

# Taking the Street Out of Street Food: the Singapore Case<sup>1</sup>

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## SUMMARY

Street food is by definition found along the streets. In the particular case of the island-state of Singapore, the government goal towards modernization caused a radical change in the production, sale, purchase and consumption of street food products, with the creation of the open-air food markets called hawker centres, and the consequent elimination of any form of itinerant sale. Through the description of the historical changes, which led to the creation of this new type of covered-street food space, marked by a strong emphasis upon cleanliness and order by the ruling class, the main features of the hawker centres will be analysed to understand why they became a symbol of national identity. I will argue how changes in the urban landscape run in parallel with changes in people's habits, especially in a context so linked to the everyday life as the purchase and consumption of food. In the brief history of the city-State from its foundation in 1965, besides the rapid modernization affecting people's everyday patterns, another element that made difficult the consolidation of a Singaporean communal identity is the extraordinary social heterogeneity. Hawker food, once sold on the streets and nowadays found exclusively in the hawker centres, not only reflects the urban changes of the country, but it also holds elements of ethnic categorization, caused by the Singaporean tendency to think in 'multi-racial' terms. A multi-level approach has been implemented in the active observation of the hawker centres' daily life and cultural role. Through a first hand experience of the physical space, the sensorial landscape, the variety of foods, the technical gestures, and the relational dynamics within a selected neighbourhood market, I perceived a strong local pride in valuing these places as the last example of Singapore's past, as well as the concrete representation of a shared cultural identity, albeit in extreme social differences, of one of the most globalized and cosmopolitan countries in the world.

Keywords: *Singapore, space, food, senses, identity.*

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## ***Introduction***

This article explores deeper some of the themes emerged in a Master thesis research, carried out between 2015 and 2016 in the city-state of Singapore, which titled: *The Hawker Centres Challenge. Sensorial Landscapes and Identity Representations in the Food Markets of Singapore*. In this work my aim was to discover more about a type of food markets peculiar of the area called hawker centres. The hawker centres or cooked food centres are open-air structures housing many stalls that sell a variety of inexpensive food, usually found near public housing estates or transport hubs, set up between the 1960s-1970s as a more sanitary option to street-side outdoor hawker dining places, which used to be found everywhere in the island. The spread of this new food space concept completely eradicated street selling activities from the whole territory of

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a Master's dissertation completed in 2017 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Singapore, radically changing the urban space, the ways vendors prepare and sell their recipes, and the ways consumers purchase and eat daily food products. At the same time, an increased sense of forced displacement and nostalgia for the itinerant more vibrant way of hawking grew among the Singaporean population.

Why and how in only fifty years from its foundation Singapore experienced such dramatic urban and economic development, which from a fishermen village full of street micro-entrepreneurs led it to become the modern, efficient, safe and clean first world city which is considered today, are some of the issues I will explore in the following pages. The outputs come from a long-term fieldwork among the Singaporean heartlands and under the roof of the hawker centres, where my observation involved different analytical approaches. Food studies, sensory studies, theories on space and national identity represent the framework of this research.

In the first paragraph I delineate the historical process of extremely fast growth, and the related changes on street food production, sale and purchase, describing the consequences on the urban setting and people's everyday life. The emphasis on cleanliness, hygiene, order, and security, as the basis for the development of a forefront and economic competitive city, has been central in the politics of Singapore's farsighted leadership. Here comes the decision to shift from street food hawking to covered-dedicated food markets, which is discussed in the second paragraph. Changes in cityscapes run in parallel with changes in people's habits. This statement will be argued using empirical data. In the third paragraph I explain why Singaporean society is pointed and run as a 'multiracial' society. The concept of 'multiracialism'<sup>2</sup> will be discussed in terms of social policies as well as in the field of food, where cooked and un-cooked products are defined more or less authentic based on culturally shaped convictions of 'ethnic recipes'. The hawker centres play an important role in the creation of ethnic and racial categorizations, from the food to the people involved. In the fourth and last paragraph an insight into methodological features in the analysis of food markets - my main and beloved area of study - is presented. An 'ecologic approach' (James Gibson, 1979; Tim Ingold, 2001) has been used to understand the close relationships between individuals, their activities and the context in which they move every day. However, way before exploring the different approaches, which accompanied my study, the main unpredicted focus of the research has been my lived experience as an outsider. The physical, emotional and sensorial involvement, constantly occurring inside the hawker centres, naturally emerged as I took my first step into that world. Therefore, I started to reflect on the different kind of ethnographic methodologies we, as anthropologists, may create in different context. In my view, a subjective feature is impossible to avoid and rather well welcomed in anthropological works. Researching how we come to know what we (think to) know means to answer epistemological questions through the understanding of methodological ones, 'transform(ing) social theory 'from the bottom up' by intervening at the site of its production' (Elliott, Culhane, 2017: 7). A new tendency well described through the pages of *A Different Kind of Ethnography* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), which I personally put into practice. Thus, the sensorial landscape of the hawker centres became of special relevance for the ethnography itself, and consequently for the research outputs.

