two, by policy), franchising their business, entering the restaurant (or other) business, or even going international.

Franchising has also been encouraged and facilitated by the government. Other entrepreneurial hawkers have sought to bottle their condiments (e.g., chili sauces) as an alternative way to bring a selection of their products to market. Still other especially well-known stalls have sold their recipes, generating sufficient profit to retire. The ambition and vision of the entrepreneurs, and the growth of the original hawker stalls illustrate the economic infrastructure that supports, enables, encourages and facilitates their growth and success.

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE: DIGITAL HAWKERS, NEW BUSINESS MODELS, MODERN BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Given how digitalization is transforming many industries and businesses, it would be a surprise if hawkers have been left totally untouched. From e- payment to online ordering and the use of delivery platforms, the world of traditional hawking is changing rapidly, although the change has been uneven, with older hawkers especially resisting digitalization shifts.

Electronic payments may well be the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to going digital. As part of a larger Smart Nation drive by the Singapore government, cashless payment methods have been enabled and encouraged. While some hawkers still prefer the certainty of cash in hand, digital payment seems more readily welcome than other forms of digitalization, such as online ordering and the use of delivery platforms. The government has sought to incentivize hawkers to adopt a unified e-payment system, allowing different contactless payment options by renting payment terminals for free for the first three years and covering the cost of transactions fees during this period. Clearly, providing digital infrastructure is necessary if a successful and wide-spread transition is to be possible.

As modern operational practices take root, business models also evolve with digitalization. Expedited by Covid-1 9, the restrictions on mobility and the requirement for physical distancing pushed hawkers and their customers to use online ordering and delivery platforms. For those who eschewed online platforms for ordering and delivery, either the challenge of entering the digital world was too much or they valued the personal relationship with their customers that comes with in-person interactions. It was also questionable whether there was sufficient business sense in incurring hefty commission charges when the food prices were low to start with. For customers, similar concerns arose when a significant proportion of the total cost of a meal goes to delivery charges. Further, some hawkers felt that their food would not taste good by the time it was delivered, especially if the delivery person picked up food from several stalls.

Such "soft" infrastructural adjustments do not just involve hawkers. Platform providers, which include major players such as Grab but also a myriad of smaller ones, are also experimenting with new business models and revising business operations as circumstances change, and particularly as the Covid- 19 pandemic transitions into an endemic. They have sought to respond to customer needs and facilitate hawkers, finding ways to recreate some of the relationships based on in- person transactions (e.g., emulating physical layouts on digital platforms to help customers to identify their preferred stalls). As the platform matures, opportunities may become available through messaging tools to facilitate the building of relationships between hawkers and customers. Grab is considering the extension of delivery services to wet market stalls together with hawker centre items, thus increasing efficiency for delivery

riders, increasing hawkers' business and of course, increasing earnings for Grab itself.

The life of the digital hawker is rapidly changing, just as the customer, the online order and delivery platform, the delivery crew and others are evolving. An entire new ecosystem has emerged, and various actors continue to innovate, leveraging digital infrastructure and its capabilities, but also reliant on traditional material infrastructure – such as good road systems and effective public and private transportation, without which digital ordering alone is ineffective. The urban cultural ecosystem of hawking is made possible by the interweaving of digital and material infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has illustrated through the case of Singapore hawker centres how infrastructure enables and constrains the hawker trade – an occupation that is central to the cultural and social life of the city. It has demonstrated that infrastructure has physical, material dimensions, but also social, organizational, economic and digital components; the time when infrastructure is recognized only for its materiality is past (Melosi 2020). More than mere "technical sinews of the modern metropolitan area", infrastructure has a social history in terms of how its systems and networks were constructed, operated, and used by different groups in society – "with variation not only from country to country but also from time period to time period within nations" (Tarr & Dupuy as cited in Melosi 2020: 145).

Given that multiple layers of infrastructure make and remake hawker culture in Singapore, undergirding the consumption of street food across the city, this chapter has argued that infrastructure is a mode of intervention in cultural reproduction. Beyond the urban planning and social history specificities of hawking in this Southeast Asian city, the cultural perspective on urban infrastructure that this chapter affords underscores how infrastructure – as an intersectional concept and tool – links the physical to the digital, the global to the local, the economic to the social, the authentic to the mimicked.

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