

Singapore's Rising Hawkers: Food, Heritage, Imagination, and Entrepreneurship

Keri Matwick

ABSTRACT: This paper describes Singapore's food scene at hawker centres, open-air complexes with food stalls serving local food. Hawker centres illustrate how 'heritage' is being reimagined as familiar foods and old techniques are being transformed by changing palates and modern technology. The recent UNESCO inscription of hawker centres on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list has led to international exposure and revived local interest. Called to preserve their 'community dining rooms,' Singaporean youth have responded, setting up food stalls at hawker centres and bringing with them their business drive and tech skills. With modern production and marketing plans, these new hawkers include next generation hawkers who take on their family hawker stall, professionally trained chefs, burned-out corporate workers, and others willing to enter the labour-intensive occupation. An entrepreneurial spirit leads, resulting in hawker entrepreneurs, or 'hawkerpreneurs' (Tarulevciz 2017), entrepreneurs that have turned to food vending. The following analysis of these hawkerpreneurs is meant to open the discussion on how food, along with its preparation and marketing, is imagined as a 'living heritage,' and what the UNESCO inscription means within this shifting context. The paper argues that the essence of heritage is conserved by these new hawkers, who now must be savvy in business, digital marketing, and social media. The research draws upon ethnographic observations of hawker centres (old and new), government material, historical documents, local media, and documentaries.

344

Tiong Bahru Market & Food Centre

Early lunchtime, I am at Tiong Bahru, one of Singapore's oldest housing estates. Central to the neighbourhood is Tiong Bahru Market and its hawker centre on the upper deck, an open-air food court with cafeteria tables covered from the hot sun. The stifling heat from the tropical climate and hot woks is kept breezy with large fans (see Figure 1). Scanning the food stalls, I try to decide among the appetizing, wide array of dishes. Though just after 11am, queues are becoming long for Hong Heng Fried Sotong Prawn Mee (yellow noodles stir-fried with squid and prawns) and Tiong Bahru Hainanese Boneless Chicken Rice (poached skin-on chicken served with oily rice and cucumber, chili sauce and dark soy sauce). Peeling stickers of past Michelin Bib Gourmand awards are reminders of the glory days of these unassuming stalls, whose hawker chefs are too intent on their woks to



FIGURE 1. Tiong Bahru Hawker Centre, an open-air food court serving traditional Singaporean food.



FIGURE 2. Tiong Bahru's popular Hong Heng Fried Sotong Prawn Mee hawker stall specializes in a yellow noodle squid and prawn dish. Michelin Bib Gourmand awards are on display.

peer through the grease shield to see the long queue (see Figure 2). Steady orders are coming out from the stall Tiong Bahru Braised Duck, serving Roasted Duck Rice. Referring to duck rice as a 'sleeper dish,' Bjorn Shen, chef and judge of *MasterChef: Singapore*, describes on a travel food show of Singapore that the dish is commonly eaten by Singaporeans but not 'one of those top things to eat' like chicken rice or *laksa* (spicy coconut noodle soup).¹ There are other sleeper dishes too, such as the Western dishes being served at the stall over.

345

New to Tiong Bahru hawker centre, Skirt & Dirt sells burgers and fries (see Figure 3). This modern offering may be surprising, given that hawker centres are known for their traditional Singaporean dishes. However, Tiong Bahru

has long been gentrified. In the early 1990s, the construction of a shopping mall, train (Mass Rapid Transit), and new public and private housing brought an influx of new residents, changing the greying population to a more youthful, diverse population.² Tiong Bahru is also popular for internal tourism and weekend visitors who cross the island to visit the market, hawker centre, and sprawl of cafes and bakeries. High-end burgers and craft seasoned hand-cut fries would appeal to the Western expatriates, youth, and middle-aged professionals.

After the initial survey of the scene, I *chope* or reserve a seat with a tissue packet, which also comes handy later as napkins are not provided. Then I join the queues for the self-service chicken rice and prawn mee dishes, gaining respect for the patience and passion Singaporeans have for good food. The last order is a burger from Skirt & Dirt,



FIGURE 3. Tiong Bahru's Skirt & Dirt hipster hawker stall serves artisanal burgers and fries and has strong branding and marketing.

346

who offers table-service, giving me a buzzer as I take my seat. I begin the meal, alternating bites between tender chicken, spicy yellow noodles, prawns, and the juicy burger. Never had queuing, ordering, and eating seemed so delicious, delightful, and for an expat like me, entertaining, and for Singaporeans, ritualistic, as at a hawker centre.

