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The Kopitiam in Singapore: An Evolving Story about Cultural Diversity and Cultural Politics

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(with Contributions by Lee Shuyun Michelle and Lim Jialiang)[1]

INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of *kopitiams* (coffee shop in local Chinese dialects) are found throughout Singapore. While both old and new ones are found in the city areas, the majority are located in the town and neighbourhood centres of all HDB (Housing and Development Board) public housing estates in which 83% of Singapore's population live. A quintessential feature of Singapore public culture and everyday life, the *kopitiam* is an institution and space within which are embedded dynamic aspects and processes of economics, social-cultural diversity and cultural politics, set within the larger contexts of change, localisation and globalisation throughout Singapore's recent history. In origin a small-scale village, street or neighbourhood setup serving cheap foods during the colonial period of mass migrations, the *kopitiam* has since evolved and

[1] Some sections of this chapter appear in an earlier work: Lai AE (2013). For this chapter, the author wishes to acknowledge Lee Shuyun Michelle's contributions in the sections on Hainanese *kopitiams* and *kopitiams*' historicisation and commoditisation, as well as Lim Jialiang's contributions on the appeal to authenticity and nostalgia in *kopitiam* heritage and on some market trends.

experienced much change over several distinct broad periods: pre-World War Two until the early 1970s, massive resettlement of communities into HDB public housing estates in the 1970s and 1980s, and rapid urbanisation and globalisation since the early 1990s.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines the *kopitiam*'s evolution of its social-cultural distinctiveness and diversity through the foods and peoples involved. It explicates the historical, social and cultural evolution of the *kopitiam* as a site of Singaporean ethnicities and multiculturalism derived from the continuous inputs and interactions of generations of (im)migrants, entrepreneurs and customers over time.[2] The second section documents some features of the HDB "heartland" *kopitiam* today, focusing on foods and community. The third section examines several forces and trends since the early 1990s — market trends and official policy, *kopitiam* heritage commoditisation and reinvention, and consumer tastes and preferences — that have dramatically affected *kopitiam* economics and cultures. The last section concludes with a discussion of future possibilities in the *kopitiam* story.

Background

This chapter is mainly empirical in substance,[3] with several broad theoretical parameters framing its discussion: a socio-historical perspective and its significance to the life of a locale or local community; the economic, social and cultural dimensions of local life constructed through migration, settlement, adaptation and reinvention; and the local-global nexus.

Two periods of mass migration, the first throughout the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries and the second since the 1980s, set the contexts for the *kopitiam*'s development through diverse populations and their cultural

[2] I move between *kopitiams* in general and those in public housing estates.

[3] Research employed historical, sociological and anthropological approaches. Secondary data is drawn from books, journals, archives, reports and media documents (newspaper reports, and "amateur" history and heritage-related blogs). Primary fieldwork (July–Nov 2008, Nov 2014) was based on conversational interviews and observations at *kopitiams* in several public housing estates: Marine Parade and Bedok — these are all "first generation" housing estates built under the government's resettlement scheme of the early 1970s. Their populations are socially mixed and multi-ethnic, comprising Chinese (majority in every case), Chinese Peranakan, Malays, Indians, Eurasians and various other backgrounds, many of whom were first resettled from surrounding villages, squatter areas and rental quarters. I did not encounter any major problems with observations, mainly because of the openness of *kopitiams* and local familiarity as resident, familiar customer, and interested documenter of food cultures.

inputs and interactions. In the first period mainly under British colonialism, diverse peoples, chiefly from China, India and the Malay Archipelago, came to Singapore and Malaya in massive waves to work and live in the ports, mines, plantations and emergent villages and towns, with migration flows stopping only just before World War Two. Singapore grew rapidly from entrepot port to town with rich hinterlands in Malaya and Southeast Asia. In the second period, migration to Singapore since the mid-1980s took place in a new era of post-colonial economic globalisation. Coming with varied levels of skills for various occupations, immigrant settlers and transient migrant workers now originated from more varied Asian and worldwide sources.

The *kopitiam*'s story also illustrates the local-global nexus which characterises various spaces, places and communities of a city or nation-state drawn into globalisation processes. In Singapore, the *kopitiam* stands out as a unique institution with its particular local-global nexus of economic, social and cultural inputs, ingredients and infusions, through the generations of diverse people who inhabit it and through the foods and activities that they bring and partake of. Its neighbourhood location — spontaneous, open and public — provides multifaceted insights into the local: everyday life as habitable reality (de Certeau 1984) and reality par excellence (Berger and Luckmann 1966); meanings and experiences of culture and community (Geertz 1975; Cohen 1982); modes of interaction, negotiations of similarities and differences (Cohen 1982; Heller 1984); and civil and moral order (Suttles 1968; Whyte 1993; Lai 1995). Simultaneously, its location makes it a well-placed institution to provide glimpses into local-global connections and into the social life, landscape and heritage of the open and globalising city that Singapore is.

THE *KOPITIAM* IN HISTORY

In Early Settlements During the Colonial Period

The *kopitiams* had humble origins as small-scale economic enterprises. Found in early settlements of workplace, village, street or neighbourhood in 19th and early 20th century colonial Singapore,[4] they sold cheap drinks and meals to poor migrant workers, and they were run by individuals or small teams of men and,

[4] Here, I omit earlier forms of public eateries that must have existed to serve the maritime trading communities in Singapore in pre-colonial times.

later, families. Known as *han*, *tong* and *tan* in Chinese dialects and *gerai* and *sarabat* in Malay, most were no more than carts or makeshift structures, often with itinerant hawkers operating alongside. In the pepper and gambier *kangkar* (plantation) Chinese settlements, the forerunner of the *kopitiam* was probably set up alongside the liquor, provision and pawn shops run by the *kongsi* (the work association usually run along clan lines). As populations and demands grew, some expanded into modest-size "eating houses", with proprietors selling both drinks and food or only drinks and teaming up with/renting out stall space to food operators.

Early *kopitiams* and food stalls assumed a strong ethnic dimension in their spatial distribution and cuisine as they "followed" migrant workers and met their desires for culturally familiar foods. By 1900, the Chinese had become the majority population, and Chinese "eating" houses/stalls became numerous. They typically sold a range of noodles and fresh pre-cooked "economy rice" — affordable combinations of rice with dishes such as salted eggs, fish and vegetables — such foods cooked in their distinct versions by place origin. When meats became affordable, place origin versions followed suit, such as Cantonese roast meats and Teochew duck. Some *kopitiams* and stalls offered *tze char* (literally "cook-fry") cook-to-order dishes which approximated home cooked meals. In the enclaves settled by Indians and Indian-Muslims, similar eateries referred to as *kedai makan Mamak* (Indian/Indian-Muslim food shop) sold breads (*prata*, *thosai*) and meals of rice combined with various curries, while *sarabat* stalls sold coffee, teas and snacks. Similarly, *kedai-* (shop) and *gerai-* (stall) *makan* (eat) in areas settled by Javanese, Sumatrans, Boyanese, Bugis and Madurese sold various *nasi* (rice) dishes such as *padang*, *rawan*, *jenganan*, *lemak* and *sambal*, spicy meats and vegetables, and various cakes and cuisines from their homelands. Such ethnic food stalls found in the pluralistic areas and edges of town, such as the old Esplanade and Selegie-Rochor-Serangoon vicinities, also catered to the increasing diverse tastebuds.