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<sup>2</sup> Term used by Singaporeans both informally and formally in public speeches. In accordance with the definition of Geoffrey Benjamin: 'Multiracialism is the ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and identities of the various races' comprising a plural society' (1976: 67). See third paragraph of this article, *A «multi-racial» food in a «multi-racial» society* for further considerations.

***Singapore: a cleaned city***

In Singapore, two main phenomena influenced the creation of the hawker centres food markets: the rapid modernization, achieved in just fifty years from the founding of the State in 1965, and the population heterogeneity and cultural diversity. Such phenomena also played a key role in the search for a Singaporean identity, fundamental to build up the Nation, and locally considered to be found in the hawker centres features, nothing but reminiscences of the formerly street-hawking chaotic atmosphere. Leaving Singaporean ‘multiracialism’ for later considerations (see third paragraph), I briefly outline the historical steps towards nowadays situation.

On August 9th, 2015 Singapore celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its independence from Malaysia. On the same day, back in 1965, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s tears marked the moment of declaration of independence, since he was aware of the hard challenge that the country was going to face. Fifty years later, on his speech to the citizens of the young Republic of Singapore, the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, son of Lee Kuan Yew, emphasized in this way the risk that the country was facing:

No one knew if we could make it on our own. Our economy was not yet viable, much less vibrant. We had practically no resources, and no independent armed forces. Around noon on that first day, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew gave a press conference on TV. He broke down halfway, unable to contain his emotions. It was, he said, ‘a moment of anguish’.

(Lee Hsien Loong, 2015<sup>3</sup>)

Singapore, despite its poor conditions, its small geographical size and its lack of natural resources, is today a highly developed country, and one of the most important financial hubs in the world. Equipped with world-class services and infrastructures, advanced banking and credit systems, Singapore has become a nerve center for the entire Asian area, owning one of the busiest ports in the world, a junction for the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. The City of the Lion<sup>4</sup> is officially a Republic, located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, 150 km north from the Equator. Its essential position for the control of the naval passage of the straits of Malacca was the reason for its foundation and growth. The island, crossroads of traffic on the sea and commercial settlement inhabited since the fourteenth century, was subject to the Sumatra Empire, to that of Java, to the Sultanate of Malacca, to the Portuguese colonization, the Dutch and finally the British (Colless, 1969). In 1819 the decisive turning point for the city’s fate occurred. Thomas Stamford Raffles, a British governor, founded Singapore and began the influent British colonial era. From that moment on its port, with the customs exemptions, attracted many migrants from the Malay Peninsula, India and China. Singapore became then a thriving multi-ethnic colony and an important military naval base, bringing trade to the Far East and Australia, through the Strait of Malacca. In the 1950s the rise of nationalism favored claims of autonomy, which on August 1963 led to the declaration of Singapore’s independence from the British Empire, the quit from the British

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<sup>3</sup> Extract from *Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s National Day Message in full*, published in the online national journal «Today» on August 8th, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The names of Singapore include the various historical appellations, as well as contemporary names and nicknames in different languages, used to describe the island, city or country of Singapore. In the fourteenth century the name was changed to Singapura, which is now rendered as Singapore in English. Singapura means Lion City in Sanskrit (Colless, 1969).