I could see that there is more to just picking a stall to satisfy hunger cravings. Yet, the addition of a new stall and cuisine offered at the hawker centre signals changes. Is it the place or the food that makes a hawker centre? or maybe the people? I began my eating and exploring of Singaporean food in attempt to figure out what was happening in Singapore's hawker culture.

Hawker Centres as 'Living Heritage'

In December 2020, the UNESCO committee made a unanimous decision to inscribe hawker culture in Singapore on to the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List. UNESCO refers to 'intangible culture' also as 'living heritage' and 'living culture,' the 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills handed down from generation to generation.'³ Of Singapore's proposal, the evaluation body noted: 'As a social space that immerses people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, hawker centres play a crucial role in enhancing community interactions and strengthening the social fabric.'⁴ The space



FIGURE 4. Tiong Bahru's Tow Kwar Pop has been serving *rojak* salad since 1965.

created by hawker centres is emphasized but the food is also important because that the very function of hawker centres is to serve food. Stalls such as Tiong Bahru's Tow Kwar Pop have been specializing in rojak for over 50 years (see Figure 4). Moreover, food is used as a metaphor to describe the ethnic mix of people. Sweet, spicy, and crunchy, *rojak* is a salad of peanuts, green mango, cucumber, and fried tofu, ingredients combined in the same bowl but remain separate.⁵ Further embellishing the metaphor, culinary historian Nicole Tarulevicz describes that 'the government binds the chopped salad together, and the dressing is part global culture and part cosmopolitanism.'⁶ Similarly, hawker centres are used to 'bind' the people together, now wrapped even tighter with the UNESCO label.

The 'diversity' of multiculturalism and class though may be over celebrated, as historically Singapore hawker centres began as a way to serve the multi-ethnic labour class with affordable, fast food. Chinese Hokkien mee noodles, Indian curry puff, and Malay chicken satay, alongside drink stalls of *kopi* (coffee) and *teh tarik* (pulled tea), satiated the diverse population. Because of this mandated food diversity, Singaporeans often taste the food of their neighbours for the first time, many of whom are of different ethnicity. Like government housing, hawker centres are designed to be representative of Singapore's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic heritage, an image proudly and politically protected by the

government with its CIMO (Chinese, Indian, Malay, Other) racial structure. Hawker centres have quotas of drink, halal, and CIMO stalls, yet there is an increasing number of international cuisines that can be found at hawker centres such as Pad Thai, Korean fried chicken, and yes, burgers. Taking an active role since its independence in 1965, the Singapore government continues to regulate, subsidize, and most recently, renovate the 114 hawker centres sprinkled around the island with a combined total of 6,000 stalls. Opened even earlier in 1951, Tiong Bahru Market & Food Centre currently has 83 food stalls, which have been recently renovated with lifts, escalators, and bigger stalls.⁷

However, the UNESCO inscription comes at a time when the hawker food trade is at risk. The average age of hawkers is 59, and more elderly hawkers are retiring, along with their specialized food trades. Rising costs are making it financially less feasible, and the steep learning curve and physically demanding work make it even less appealing to the educated younger generations. Health concerns and a demand for more comfortable seating further deter diners. There is a strong preference for international foods, sit-down restaurants, and modern cafes. American BBQ, Taiwanese Bubble Tea, and Korean ramen are among the latest trends alongside the global favourite McDonald's. Even with the latest national and international recognition of traditional hawker centres, there is the reality that Singaporeans, especially the youth, may not be interested in dining there. So, within this generational shift, what does the UNESCO inscription mean? How does an intangible heritage like hawker food remain 'living'? What is being preserved?

348

Rising Hawkers: Innovation in Food Preparation, Branding, Marketing

One answer lies in the next hawker generation as younger family members take on their family's hawker stalls. They seek to preserve the family dish, but sometimes innovate new ones. A highly publicized example is the Netflix documentary, *Singapore Street Food* (2019), by the creators of *Chef's Table*.⁸ One hawker featured is Aisha Hashim, a 36-year-old next-generation hawker who continues her family's Malay food stall. The specialty is *putu piring*, steamed rice cakes filled with gula melaka (palm sugar), topped with shredded coconut and fragrant pandan leaves. Aisha modernized the labour-intensive method by using machines to grind the gula melaka cakes and shred coconut, speeding up the process from ten hours to two hours. Forming a central kitchen, Aisha began to grow the business, trucking the Malay snacks to the family stalls around the island. In the film, Singaporean food writer, Evelyn Chen, reflects about Aisha: 'She found a way to integrate her own ambitions while improving on the traditional methods, and that's really remarkable.' In this case, the hawker food stayed the same. The familiar taste of the *putu piring* was paramount and what convinced Aisha's parents to support her new methods. Instead, what changed was the way of making the food.