With the sale of food and drink, the *kopitiam* gradually became a social centre for the largely male immigrants. Among the Chinese, its early forms were probably their only alternative gathering place to brothels and alcohol, opium or gambling dens. When public gambling farms under British licences were outlawed in 1829 by the colonial government on grounds of immorality, some *kopitiams* served as fronts for betting and gambling dens. Some also served as meeting places for secret society members. In the main, most *kopitiams* were simple eateries where, besides food, customers sought rest, company and recreation. It was also a place for men, as women immigrants were relatively

few and were expected to remain at home or in women's quarters. Among women, usually only hawkers, workers and servants were found in workplaces and markets, while only prostitutes, dancers, escort girls and mistresses were seen in recreation places frequented by men; women did not sit around in *kopitiams* to chat and idle.

As social centre, the *kopitiam* was the place to meet and gather for news, chats, stories and a games of chess or cards, its strategic location simultaneously providing a view of people and the world passing by.[5] News of the outside world — on immigrants' homelands, Singapore and Malaya, and elsewhere — came via vernacular newspapers subscribed to by the *kopitiam* owners and from which reports were read, alone or aloud to others many of whom were illiterate. When *Rediffusion* (the first commercial and cable-transmitted radio station in Singapore) started broadcasting services in various Chinese dialects and Malay and Tamil languages in 1949, many *kopitiams* subscribed to it to attract customers. *Rediffusion* not only offered news but also stories, songs and music of various linguistic and cultural traditions, from the classical to contemporary pop, and it provided many hours of free and favourite entertainment to customers. As many households could not afford the installation and subscription charges, the *kopitiam* became the location where they could enjoy the new radio station.

Hainanese *Kopitiams*

The early history of *kopitiams* is incomplete without understanding the significant part played by the Hainanese *kopitiam*.[6] The dominance of the Hainanese in the Chinese *kopitiam* business is an interesting tale of the latecomer and minority immigrant group whose survival skills later gave them an unexpected edge. Arriving later than the other dialect groups that had already occupied various occupational niches backed by exclusivist clan associations, the numerically smaller and marginalised Hainanese found employment in despised or difficult work as farmers, rubber tappers, seamen, cooks, waiters and servants. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, those who worked as cooks and domestics in European/Peranakan households built up a reputation

[5] Chua (1995) elaborates on the *kampung* (village) *kopitiam* as the location par excellence for collective idling by males.

[6] Some details in the discussion on Hainanese *kopitiam* in this section are drawn from the work of Lee Shuyun Michelle (2009), Hainanese Gobidiams in the 1930s–1950s: Food Heritage in Singapore.

as loyal and reliable Hylam/Hainan "houseboys" and "cookboys", and they came to be in great demand for their ability to help support colonial and rich lifestyles.

Changing economic and political conditions during the turbulent pre- and post-war periods saw the gradual demise of the Hainanese domestic workers. Their growing demands for better work conditions and competition from well-organised Cantonese single women immigrants (the *ma-tsae*) from the 1920s onwards greatly reduced their appeal, their decline in this sector culminating during the exodus of the British in the immediate pre-war, post-war and pre-independence periods (Lee 2009: 13). Many were forced to enter new occupations, and they turned to what they knew best — foods, beverages and services. Striking out on their own individually or in small teams of relatives or friends, Hainanese men tapped on their culinary, housekeeping and personal service skills cultivated from domestic work to set up *kopitiams*, bakeries, eateries, canteens and related food and beverage businesses such as coffee processing and food catering, under new conditions of self-employment. Others found waged employment as cooks and waiters in Western-style hotels, clubs, restaurants and cafes, while yet others started their own small hotels. Other Hainanese immigrants entered the *kopitiam* trade directly, picking up skills along the way. Their economic niche-building was further strengthened by the common ideal among Chinese immigrants to exit arduous waged labour into *ka-ki-kang* (self-employment) and, even better, to be a successful entrepreneur through hard work.

The 1920s–1950s thus became a period of growth during which the Hainanese carved out and consolidated their distinct *kopitiam* business niche (Lee 2009:14–15). The now famous Killiney Kopitiam chain (Killiney Kopitiam 2007), for example, was opened as a humble shop in Killiney Road in 1919 by a Hainanese immigrant. Similarly, the now famous Ya Kun Toast (Ya Kun 2014) began with 15-year old Hainanese immigrant Loi Ah Koon who arrived in Singapore in 1926 and first worked as an assistant in a Hainanese coffeestall before setting up his own. Yet Con, Chin Chin and Swee Kee, all renowned for chicken rice and other Hainanese dishes, started operating in 1931, 1935 and 1949 respectively. The famous Chin Mee Chin Confectionery in Katong was opened in 1925 by a Hainanese, Mr Tang, while the Red House Bakery and Confectionery nearby, first started by Jewish Jim Baker in 1925, was taken over in 1931 by a Hainanese seaman Tan Siang Fuan (see Chapter 6 of this volume). Hainanese *kopitiams* numbered between 20–30 along the main streets of the Hainan town enclave and "Coffee King" Lee Chang Er owned

seven *kopitiams* (Lee 2009: 18). Hainanese *kopitiams* also sprang up in other locations such as Telok Ayer, Siglap, Chai Chee, Thomson and Nee Soon, while Hainanese cafes served mainly British and Commonwealth troops and their families in the Seletar, Sembawang and Portsdown military bases.[7] The firm establishment by Hainanese in the food and beverages industry by the early 1930s led to the formation of the Kheng Keow Coffeeshop and Eating House Owners Association in 1934, later renamed the Kheng Keow Coffee Merchants Restaurants and Bar-Owners Association (新加坡琼侨咖啡酒餐商公会) in 1952 to reflect the expansion of the business and related trades during the 1950s which was considered the peak of the Hainanese *kopitiam* business.[8]

The core attraction of Hainanese *kopitiams* and eateries was their foods. Drawn from their culinary backgrounds working in European households, some distinct dishes were hybridised creations with Hainanese-Western roots, such as breakfast comprising coffee,[9] *kaya*-butter toast and half-boiled eggs, pork chops and assorted confectionery (developed from the original British breakfast, Western pork chops and Western confectionery respectively). Other dishes were chicken rice, curried chicken and beef noodles. The early Hainanese *kopitiams* and eateries may thus be credited with introducing to the public Hainanese, Western and hybridised Hainanese-Western foods, many of which have now become iconic or favourite Singapore foods. They may also be credited for being foundational in developing the *kopitiam* into a public institution and the strong public culture of eating and drinking by the 1950s, during which the *kopitiam* landscape was made up of hundreds of operators. But where the Hainanese *kopitiam* business became a successful niche, so did it attract other newcomers and competitors such as from the Foochows.[10]

Indian and Malay Eateries

Paralleling the Chinese *kopitiams* and eateries were *kedai kopi* and *sarabat* stalls set up by Indians, Indian-Muslims and Malays which catered to demand for

[7] For two other outstanding examples — Jack's Place and Han's — see www.jacksplace.com.sg and www.hans.com.sg.

[8] Membership rose from 61 at its inception to 221 in 1940 and 505 in 1950 (Lee 2009: 16–17).

[9] Hainanese coffee merchants and *kopitiam* operators also developed their special recipes and distinctive forms of roasting coffee beans and brewing coffee.