Commonwealth and the admission in the Federation of Malaysia (Turnbull, 1977). The structure did not last long and on August 9th, 1965 Singapore declared itself independent from Malaysia, beginning in difficult terrain the ascent that lasted unaltered until today. On August 9th, 1965 at 10:00 am, an announcer on Radio Singapore read the declaration of independence. Later that day, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew talked about that moment of anguish he was feeling, with tears in his eyes. In his memoirs he will write that Singapore had been driven towards independence without: ‘no indication for our next destination’ (Lee, 2000: 19) and that the island without Malaysia was a ‘heart without a body’ (Lee, 2000: 23) that had a population of 1.9 million people to be trained, few internal resources and high unemployment rates. Yet, if without Malaysia Singapore lost its body, thanks to the visionary policy of Lee Kuan Yew, the nation developed a remarkable mind. The Prime Minister of the new city-State was aware that the island needed a strong economy to survive as an independent country. Therefore, he promoted a program to modernize the country and turn it into a major exporter of finished products, encouraged foreign investment and agreements between company management, ensuring the absence of discontent and raising the standard of living of workers, improved health and social care services, and required forms of ‘collaboration’ by the social media in order to promote a supportive country and an austere ruling class, which viewed discipline as the path to success. Therein lies the certainty that the spectacular prosperity and efficiency of Singapore had sometimes (and still have) the cost of an authoritarian style government<sup>5</sup>.

On August 9th, 1966, Singapore celebrated the first National Day of its history. Fifty years later, the exponential progress, which transformed the country into a world power, was proudly celebrated while keeping an eye into the future, already planning for the next fifty years<sup>6</sup>.

Today, Singapore presents itself to those who visit it for the first time as an ordinate, green, clean and efficient city. The parks are numerous, road traffic is controlled to keep the levels of air pollution, and separate waste collection is easy and efficient. In 1967, with the Garden City Vision promoted by Lee Kuan Yew, the country changed its face beginning the winning road to an eco-city. Unlike other Asian cities, which have experienced rapid progress (such as the neighbors Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta), Singapore’s metamorphosis has not been marked by the consequences of pollution and urban degradation, and in just five decades of economic progress, it has earned a worldwide reputation for a green and clean city. ‘We have built. We have progressed. But there is no hallmark of achieving our position as the cleanest and greenest city in South Asia’ (Lee, 1968: 3<sup>7</sup>). A welcoming and green environment was at the heart of the government project towards modernization. It was not only about obtaining competitive advantages at a global level; the leadership also believed that

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<sup>5</sup> For a deeper analysis of the policies of the People’s Action Party, Singapore’s ruling party since 1965, and of Lee Kuan Yew ruling features see: Bell Daniel A. (1997) *A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism: The Case of Singapore*, in Political Theory, Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 6-32, Sage Publications; Chua Beng Huat (1995) *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore (Politics in Asia)*, Routledge; Plate Tom (2010) *Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew. Citizen Singapore: How to build a Nation (Giants of Asia)*, Marshall Cavendish Edition.

<sup>6</sup> As part of the SG50 celebrations of the Nation Golden Jubilee, an exhibition called “The Future of Us” has been released to offer a glimpse of how Singaporeans can live, work, learn and care in the future, in a immersive and multi-sensory kind of experience. Through short films and interactive installations, it laid out possibilities and hopeful scenarios of how life in Singapore might be like in the year 2030.

<sup>7</sup> Full speech to be founded in pdf version from The National Online Archives of Singapore (NAS) website, See URL in sitography.

controlled development represented a key prerequisite for the citizen's future well being. Thanks to many environmental reforms<sup>8</sup>, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew built the foundations to promote (and justify) progress and create a sustainable country. In 1968 the Keep Singapore Clean campaign was launched, with the concern for waste related with the growth of population: 'higher densities of population, more housing estates, greater consumption of preserved and packaged food were leaving more domestic waste, and more hawkers in public places' (Lee, 1968: 1). The hawkers, term which literally means street vendors and which, in agreement with the urban geographers Terence Gary McGee and Yue-Man Yeung, I define as 'those who offer goods for sale in public spaces, primarily streets and sidewalks' (1977: 25), began to represent a problem in the process of creating a clean and tidy city.