This move to centralized, off-site, and mass-produced hawker food is not unlike industrial food, effectively changing the type of labour involved in being a hawker.

Historically, manual labour has been the core of food vending as hawkers have churned out hundreds of the same dish a day to meet the volume required for profit. Skilled hands make roti crisp, roll out dough for translucent dumplings, and hand-cut curry rice, an art that is increasingly being replaced with industrial substitutes and machines. Instead, a new skill is emerging, one in technology and business.

Besides Aisha, there are other stories of next generation hawkers who return to help run the family stall and employ innovative methods.⁹ A headline in *Straits Times*, the flagship newspaper of Singapore, reads, 'Millennial Gives Up \$100K a Year Bank Job to Become Sambal Stingray Hawker'.¹⁰ Leaving a steady bank job, millennial Zhi Jie learned the trade and recipes from his mother, and after six months, opened his own barbecue seafood hawker stall. Initially business was brisk, but slowed down, maybe 'cos the novelty of the new hawker centre wore off,' he shrugs. The innovation in this case was the marketing and the new way of interacting with customers. Increased marketing efforts led to a steady customer clientele, and now he has taken over his mother's stall.

Indeed, branding and marketing are the 'highest priority' of young hawkers, claims food blogger Seth Lui.¹¹ For Skirt & Dirt, branding is strong with its modern black and bright yellow design and playful burger logo, a trendy look that has been called 'hipster'. Marketing through social media is also active. A quick check on Skirt & Dirt's Facebook (handle posted on the stall front) shows enthusiastic reviews for the Cheese Skirt Beef Burger with its 100% beef patty outsized by a larger patty or 'skirt' of Cheddar cheese. Another dish much Liked is Dirt Fries, thick crinkle-cut fries piled with bacon, peppers, pickled relish, and served with cheese sauce and mayo. A distinct and craveable menu is important to compete with other specialty burger joints on the island, such as Shake Shack and Five Guys.

Yet, Skirt & Dirt's menu had to go through several transformations. Led by Fabian Tan, who previously had worked as a chef for a restaurant tourism group, the stall had a difficult opening. The initial four months led to mixed reviews—soggy fries, not enough burger to cheese ratio, overly salty cheese—prompting Fabian to change his menu multiple times. This ability to change the direction of a business or 'pivot' may be part of the reason why the hipster stall survives beside stalls serving traditional Singaporean dishes of fish balls (fish paste seasoned with soy sauce, stock, and spring onions), *popiah* (spring rolls made of thin wheat skins and filled with cooked turnip, beansprouts, and hardboiled eggs), and chicken rice.

At the same time, I wonder at the business sense for Skirt & Dirt and other new hawkers. Integral to the identity of hawker food is being 'cheap and good food,' yet this makes it difficult for hawkers to sustain their livelihoods. They are unable to change government-regulated prices and there is local resistant to any increase in price.¹² So, Michelin-starred hawker stalls still undervalue their dishes, some even less than USD2.00, effectively continuing their role to 'moderate the cost of living' as described by Singapore's National

Heritage Board.¹³ Yet, Skirt & Dirt's USD5.00 burger would easily go for double the amount at a restaurant. Perhaps hawker centres are just stepping stones for these new hawkers.

Hawkerpreneurs: Hawker Entrepreneurs

This priority for business has given these rising hawkers a new title, hawker entrepreneurs, or 'hawkerpreneurs.' As Tarulevic emphasizes, 'What is clear is that hawkerpreneurs are not entrepreneurial hawkers; they are entrepreneurs who have become hawkers.'¹⁴ The low rent makes for an easy entry to gain business experience, test out the menu, get some press and followers, and then move on to their own restaurant. Franchising the concept comes next, further distancing these new hawkers from their predecessors. The dream is to become like Hong Kong's Din Tai Fung.

Yet, the Singapore government appears to recognize the ambition of young Singaporeans and makes that part of the appeal to draw them into the hawker culture. One such incentive is a 12-month Work-Study Certificate in Hawkerpreneurship offered at Temasek Polytechnic with the first class offered March 2021.¹⁵ Recent graduates from technical school or national service (notably excluding university graduates) can enrol in the program to gain classroom and on-the-job training to enter the hawker profession. Part of the application includes the advertisement that hawkerpreneurs can start with one stall but may move into the café and restaurant businesses.