[10] Among the Chinese *kopitiam* operators the numerically larger group of Foochows expanded so rapidly that they set up the Singapore Foochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association (新加坡福州咖啡酒餐商公会) which had about 600 registered members by the 1950s (Lee 2009: 18).

ethnic foods by the expanding Indian and Malay populations. For example, Zam Zam, which opened in Jalan Sultan as early as 1908, sold Indian-Muslim foods such as *briyani*, *murtabak* and *prata* (with different curries and meats) and drinks such as coffee and teas such as *teh alia* (ginger tea) and *teh tarik* ("pulled" tea). The first Indian vegetarian eatery Ananda Bhavan (now a chain of four across "Little India") was founded in 1924 by Indian immigrant Bhavan within the Indian enclave of Selegie (Ananda Bhavan 2013), while vegetarian restaurant Komala's was opened in 1947 by Murugiah Rajoo and brothers, immigrants from Tamil Nadu, South India, after Rajoo had first worked as a waiter for ten years at Komala Vilas vegetarian restaurant in the Indian enclave in Serangoon (Komala Vilas nd). Such eateries sold Indian vegetarian foods such as *prata*, *thosai*, *vadai*, pancakes, as well as sweets in their diverse varieties. Sabar Menanti restaurant in the historically ethnic Kampung Glam and Kampung Jawa districts, famed for *nasi padang* and other Minangkabau dishes, was first set up around 1958 as a food stall by an immigrant from Sumatra (Omar 2006). Indeed, Indian-Muslim and Malay stalls and eateries, although smaller in numbers, have equally contributed to the making of the Singapore *kopitiam* as a public institution and to the public culture of eating and drinking.[11]

Resettlement into the HDB Estates and the Rise of the Multicultural HDB *Kopitiam*

The *kopitiam* underwent much change in the immediate years of nation building, from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s. This was a period of massive and hurried urban renewal and rural resettlement, under which the HDB was tasked with meeting Singapore's housing redevelopment needs and with resettling populations from sometimes overcrowded and dilapidated urban areas, slums and squatter settlements, as well as rural villages into high-rise blocks of flats in HDB housing estates and new towns. Large plots of land with numerous settlements and farms were targeted for clearance for public housing and schemes such as industrial estates, and their entire populations

[11] The historical evolution and individual stories of Indian, Indian-Muslim, Malay and other eateries within the contexts of the social history of Singapore and their respective communities need to be researched and told alongside the Chinese ones, for a more complete and inclusive story of *kopitiams* and food heritages in Singapore's multiculturalism.

were moved out into new instant and highly planned neighbourhoods.[12] Along with these new public housing estates was born a new type of *kopitiam*.

Designed as part of basic facilities in the HDB estate's town and neighbourhood centres, this new *kopitiam* was typically located at each end of a shophouse row and close to hawker centre and market facilities, serving drinks and cooked food as before. Most of the first operators of the new *kopitiams* were likely *kopitiam* operators and others displaced by resettlement and offered priority HDB accommodation and the option of relocation into or priority allocation of HDB business premises at concessionary resettlement rental rates (Lim and Lim 1985: 311–316, 326–328). Others were individuals seeking new business opportunities. Similarly, the many itinerant hawkers and makeshift stallholders who found themselves compulsorily licensed and resettled as part of the government's town cleansing, public health, urban renewal and resettlement programmes, also took up new stalls in the new *kopitiams*, hawker centres and markets in the new estates.

The *kopitiam* in the new public housing estate was also new in another sense — through its multicultural makeup. Where previously, the *kopitiam* was largely ethnic-based in location, cuisine and clientele, this new *kopitiam* was clearly multi-ethnic, mirroring the new multi-ethnic composition of the new estate whose populations were resettled from previously mainly ethnic-based areas. This feature became an instant reality as the *kopitiam* naturally became one of the first public gathering sites for those disoriented by resettlement and for reorienting them. Through it, co-residents and neighbours from former communities were reunited with one another, strangers became recognisable as familiar faces, and yet others befriended as members of a new social network and co-residents of the new community. The *kopitiam* operator now had to provide food and drink for an enlarged and ethnically mixed clientele even as the majority in every housing estate was Chinese, and he quickly adapted the old formula in which he sold drinks and rented out stalls selling a variety of ethnic foods. Residents themselves also began to develop a multi-ethnic and cross-cultural taste for foods due to regular exposure in the *kopitiam*. "Multicultural" thus became the unwritten formula for the *kopitiam*'s survival, growth and success in the new multi-ethnic neighbourhood, and in doing so

[12] See Lim and Lim (1985) for details of resettlement policy, process and pact and Chua *et al.* (1985) for a detailed longitudinal case study of resettling a village. Unfortunately, the latter study did not track the resettlement consequences for the village's one and only coffee shop. See also Neo, Chapter 4 of this volume, on the resettlement of pig farmers.

it reinvented itself as a public place for the cultural confluence of cuisine, clientele and community in local everyday life that persists to this day.

THE HDB *KOPITIAM* TODAY

There are an estimated 1,963 food courts, coffee shops, eating houses, cafes, coffee houses and snack bars and 322 coffee shops in Singapore today, among which hundreds of *kopitiam*s are found in the HDB estates.[13] Their manifestation as a public site of multiculturalism is best understood by way of the kinds and flows of foods, people and activities found in them.

Foods, Foods and More Foods

The common comment "what to eat today?" attests to the variety of foods sold in the HDB *kopitiam*. Culturally, they range from Chinese to Malay, Indian/Indian-Muslim, "Western" and international, derived from migration flows of people and their foods. Individual items such as chicken rice, noodles, *prata* and *nasi padang*, once identified as ethnic and introduced by/for immigrants, are now iconic Singapore foods readily available in most *kopitiam*s as basic and popular items. The Hainanese-Western breakfast set is now standard fare. The "economy rice" stall that originally offered a cheap combination of rice and dishes to immigrants retains its status as the *kopitiam*'s "anchor" stall while the *tze char* stall is now effectively a small restaurant serving a wide range of dishes. The Indian/Indian-Muslim food stall selling *prata, chapati* and meat dishes, the Malay stall selling *mee rebus, nasi lemak* and meat dishes, the "Western" stall offering local versions of Western foods (chops, steaks, grills, fries) are at least three other "must-haves" for a *kopitiam* to be "complete" or at least "decent". Traditional ethnic foods abound and so do hybridised and cross-cultural versions of individual items, such as noodles (Chinese, Indian and Malay in dry, fried or soup versions and by Chinese dialect group); rice (Chinese, Malay and Indian, each with a range of meats and vegetables); curries (Chinese,

[13] http://www.business.gov.sg, http://www.thegreenbook.com, both accessed 3 July 2009. Total membership of outlets registered with the Keong Keow and Foo Chow associations vary between 700 and 1,100, while there are 800 HDB coffee-shops and 550 pre-war coffee-shop houses (National Environment Council 2004).

Hainanese, Malay, Indian); breads (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western); and *rojak* (Chinese, Malay, Indian). A diversity of drinks match this food "fair" and are often ordered in their hybridised Singlish names. Most customers have developed at least a mildly multicultural taste, and it is common practice for individuals to rotate different ethnic dishes among their meals and for a family to be eating different dishes together.

A *kopitiam*'s range of ethnic foods also varies by ownership, location and customer base. For example, stalls in Chinese-owned 128 Kopitiam, Bedok, besides offering common dishes such as roast meats and noodles, also serve distinctly traditional Chinese dishes such as Teochew porridge, Szechuan duck, black chicken, pig's innards and trotters, and frog legs and turtle soups. The stalls in nearby Mukmin Restaurant serve a range of Malay and Indian-Muslim foods and desserts, the classics being various kinds of rice with spicy meats and vegetables, breads and cakes as well as Malay and Indian hybridised versions of Western foods such as burgers.