A subject taken into account in many works which discuss the theme of urban space in Southeast Asia (McGee and Yeung 1977, Duruz and Khoo 2015, Kong and Sinha 2016) the figure of the hawkers have also been studied as a feature of cities' cultural identity in this area of the world, whose removal from the streets in the case of Singapore changed not only the urban structure, but also the habits of people's daily life (Tarulevycz 2013, Leong 1976, Grice 1988, Kong 2007, Lai 2010, Chua in Kong and Sinha, 2016). The hawkers were a ubiquitous figure in the urban body, in which they were extensively present until the 1970s, announcing their goods loudly, settling in line at the sides of the streets, or bringing around their mobile furniture (Fig. 1, 2).



Figure 1. *Street hawkers at Trengganu street* (1971), Ph. Paul Piollet Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

<sup>8</sup> In those years the Anti-Pollution Unit (APU) was established as part of the Prime Minister's office to deal with the increase of air and water pollution caused by rapid industrialization. In 1971, the Water Planning Unit was established to improve the island's water resources, in order to make Singapore self-sufficient in the production of drinking water, and campaigns were made to avoid water waste (Turnbull, 2009). Also, the government took care of the Singapore River's cleaning, which until 1980 was famous for its rotten smell of decomposition of industrial and human waste (Josey, 1968).



Figure 2. *An itinerant hawker bringing wares to villagers of Jalan Jumat village (1949)*, Ph. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

The sound of their voices and the smell of their dishes carried on the bamboo shelves anticipated their arrival, and the residents could buy breakfast, lunch or snacks just a few steps from their front door. The hawkers: '[...] add(ed) to the cities a texture and feel that has largely disappeared from the cities of the industrialized West' (McGee e Yeung, 1977: 20). Today, part of that 'industrialized West', in the form of policies of modernization by a ruling class influenced by western ideas of modernity, has changed Singapore's urban setting. These policies included hygiene and order as basis to 'modernize and civilize' (Lee, 1968). In 1950 the Singapore's Hawker Inquiry Commission emphasized the presence of disorderly masses of hawkers 'blocking up the streets with a jumble of goods in the defiance of all reason and order' (Tarulevicz, 2013: 54). The commission, and therefore the government, considered the hawkers as a problem that inhibited the efficient functioning of the city. They cluttered the streets for cars mobility, caused hygiene deficiency and health consequences, provoked road congestion and obstructed the free mobility of emergency vehicles throughout the urban area. Moreover, contaminated water and food waste attracted insects and mice, causing the spread of diseases such as cholera and typhus. The disorder and the threat to public health were real, and the danger was made worse by the tropical climate. Consequently, the important role of the hawkers in the daily life of Singaporeans, which were used to that disorder, and in the micro economy of the country, was minimized due to these problems of public order to be solved fast.

The causes of the everlasting removal of the iconic street hawkers, which were forced to adapt their work and daily lives in the newly built hawker centres, lie in the presented historical processes.

### ***From hawkers to hawker centres***

The hawking tradition in Singapore goes way back. Traveling hawkers, also known as itinerant hawkers, were quite a common sight during the 19th to mid-20th century. They used to move around selling everything from raw produce to cooked food, and they were frequently found along busy streets and intersections. Street hawking was a popular occupation for many new immigrants in Singapore as it gave the unemployed and the unskilled a way to make a living with little costs. In each *kampong*, Malay term still used to name a village or a neighborhood; in addition to the traveling hawkers there was one



or more *kopitiam*, which survived until present days, often in connection with the hawkers themselves for sourcing products or to welcome them in their shadow for a break. ‘The kopitiam was the exclusive center of sociality of the neighborhood/village’ (Chua in Kong, Sinha, 2016: 28). Today named coffeeshop, the *kopitiam* represents, along with the hawker centres, a place frequented by the residents on a daily basis, making them part of their everyday life, a space remained almost unchanged over time, where the feeling of a missed slower past is perceivable (Fig. 3, 4).