350

Hipster Hawker Centres

While Skirt & Dirt is embedded in a traditional hawker centre, there is another business model being tested at designated 'hipster' hawker centres. Consider Pasir Ris Central Hawker Centre, a dual dining concept of 42 food stalls with traditional hawker favourites on the first floor and more eclectic hipster choices on the second floor cheekily called Fare Ground. At Wild Olive, made-to-order Italian pasta bowls are popular, such as Sambal Seafood Spaghetti, as well as their Mushroom Rice. At Tasty Street: Our Little Red Dot, healthier Singaporean food is offered with mixed grain rice (brown & pearl rice), sous-



FIGURE 5. At Pasir Ris Central Hawker Centre, a hawkerpreneur, entrepreneur turned hawker, serving healthier and housemade Singaporean food.

vide chicken, onsen eggs, cooked daily greens, and housemade sauces like wolfberry wine sauce and truffle hotplate tofu sauce. The friendly hawkerpreneur taking my order and preparing the food was also the owner (see Figure 5). When asked how she became the owner, she said she had loved the food offered by the first owners and when hearing that the stall was going to close, she offered to buy it. She was quick to add that this was not her only job; she also runs other businesses.

Another hipster hawker centre, Timbre + (Timber Plus) describes itself as a 'food park.' Graffiti and spray paint art splash over the beige-coloured walls of the original hawker centre. Bar stools, wooden tables, and industrial chairs replace hard cafeteria-style orange tables and chairs. Edgy and provocative, industrial-cool, the décor matches the progressive approach taken to the food by the hipster hawker vendors. Two Wings makes chicken wings trendy with a Salted Egg treatment, and knowing its Millennial audience, serves it on an Instagrammable wooden board. This attention to the aesthetics and origin of food are concerns largely absent in traditional hawker centres like Tiong Bahru.

No, lah: Singaporean Youths Push Back

Over an americano at an Australian café, a Singaporean Millennial working in the tech industry told me that he rarely eats at hawker centres. Unhealthy food, questionable sanitation, and uncomfortable eating spaces with no air conditioning, these are all unappealing for business meetings and laptop work, he explains. I asked him about a newly renovated hawker centre that had added bar tables with electrical outlets.¹⁶ He laughs, "Too hard, the government is trying too hard." Trying to modernize an old hawker centre to catch up with Singapore's advancement seems impossible, even a laughing matter.

351

Other millennials similarly push back from the government's call for new hawkers. 'No, lah,' one Starbucks barista told me when asked if he would consider being a hawker, the Singaporean English or Singlish particle emphasizing his aversion. 'Insulted,' he continued, explaining his resistance to the government pressure to take up the hawker career. While the youth do not want the hawking profession, they do buy into the government rhetoric and perceive hawker culture as 'culture,' a unique 'experience,' and 'Singapore.'¹⁷ Nor is a hawking career desired by their parents who sent them to university. Hawking is seen as a fall-back option, like a taxi driver, for those who cannot get a better job. Headlines about millennial hawkers such as, 'Covid 19 Upended His NY Internship, so He is Learning to Make Chicken Rice in Shunfu', frame hawker food as a last resort.¹⁸ The UNESCO inscription may help change the low status of hawking, yet pragmatism prevails over sentimentalism, highlighting the gap between Singapore youth's career aspirations and their professed passion for hawker culture.

It is not just the youth that push back to these changes in hawking. Older hawkers see this new breed of hawkers and innovative food as threatening the hawker environment

and resulting in a loss of heritage. Soya bean stall hawker Low Teck Seng remarks that he offers a sense of familiarity to his customers. He recognizes their order and knows their names, creating a relationship that makes the food court more than a place to buy and eat food. (Yet, this is not unlike one's favourite café or corner Starbucks.) Appeasing the older generation, Singapore's UNESCO nomination video gives reverence to past hawkers who embody 'culture,' 'legacy,' and 'Singapore.' How do hawkerpreneurs fit within this image? Can they? *Should* they?

Leaning into the Future

The UNESCO label gives hawker food a certain aura and recognition at local, national, and international levels. There are commercial and ideological reasons to promote hawker food: statement of identity, national pride, demand for public attention, and social or cultural capital. There is also the attempt to preserve something, which is elusive to Singapore who has undergone rapid transformation. The rising hawkers are trying to preserve the hawker culture, which has been identified as 'Singapore.' Yet, what *is* Singapore keeps changing. Food too keeps changing. Historically food is and has been always changing. Immigration, global trade, and technology have made hawking an occupation that has never been a stable occupation.

The production of food was traditionally only the concern of a hawker; now, new hawkers must be concerned with communicating their food and brand to their customers. The model of a food worker is not a mundane cook or ordinary food service worker but an entrepreneur. One must be 'innovative' and digitally savvy as a food vendor, even if it is venerated as traditional.