Some HDB *kopitiams* and stalls have also attained fame for their foods within the estate or beyond, "appearing" on food and heritage trails by word of mouth and through the internet[14] (see Tan, Chapter 8 of this volume, for a discussion of food blogs) and are sites sought out by eager "foodies". Mukmin Restaurant, for example, was and still is well known for its range of Malay *kuih-muih* (cakes and desserts) and, according to one stallholder, "people from all over Singapore, from as far as Woodlands, will come here to eat and buy our food". Similarly, the *tze char* stall formerly in MP59 Kopitiam in Marine Terrace (and now relocated to Bedok) attracts crowds from beyond the estate. Their claims to fame and sometimes ownership of a particular dish are based on "first" setup, originality, authenticity, heritage and tradition, special skills, styles and ingredients, and sometimes simply being the offspring of an original stall, or due to an award received or positive media coverage by food tasting experts, while patronage or visits by celebrities or politicians are given prominent publicity through pictures and pinups.

Since the 1990s, the range of foods that have shaped and substantiated Singapore's diverse culinary landscape (Chua and Raja 1997: 1) have been further infused with new ingredients and inputs by locals and new immigrants. In the Marine Parade and Bedok *kopitiams* surveyed, the traditional "Western"

[14] See for example, www.foodlane.sg, www.makansutra.com, www.hungrygowhere.com, www.makantime.com, soshiok.com, www.goodfood.sg, www.yebber.com, www.ieatishootipost.blogspot.com and www.eateatenate.blogspot.com.

food stall now additionally serves burgers, pizzas and spaghetti, besides chops and steaks; Indonesian *ayam penyet* and Thai *tom yam* are popular in Malay cuisine; the Korean and Chinese noodles stall in MP59 Kopitiam is well patronised; while Japanese and fusion foods (e.g., XO brand fried rice) was offered by fusion food Asia.Com stall in VStar. A Botak Jones outlet serving American foods set up shop in a Marine Parade *kopitiam* in July 2009 and was doing brisk business initially. Its parent company, set up by an immigrant American and his Singaporean wife, was born out of the observation that there is a "definite lack of availability of good, well-made western food in the industrial and heartland areas".

> Botak Jones is always finding ways to bring the quality of food and service into a more comfortable, everyday setting, which translates into coffee shops and eating houses, where people feel at ease and can dress as they wish and be themselves … everyone should have the opportunity to taste what the world has to offer no matter where and how they live (Botak Jones nd).

Some dishes and stalls "die" in Singapore's fiercely competitive culinary environment and amidst rapidly spiralling business costs (for example, fusion food Asia.Com stall closed after a year; Botak Jones has reduced its number of outlets; MP59 Kopitiam changed hands in 2013). However, the concept of "multicultural" in the *kopitiam* is firmly established — it has to offer a wide range of ethnic, hybridised and even "national" foods that meet the ethnic, multicultural and international palates of customers and at affordable prices. In turn, it is the strong public culture of eating, first initiated through meeting immigrant needs and developed to now include "foodies" and food heritage trails, which sustains the multicultural *kopitiam*'s survival and success.

People of the *Kopitiam*

Customers and community[15]

In contrast to an earlier time when the *kopitiam* was a male domain, the *kopitiam*'s customers today are families, schoolchildren, groups and individuals

[15] For a fuller discussion on various aspects of a local HDB community, see Lai AE (2012) A neighbourhood in Singapore: ordinary people's lives 'downstairs'.

(all of whom are mainly local residents) frequenting it according to their everyday life schedules and needs. Now a taken-for-granted scene, women, including Muslim women, eat and drink in the *kopitiam* in same-sex or mixed groups or alone. "Latchkey" schoolchildren whose parents are out working can safely eat there. The down-and-out, the storyteller and the joker too can find their own spaces in the *kopitiam*. This is the public home ground of the *Ah Laus, Pakciks* and *Makciks* (the elderly in local Chinese and Malay referencing) and *Ah Bengs, Ah Lians, Mats and Minahs* (the Chinese and Malay youngsters in local referencing). The *kopitiam* that is opened every day from early morning till late at night is at once a place of intense colours, sounds and activities. Customers queuing for food, stallholders shouting orders, cooks preparing foods, cleaners clearing tables, people eating and chatting, the television screening programmes — these are the everyday scenes of the multicultural public site that the *kopitiam* has evolved into within the local community. As if in a play about everyday life, they all make their appearances at different times to perform on the stage that the *kopitiam* is. It is a site where HDB "heartlanders" of various age, ethnic, income and work backgrounds frequent to eat, drink, socialise, idle or simply to feel the presence of others. A shared space, it offers a sense of being open and equal to all (Chan 2003: 132, 135), with social boundaries temporarily removed or well negotiated within an order of civility honed over time. The professionally dressed worker and the pyjama-clad *auntie* (elderly lady), the retired *pakcik* and the young student — all may enter and share space in the *kopitiam*. It is normal to ask "can I sit here?" and unthinkable to reply "no, you cannot".

As a social centre, the *kopitiam* remains, as in the past, a window to the world through media access. There is always something to watch on cable television (which replaced *Rediffusion since the 1980s*), from international news to cartoons, soap operas, documentaries, sitcoms and reality shows. Highlights are "live" sports events such as local and international soccer league games, when men in particular, fathers and sons, foreign workers and beer drinking groups, turn up to watch, and from which new Singlish terms are spawned, such as Pang-Pow (cannon-firing in Hokkien) for Arsenal and Tok-Tok-Ham for Tottenham Hotspurs soccer teams. Indeed, the *kopitiam* is one of the few public places where local languages may still be heard and the multicultural Singlish language further developed, such as "palata" (prata), "who man say?" (who said so?) and "you sit I bring" (please sit, I will bring your order). Here too, chats and discussions about world and local events, jokes, stories, personal histories and various matters significant or

otherwise continue to take place in the true tradition of coffee shop talk. The heartland HDB *kopitiam* is a place that provides a sense of social intimacy and community.

The practices of religious diversity and negotiations of religious boundaries in the *kopitiam* attest to the strength of equality, tolerance, respect and developed codes of civility within its multiculturalism and sense of community. Visually and symbolically, these are manifested by the peaceful coexistence of Muslim-run stalls' signboards, which typically display icons of mosques, moon and star and Arabic inscriptions about Allah, and Chinese *kopitiams*' altars for the deities deemed important for peace and prosperity. Religious boundaries around food are maintained along halal/non-halal lines for Muslim and others foods. Stalls observe these boundaries in food preparation and service, such as with colour coded crockery, while customers demarcate eating spaces within an unspoken but well understood code when eating halal/non-halal dishes at a shared table. Some events further highlight religious diversity and its negotiation. During Ramadan, Mukmin Restaurant opens close to breaking fast time when there is a frenzied sale of foods by the stalls and the owner offers free food to the needy as a gesture of almsgiving. It is also a time for non-Muslim customers to savour the special foods of the season. For Chinese *kopitiams* and stalls, offerings are made daily and on auspicious occasions such as the Seventh Month Festival, while the *tze char* stall offers special dishes such as *lou hei* (a salad toss for blessings) and visiting lion dance troupes perform for prosperity during the Lunar New Year. In general, the code of civility for respecting and accommodating cultural and religious needs, practices and taboos in the *kopitiam* are well understood and developed by stallholders and customers alike, honed through everyday practice over time.

Kopitiam owners and stallholders

The white singlet and striped pyjama pants-clad *kopitiam* proprietor making coffee was a common sight until the 1980s. Today's *kopitiam* owner is likely an absentee landlord who owns several *kopitiams* in various parts of Singapore and even abroad — a consequence of intense competition and capital movements in which older founding proprietors unable to keep up with competition or wishing to retire have sold their shops to new and aggressive investors in what has become a highly lucrative business (elaborated in the third section). Similarly, *kopitiam* stallholders tell a complex story of small family business formations and adjustments to economic pressures since the 1990s.

Kopitiam stalls have historically been run by a sole proprietor or as a small family or team enterprise. Father-son, husband-wife, siblings and friends teams were common. But stallholders' upwardly mobile children, like those of *kopitiam* owners, are reluctant to take over their parents' trades with the long hours, hard work and low status. As a result, there has been some loss of culinary skills and secrets and some stalls have closed when their operators retired (Huang 2008, Yen 2008). More seriously, since the late 1990s, rising costs have led many stalls to close or relocate, some several times, to areas with lower rents. The 30-year old Malay food stall in one Marine Terrace *kopitiam* closed when it changed ownership and rents were raised twice. Father-sons team of a popular chicken rice stall moved out of Marine Parade to Katong and then Bedok because of rising rents; another Hainanese chicken rice stall in Bedok, in the same business for 30 years, has moved several times within Bedok to neighbourhoods with cheaper rents. Lao Feng Turtle Soup's stallholder in Block 128 Coffee Shop Bedok intends to retire after several decades in the business as rents and costs of ingredients have spiralled, and also because his "highly educated" son never had any interest in the business. Younger generation members of family-run stalls in Mukmin Restaurant hold full-time jobs and only assist after work or during the Ramadan peak hours. Marine Parade Laksa run by a husband-wife team in Block 128 Coffee Shop Bedok is a classic stall story. Starting as itinerant hawkers carrying their food ware on shoulder poles in Joo Chiat/Katong in the 1950s, they relocated from their Katong shop where they had been for decades to Marine Parade when rent controls were lifted, and then to Bedok following rental rises. Now in their early 80s, their last move from a S$3,000 per month rented stall in Marine Parade to their current S$1,500 one in Bedok might well be the last, although their grandchild is running a similar stall in Katong where "*laksa* wars" among competing stalls have occasionally erupted.

Hard work, long hours and low wages in the *kopitiam* and food stall trades — a constant feature since their early days — has meant a shortage of local workers, particularly throughout the last decade. The solution has been the hiring of cheap foreign workers, sometimes illegally and which has been fraught with problems of exploitative work conditions.[16] However, this too has run into problems due to official policy changes since 2013 to reduce overall

[16] For a discussion on the hiring of cheap foreign workers and their cultural implications, see Lai (2013: 220). Under existing law, the services sector must employ a minimum nine Singaporeans or permanent residents before they can hire foreign workers, while only Singaporeans and permanent residents are allowed to work in food stalls, including *tze char* stalls. See also *The Straits Times* (12 Dec 2007a) (12 Dec 2007b) (5 Jul 2009a) (5 Jul 2009b) (16 Oct 2009).

dependence on cheap foreign labour. The labour shortage continues and the hiring of cheap local elderly labour by *kopitiams* appears to be another short-term solution.

A NEW CHAPTER IN THE *KOPITIAM* STORY: THE 1990s AND BEYOND

Kopitiams have entered a new era in their evolution since the early 1990s. There are unprecedented changes and tremendous competitive pressures, with frequent changes of *kopitiam* ownership and food stall tenancy amidst a general trend of spiralling costs and prices. The demise of many old *kopitiams* and stalls will probably go unremembered. What dominates the scene are the success stories of early immigrants' *kopitiams* and eateries which had a headstart and are now run by subsequent generations of family, through inheritance and intergenerational skills transfers but changed by rebranding, modernised management systems, new ideas of public eating culture, and reinvented and hybridised dishes — such as Jack's Place, Hans, Killiney and Ya Kun (all Hainanese), Bhavan and Komalas (South Indian) and Sabar Menanti (Indonesian/Malay). There are also new "rags-to-riches" success stories, such as that of Pang Lim, the 13-year-old kitchen-helper who became Koufu food court's chain boss[17] and Lim Bee Huat, the once nine-year-old *kopi kia* (coffee boy) who became *kopi king* of the Kopitiam chain[18] and who dreams of "a *kopitiam* on every street" and hopes to "fill the street corners with coffee, *kaya* toast and eggs". These enterprises have expanded locally through the establishment of outlets all over Singapore, as well as regionally and internationally, such as in the case of Komalas, Kopitiam, Hans and Ya Kun whose staff are effectively a class of international "circulating migrant" entrepreneurs. There are also numerous food courts in shopping malls, "new generation" *kopitiams* and "hipster" cafes mushrooming in gentrified town areas and older HDB estates that have undergone physical upgrading programmes. Underlying this changing *kopitiam* landscape are several forces

[17] Pang worked variously as kitchen helper, street hawker, fruit seller and coffee shop stallholder before opening his first coffee shop in 1990 with his younger brother and uncle. Pang's Koufu chain operates about 30 food courts, five coffee shops and five cafes, mainly in HDB estates. See Tan (2007) and Koufu (nd).

[18] Lim Bee Huat started as a coffee stall assistant who harboured entrepreneurial ambitions and made acute observations about the trade along the way (http://www.kopitiam.biz/our-success-story/).

which have significantly affected the *kopitiam* as a complex economic and cultural site: market behaviour and official policy changes, coffee shop heritage commoditisation, as well as consumer tastes and preferences.

Market Behaviour and Policy Changes

Since the late 1980s, structural economic changes, together with state deregulatory measures followed closely by private capital mobilisation in the property markets, have affected old *kopitiams*. In particular, the removal of the Control of Rent (Abolition) Act in 2001[19] displaced or spelt the death of many small businesses that were unsustainable without low rents, resulting in their shuttering or relocation. An influx of capital quickly entered the *kopitiam* sector and intensified, with *kopitiam* chains such as Kopitiam, Koufu and S11 purchasing *kopitiams* around Singapore. In HDB estates, the consolidation of major *kopitiam* operators was made possible by another policy change at about the same time: the privatisation of ownership of HDB *kopitiams*, where they were previously only rented out under HDB's management since resettlement days. This trend was started by the founder of the Kopitiam chain when he bought his first HDB *kopitiam* in Bishan with a "jaw-dropping" bid of S$2.01 million in 1988, a sum that buckled industry expectations then. The shop's value later rose to S$6 million while the chain quickly expanded to about 70 outlets by 2009.[20]

The rapid and widespread extent of buying *kopitiams* had the overall economic effect of soaring prices of *kopitiam* properties for sale or resale. It was a period of consolidation for the major *kopitiam* operators, in which the *kopitiam* became as much a property investment or speculation as a business (Han 2013). The bullish market has also created the urge for investors to see *kopitiams* as targets for "flipping". This process begins with the sale of a newly purchased *kopitiam* to another owner, who then takes the opportunity to renovate the space (even if it was renovated fairly recently by the previous owner) so as to justify increased rents onto the tenants. Rather than work for

[19] The Rent Control Act was passed in 1947 to prevent profiteering by landlords due to the housing shortage then. However, it has been phased out gradually, firstly through the Controlled Premises (Special Provisions) Act, in 1970, and then in 1989. This allowed owners to recover possession of their properties if they have development plans approved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and owners and tenants will have to negotiate to reach a settlement.