Whether and how long the UNESCO inscription remains valid, only time will tell. As people change, so must the ways they eat. For food to be 'living heritage,' it must be eaten. Rising hawkers are using their imagination to keep traditional dishes current or are inventing new ones for the next Singaporean generation whose palates are increasingly sophisticated, globally informed, and health oriented. Keeping traditional food appetizing to the next generation so it keeps being an everyday food is perhaps the best nomination a national cuisine can get.

Notes

1. *Somebody Feed Phil: Singapore*, dir. by John Bedolis (Netflix, Oct 30, 2020), Season 4, Episode 3. American travel documentary presented by television writer and producer Philip Rosenthal.
2. Alvin Chua, 'Tiong Bahru,' *Singapore Infopedia*, A Singapore Government Agency Website, 2010 https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1700_2010-08-11.html [accessed 3 May 2021]
3. UNESCO, Culture, Intangible Heritage. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en> [accessed 2 May 2021]
4. UNESCO 2020, 'Hawker Culture in Singapore, Community Dining and Culinary Practices in a Multicultural Urban Context.' Nomination File No. 01568 for Inscription in 2020 on the Representation List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. [English] Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/hawker-culture-in-singapore-community-dining-and-culinary-practices-in-a-multicultural-urban-context-01568> [accessed 21 December 2020]
5. Heritage' stalls such as Tiong Bahru's Tow Kwar Pop have been specializing in rojak for over 50 years.

Singapore's Rising Hawkers

6. Nicole Tarulevicz, *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Singapore* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 33.
7. Tiong Bahru Market's original name was Seng Poh Road Market, which was an immediate success for the residents during the rapid urbanisation period post-WWII. Historical information about hawker centres was gathered for the UNESCO nomination and posted on OurSGHeritage website. www.oursgheritage.sg Various communities, groups, and individuals were asked to contribute letters of support, including a letter by hawkers from Tiong Bahru Market & Food Centre.
8. <https://www.oursgheritage.gov.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FMAS-Hawkers-Associations-Jul-2019.pdf>
9. *Street Food: Asia, Singapore*, dir. by David Gelb and Brian McGinn (Netflix, April 26, 2019). The local reaction was polarized, with some critiquing that the Singapore episode was lacking in its representation of local hawker culture. Putu piring was particularly critiqued for being featured as it is a lesser-known Singaporean dish. However, the documentary appeared to emphasize the people themselves, lesser so the food.
10. Singaporeans regard family as top priority, according to an annual study of Singaporean. IPS Exchange, 'Our Singaporean Values: Key Findings from the World Values Survey', *IPS Exchange Series*, 16 (2021). Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Singapore. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-16.pdf>
11. Jieying Yip, 'Millennial Gives Up \$100k A Year Bank Job to Become Sambal Stingray Hawker', *8 Days*, 21 March 2021. <https://www.8days.sg/eatanddrink/newsandopening/millennial-gives-up-100k-a-year-bank-job-to-become-sambal-14458626>
12. Channel News Asia, 'The Big Read: With UNESCO Listing in Sight, will New Breed of 'Hawkerpreneurs' Rejuvenate or Erode Hawker Culture?' *Channel News Asia*, 7 December 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/the-big-read-with-unesco-listing-in-sight-will-new-breed-of-13707580>
13. Annie Tan, 'Commentary: Hawker Food isn't What it Used to Be. And It's Partially Our Fault', *Channel News Asia*, 22 November 2020. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/hawker-food-singapore-unesco-culture-heritage-list-local-13600612?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna
14. National Heritage Board, 'Hawker Culture in Singapore,' *OurSGHeritage*, 11 February 2018. <https://www.oursgheritage.gov.sg/hawker-culture-in-singapore/>
15. Nicole Tarulevicz, 'Hawkerpreneurs: Hawkers, Entrepreneurship, and Reinventing Street Food in Singapore', *Forum: Journal of Business Management*, 58(3), (May-June 2019), 291-302, (p. 298).
16. 'Work-Study Certificate in Hawkerpreneurship,' *Temasek Polytechnic*, <https://www.tp.edu.sg/wsphawkerpreneurship#application-entry-req>
17. Zion Riverside Food Centre
18. Daphne Wong and Jocelin Yeo Zhi Ling, 'Understanding Singapore Youth's Perceptions on Hawker Culture' *Pioneer Road: Journal of Undergraduate Research* (Language and Communication Centre, School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University, 2021). Original paper written for my HW0208: Academic Communication in the Social Sciences class, April 2021.
19. Chua Mui Hoong, 'Covid-19 Upended His NY Internship, so He is Learning to Make Chicken Rice in Shunfu,' *The Straits Times*, 20 November 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-chicken-rice-seller-and-his-apprenticev>