[20] The Kopi Tiam King www.kopitiam.biz/our-success-story, accessed 1 July 2015.

a return, the new owner may simply hold the *kopitiam* for a few years (or in some extreme cases, months) and sell it to make a quick buck, and the process continues. This is seen in the increasing regularity of *kopitiams* being bought and sold for millions, such as the case in which six *kopitiams* in Hougang were sold during 2011 for a combined value of SGD$60 million, while another, Coffee Express 2000, sold for a record SGD$23.8 million in 2013 (Huang and Cheong 2011; Wee and Lim 2013; Chan and Kua 2007). In June 2016, Yong Xing Coffee shop in Bukit Batok was sold for a record of S$31 million (almost 10 times the original price of $3.38 million 20 years ago) to a brother of the founder of coffee shop operator Chang Cheng Group which owns the Chang Cheng Mee Wah chain of coffee shops (Lin 2015). Several *kopitiams* observed in Marine Parade and Bedok (W326 Coffee Shop, 123 Coffee Corner, MP59) changed hands at least thrice since the late 1990s. MP59 Coffeehouse and VStar Coffeehouse in Marine Terrace changed ownership around 2004 and 2006 respectively, and each again changed ownership twice around 2010 and 2012. Another example is the *kopitiam* at Block 18 Bedok South Road, which has changed owners three times from 2010–2014.

The overall economic effect of this trend on stallholders and customers has been the rapid rise in rentals and food prices. The sale of a *kopitiam* at Jurong East in 2007 at SGD$12 million to Koufu netted an increase in rents of SGD$1,000 for the economy rice stall (Chan and Kua 2007). The sales of *kopitiams* in Marine Parade over an estimated ten-year period from 2004 to 2012 led to several rises in rental and food costs. Rental for one *kopitiam*'s *roti prata* stall rose by about $1,000 per month (about 30%) and the price of *roti prata* rose ten cents (about 20%) with each change of ownership, while prices of other stalls' dishes have risen variously by about 30%–70% and the price of a cup of coffee rose by nearly 100% from fifty cents to one dollar. The steep rise in rents has also meant a movement of stalls to places with cheaper rents and a hollowing-out of some *kopitiams*. Rather than full occupancy, some *kopitiam* operators have failed to attract stall tenants as rents have become too unsustainable. This appears particularly true for stallholders whose clientele bases are more limited. It is now common to hear that Malay foods are harder to find as some Malay food stallholders find rents too high and move elsewhere. Two long-time Malay stalls in the Marine Terrace *kopitiam* moved out when it was bought over by a new owner in 2012. The original tenants of Bedok Block 18's *kopitiam* simply moved out

as rents were raised with each change in ownership. Under the current fourth owner, none of the original tenants, except for the *tze char* stall, are still at the *kopitiam*. Food prices also average around S$3.50–$4.00 per plate in this *kopitiam*, which is markedly higher than those at around S$2.50–$3.00 at the hawker centre nearby.

Simultaneous cutbacks in the building of HDB *kopitiams* (and also traditionally adjacent facilities such as hawker centres and wet markets) in new housing estates such as Ponggol and Sengkang further favoured shopping mall food courts funded by big capital. Thus, while prices of sale/resale *kopitiam* properties, stall rentals and food prices soared, some newer HDB estates additionally faced a dire lack of *kopitiams* (also hawker centres) selling foods at lower prices. One 2013 report noted that in Sengkang, the majority of stalls in Kopitiam Square, Singapore's first privately built and owned food centre and wet market under the Kopitiam chain, were unoccupied (about 40 out of 60) due to high rents and lack of customers. Renaissance Properties, a subsidiary of Kopitiam, had earlier in 2009 won the tender to run the centre at $500,100 a month — more than double the next highest bidder's offer. Even at that time, Sengkang residents had expressed concern that the high tender bid would result in higher rent and food prices, and indeed customers complained of high prices (and poor food quality), and 15 food stalls and three wet market stalls left within a year (Ee 2013).

By 2012, high prices and costs of living, including of food, had become a serious social and political issue. Although the Ministry of National Development said there was no evidence of speculation in the market for HDB shops,[21] there was indirect acknowledgement of the problem through policy changes. HDB, probably in response to the property investments/speculation in *kopitiams* after its policy change to private ownership and to the complaints of the lack of *kopitiams* (and hawker centres), quietly returned to its old policy of only renting out newly built *kopitiams*. It was also announced that new towns Sengkang, Hougang and Sembawang will have a new hawker centre in each of their neighbourhoods by 2017.[22]

[21] The Ministry of National Development (MND) revealed, in a written parliamentary reply, that, of the 216 HDB shops sold in 2012, only 14 — or 6% — were resold within one year of purchase. "This does not suggest a speculative element in HDB shops", see *The Straits Times*, 16 Oct 2012).

[22] This was announced by the Ministry of Environment and Water Resources (*The Straits Times*, 21 Oct 2012).

Shophouse kopitiams: redevelopment and gentrification

The effects of market and policy changes on shophouse *kopitiams* elsewhere in old city areas such as Tanjong Pagar, Chinatown and Joo Chiat deserve a brief note here. The removal of rent control in these areas and a simultaneous policy change in land use that "established zoning which favoured commercial and other non-residential uses" (Ho and Hutton 2012: 235) led to big capital moving in to purchase old shophouses for conversion into offices, hotels and cafes. Such redevelopments first took place in phases in the financial district and surrounding areas in the 1970s and 1980s. The passing of the Control of Rent (Abolition) Act in 2001 sounded the death knell for the remaining rent-controlled premises out of which 68% operated low-value commercial businesses such as coffee shops and eating places.[23] The overall result has been the gentrification of commercial properties. The pressures of gentrification have in turn forced rentals up, especially in areas like Keong Saik Street and Tiong Bahru and those near the Central Business District. *Kopitiams* in these areas face high rents as well as possible buyouts for other more high-value uses. Tong Ah Eating House in Keong Saik Street was bought over by a hotelier for SGD$8 million after operating at its premises for 75 years (Lee 2013). Similar trends have forced several *kopitiams* in Tiong Bahru to close or change their business operations. These *kopitiams* now include restaurants so as to continue running their businesses. Hua Bee, which sells fishball noodles, now houses the upscale Japanese *yakitori* restaurant Bincho. Similarly, 01–46 now opens in the evening as a pizzeria named Two Face (Tan 2012). A strategically located old *kopitiam* in new heritage site Joo Chiat has been bought over, redeveloped and renamed Alibaba R based on a "hawker bar" concept but several of its former tenants have moved elsewhere due to high rents (see Duruz, Chapter 6 of this volume, for a fuller discussion of AlibabaR). Similarly, the stallholders in another *kopitiam* nearby moved out when it was acquired and turned into German-themed beer-bar-restaurant Brotzeit.

Kopitiam Heritage: Historicisation, Commoditisation and the Appeal to Authenticity and Nostalgia

In today's relentless *kopitiam* competition, elements of *kopitiam* culture and heritage are being invoked to maximise business claims and opportunities by

[23] Bill, *Control of Rent (Abolition)*, 2nd Session, 9th Parliament, Singapore 2001.

kopitiam operators who consciously appeal to specific elements of tradition, culture and heritage which play on memory, nostalgia and even pride. *Kopitiams* have also been swept along with and contributed to the wave of nostalgia sweeping Singapore amidst its rapid economic, social and cultural changes.[24] Indeed, the "local *kopitiam*" as an institution is now cast as part of tradition, culture and heritage. It has undergone sufficiently long evolution to have built up history and tradition and there is now sufficient space for recreating the past, historicising it and invoking memory and nostalgia, while the appeal to social ties and locale intimacy through its social role and location further lend a sense of historical and contemporary meanings. Thus for example, the Koufu chain claims to

> reinvent the coffee shop traditions with a fusion of eastern and western techniques so that the company can evolve through modern management concepts and yet stay true to good old coffee shop traditions,

and "to preserve the uniqueness of authentic Singapore hawker cuisines". It also claims to be able to personalise service with "friendliness and intimacy" because its shops are located in housing estates (Koufu nd). Killiney chain *kopitiams* recreate the atmosphere of the old coffee shop with period furnishings, décor and historical memorabilia. Its mission statement is "to keep the '*Kopitiam*' tradition going for this generation and for the many generations to come", while its tagline is "Welcome to the good old days". Ya Kun's branding lies in its belief that "a good toast binds kinship, friendship and partnership" and its mission includes "to preserve its unique and rich heritage". Both Killiney Kopitiam and Ya Kun have received "heritage" as well "spirit of enterprise" awards in recent years. It is of little surprise that a legal case involving the use of the name "Kopitiam" by two such operators took place in 1988 when the competition first began.[25]

In the claims of tradition, culture and heritage, the "ethnic" and multicultural elements in each *kopitiam*'s history and foods sold are capitalised

[24] Blogs and Facebook sites such as yesterday.sg, iremember.sg, Remember Singapore, Nostalgic Singapore, On a Little Street in Singapore, and Singapura Stories all attempt to document some memories, sights and sounds of the past. A sense of urgency pervades cultural preservation and heritage work.

[25] The legal tussle between Kopitiam Singapore Restaurant and the company Kopitiam Pte Ltd over the exclusive use of the name "Kopitiam" resulted in the latter's favour as it was ruled that the term "*kopitiam*" was generic and could be used by anyone.

on, and originality, authenticity and diversity are emphasised. In this, the Hainanese operators' claim to both *kopitiam* and culinary heritage is an outstanding example by virtue of having been among the first to start and to contribute through their unique fusion foods. Indeed, the "Hainanese *kopitiam*", considered foundational in "tradition" and "heritage" have become legendary within the now developed larger *kopitiam* culture.[26]

At the same time, operators are aware that *kopitiams* (also food courts) must remain diverse/multicultural in their foods and their appeal to customers. Thus, Kopitiam set up the Banquet halal food court chain (which, however, closed in 2013) and Hans runs several halal Hanis Café and Bakery outlets. For Koufu, it

> ... want[s] to nurture the inherent joy of sharing a meal or drink with family and friends, by providing friendliness and a spark of inspiration in the everyday life of people of all ages, social classes and ethnic backgrounds,

while Komala's restaurant claims that

> it is the commitment to such values [quality, value-for-money authentic Indian food, commitment to cleanliness and hygiene] that earned Komala's popularity with the Indians, Malays, Chinese and tourists throughout its 50-year history in Singapore.

Needless to say, foods and food cultures themselves have become part of heritage. Clearly traceable to migration origins and histories, food specialisation and hybridisation continue to be a dynamic part of this living heritage, sustained by and in turn sustaining, exciting and enriching the strong public eating culture. Some new, reinvented, hybrids and further hybrids of food dishes have even triggered food crazes and the occasional culinary war between, such as over *kaya* toast, *laksa*, chicken rice, bean curd, *nasi padang* and chilli crab.[27]

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[26] One recent television sitcom revolved around the *kopitiam* and was titled "Hainan Kopi Tales".

[27] Yakun makes and sells its own brand of Hainanese *kaya* (*The Straits Times*, 9 Mar 2009), while Hans continues the Hainanese tradition of hybridising dishes and confectionery. For examples of the *kaya* craze, *kaya* toast wars and food feuds, see *The Straits Times* (5 Dec 1999), *The Straits Times* (22 May 2005) and *The Sunday Times* (11 Jan 2009). Competing food heritage claims in the competitive local and tourism sectors have recently also threatened to take a regional dimension between countries in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia where foods have followed migration and developed into local versions, igniting even nationalist sentiments in what may be alternatively seen as shared heritages.

Finally, occupational pride and prestige have contributed to the push for recognition of the *kopitiam* as tradition and heritage. The low status of the *kopitiam* is fast changing, the success stories of Koufu, Ya Kun, Hans, Kopitiam, Bhavan, Komalas, Zam Zam and Sabar Menanti have undoubtedly contributed to this change. Lim Bee Huat, the "kopi king", still has a mission to accomplish:

> to make the coffee shop or hawker business respectable in the eyes of the people ... to change the image of the coffee shop as a 'low grade' business ... because the children of the '*kopitiam*' men are afraid people will look down on them (Kopitiam nd).

The issue of *kopitiam* authenticity is especially relevant in a time of nostalgia and search for identity.[28] While both HDB and brand name *kopitiams* are sites of cultural production, HDB *kopitiams* are "endowed" with working class origins and characteristics and do not need to appeal to nostalgia or manufacture authenticity.[29] The HDB *kopitiam*'s historical origins and everyday life provision of cheap foods for the working class and "common folk" in a "common" space is firmly established, its "heartland" location and social role further enabling its authenticity and "timelessness" to endure. On the other hand, "nostalgia" *kopitiams* such as Ya Kun, Killiney and Toast Box which have been gentrified through décor, utensils, pricing and clientele have to endeavour to tap on nostalgia and to offer elements of an authentic past. Thus, Toast Box

> ... is a reflection of the coffee shops from the 60s and 70s ... This warm, nostalgic concept was reinvented to bring back fond memories for those who missed the good old times, and for the younger ones to experience the feel and flavours of a bygone era (Toast Box 2014).

Toast Box, a subsidiary of a local bread company BreadTalk, is an interesting case as it does not have a history like Ya Kun's or Killiney's. How it positions itself is therefore through its fidelity towards the past — its décor includes wooden stools, heritage items and a "butter mountain" (a huge conical shaped

[28] The discussion in this section on nostalgia and authenticity is drawn mostly from Lim Jia Liang (2014).
[29] The media further reifies this working class nature of the HDB *kopitiam*. The "state of the *kopitiam*" is essential, in which the prices of coffee are heavily scrutinised. Thus, the price rise of a *kopi-o* from 60 cents to 70 cents in 2006 was met with two articles, the second explaining that *kopitiam* associations did not collude to raise prices together. See Lim D (2006) and Lim WC (2006).

block of butter), and it also conducts Nanyang coffee appreciation workshops (Gurkhason 2013).

Pastiche appears to dominate nostalgia *kopitiams* despite their adherence to the "good old days". Toast Box employees wear uniformed frocks, working amidst sacks of coffee strewn around. Jameson defines pastiche as borrowing without intent, where artists (and in this case, interior designers) borrow from the past in a "random cannibalisation of past styles". Ornaments are devoid of use value and serve only as cultural symbols hinting at an idealised past. The recreation of the past through the use of specific material objects and pop culture also circumscribe presentations of the past, leading Jameson (1991: 25) to call these representations "pop history". On the other hand, it can be argued that pastiche as they may be, the local history these *kopitiams* draw from and the nostalgia they create are attempts at placing the local in the global and expressing Singapore's position and identity in a globalised society through food, especially in the face of fierce competition from global branded coffee chains such as Starbucks and Coffee Bean. Indeed, there was a period in the 1990s when it appeared that global brands were replacing local *kopitiams*, especially in city areas and shopping malls. "Food Talk" that speaks of eating locally can be seen as an assertion of (local) agency in a globalised world, and the creation of such deliberately local eateries and cladding them in nostalgia is therefore a reaction and response to globalisation, "a hunt of agency in a moment of change" (Thompson 2012: 58–70).

A note should be made here on food courts in shopping malls, as they have become the new site of fierce competition. The shopping mall food court has been a development in Singapore since the late 1980s. Arguably, the food court is the *kopitiam*'s concept (also the hawker centre's) extended and redeveloped to a new level of public eating culture. Based on the same principle of combining food and drinks under one roof, the food court in a huge space and providing the choice of a wider range of foods in air-conditioned comfort quickly became a successful form and venue by the mid-1990s, particularly when situated in a shopping mall that itself has become a site of consumption culture in Singapore.[30] While there has been a proliferation of shopping malls all over Singapore (Gallezo 2013), their main food court operators are the same dominant players Kopitiam, Koufu and Food Republic which compete through differentiation. Thus for example, Food Republic claims to overturn

[30] See Chua (2003). Picnic Food Court was the first food court in Singapore. It opened in 1985 at the now-defunct Scotts Shopping Centre.

"old perceptions of food court dining to fresh outlooks at new heights", and aims to "dish out the best of hawker and restaurant fare under a single platform" (Food Republic 2015). The décor of each of its food courts has a different theme and, more importantly, it has approached famous hawker stores to franchise their products. Boards explain each stall's legacy, and even if it were a generic one without any history behind it, a marketing narrative would be created. These concepts eagerly embrace the cultural capital that is historically provided by *kopitiams*.

Changes in Consumer Behaviour and Preferences

A third trend in the changing landscape are consumers who have become more complex in their preferences and tastes. *Kopitiam* culture is firmly established as part of an everyday lifestyle and habitual affair that cuts across all class and ethnic backgrounds. But unlike the past, there is now a huge variety of *kopitiams* and food outlets competing to keep up with customers' changing tastes, as well as create new expectations of the coffee shop and eating experience. Customers have tremendous choice of *kopitiams* and food outlets and are not limited to neighbourhood ones unless they are locale-bound or cash-strapped. For ordinary HDB residents, the neighbourhood *kopitiams* remain a place of choice in everyday life, with the smaller ones in quieter neighbourhoods still better able to offer a sense of intimacy and community that the larger crowded ones may not. For the more mobile, patronising different types of coffee shops can be a choice of moving between a nostalgic local past and a "hip", globalised, cosmopolitan and gentrified present. Depending on occasion, need and context, these consumers move flexibly between the HDB and gentrified *kopitiams* and between local and international coffee shops, consuming a range of local and international drinks and foods.

Whither the *Kopitiam*?

The story of the *kopitiam* is deeply embedded within a larger historical and social narrative of migration and cultural diversity. Born out of the necessity for food and company among male immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds in colonial Singapore, the *kopitiam* served as a simple eating place and social centre, and it became an economic niche for those with culinary and service

skills or who had little choice but to work long hours at low wages in this low status trade. Reflecting ethnic dimensions in terms of spatial locations, foods sold and customer bases, the *kopitiam* also evolved to become the social centre in local communities across the island, serving as the focal point of everyday life and at the same time providing links to the outside world. Through resettlement into public housing estates and over time, the monocultural *kopitiam* reinvented itself into a multicultural institution that is a confluence of cuisine, clientele and community. The multicultural heartland *kopitiam* today remains, together with hawker centres, *the* institution of local community and everyday public life. Open to all, it displays the public culture of eating and talking that is considered by some as the national pastime; and it satisfies the need for replenishment, rest and recreation through culturally familiar foods, friends and fraternities.

The confluence of cuisine, clientele and community in the *kopitiam* makes it a particularly significant site, within the larger politics and dynamics of diversity in Singapore. Cuisine itself is one particularly outstanding dimension of this diversity. Closely associated with *kopitiams* (also hawker centres and restaurants) and constituting heritage with migration roots, Singapore's food diversity has been taken to new levels in recent years and popularised simultaneously as ethnic, national and multicultural. While some dishes may vanish and cooking secrets die out, there are enough intergenerational transfers of cuisine skills, recorded recipes and creative players to ensure continuity. Indeed, the thriving food diversity and hybridisation with its seemingly endless possibilities attests to Singapore's unique multicultural food culture and contribution to the world. The *kopitiam* provides the social and public setting for sustaining this heritage and its further development. *Kopitiam* community similarly displays dimensions and dynamics of the diversity narrative in Singapore, through the meals and meetings the *kopitiam* provides and enables in everyday life.

So how will the story of the *kopitiam* unfold in future? So long as there are cultural flows and interactions, there will be a multicultural *kopitiam* that is the confluence of cuisine, culture and community. And so long as there is a working class, there will be a heartland *kopitiam*. Even as mobile customers and residents now move about for food and company in varied settings, *kopitiam* culture remains a way of everyday life and makes the *kopitiam* a quintessential Singapore experience and a living heritage site. And so long as love of food and public eating cultures remain strong, the multicultural *kopitiam* will continue to thrive and evolve.

The new dimensions of *kopitiam* heritage with its historicisation, commoditisation and the appeal to nostalgia and authenticity speak to larger issues and senses of identity and belonging. Pastiche notwithstanding, *kopitiam* spaces both old and new undoubtedly provide comfort, and the preservation of a part of the old, reinvented as it might be, create opportunities for Singaporeans to reaffirm their identity and belonging in the face of rapid globalisation and change. It appears ironic that many of the *kopitiam* chains are located in shopping malls — a celebration of the old in the space of the new. Yet, this shows the *kopitiam*'s endurance as a site of authenticity and nostalgia as well as dynamism amidst the competition from many new, "hipster" and "new generation" coffee shops and global coffee chains.

Finally, how can the *kopitiam* story be appreciated in context? Like Lao She's famous Chinese "Teahouse",[31] the *kopitiam* is like a miniature society and a metaphor for Singapore, telling a story of its migration and social histories and that of ordinary people and their lives, capturing their struggles for livelihood and the evolution of Singapore's multiculturalism and identity. The story is far from concluded; it continues to unfold with dramatic developments of a local-global nature before our very eyes today.

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[31] For Lao She, "a big teahouse is like a miniature society", and his famous play "Teahouse" can be read as a metaphor for China. It spans 50 years of modern Chinese history, witnessing the disintegration of the Qing Empire and the beginning of the struggle to build a modern nation-state through the portrayal of *xiao renwu* — ordinary characters — from all walks of life who frequented the Chinese teahouse. Singapore playwright Kuo Pao Kun (Kuo 2001) attempted to do the same for Singapore with his play "*Kopitiam*" which was performed in 1996.

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