Figure 3. A *Kopitiam* (coffee shop) at Trengannu Street (1981), Ph. Ronni Pinsler, National Archives of Singapore.



Figure 4. *Tin Yeang* coffee shop in Joo Chiat Neighborhood (2016), Ph. Claudia Squarzon.

In this past, traveling hawkers and stable *kopitiam*, usually found at the corner of the streets, punctuated the daytime rhythm, offering people what was an everyday appointment kind of street food. ‘Street foods used to be available according to routinized schedules and routes of the itinerant hawkers; consequently, the rhythm of hawkers’ movements structured the routines and cycles of social life of the consumer’ (Chua in Kong, 2016: 23). Nowadays, the social life of consumers and hawkers is constantly influenced by policies of cleanliness and order towards a never-ending modernization, the same policies which led to the elimination of the road in the hawking

experience, as detailed in the biographical lines of the Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat (Chua in Kong, Sinha, 2016). From 1960, the license to sell any product on the streets became mandatory, and the roads gradually emptied, since that of the hawker was a job that allowed only earning the day. The license became also the basis for the assignment of the kiosks in the new closed structures called hawker centres, whose construction project began in 1970. In parallel with the concrete construction of the new structures, the Hawkers Department Special Squad was formed as a control police security team, which used to make daily raids in search of abusive salesmen (Tarulevicz, 2013). The resentment between the hawkers and the police began then, when the sudden escapes of hawkers to the arrival of the police team occurred daily (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. *Here they come*, Koeh Sia Yong (1965), Singapore National Gallery.  
National Heritage Board online Archives.

Hawker centres, established as a step towards the government's plan to modernization, are part of Singapore's long-standing legacy of putting things in order in an otherwise unwieldy world. They were created as spaces that had to be equipped with public safety supplies such as access to water, sewers, drainage channels, and electricity for evening lighting and superior coverage. The stalls were orderly placed in line in the structure's perimeter, and furniture was fixed and standardized. In the middle, common plastic tables and chairs were placed and thought to be shared by strangers in an informal atmosphere. Public toilets with cleaning rules on the walls were also provided. Most of them were placed in residential areas, easily reachable by patrons in every corner of the island at any time of the day. The businesses ran from early in the morning to late at night, with usually one day of rest per week by hawkers' choice (Fig. 6, 7).



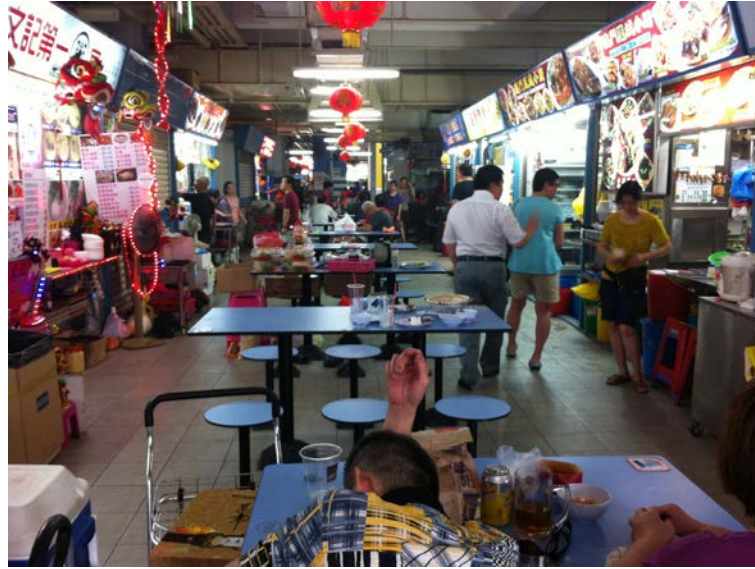


Figure 6. *Chinatown Complex hawker centre*, Chinatown, Singapore (2016), Ph. Claudia Squarzon.



Figure 7. *Friends' table at Chinatown Complex*, Chinatown, Singapore (2016), Ph. Claudia Squarzon.

In addition to the spatial organization, the hawkers' ways of food production has also undergone radical changes, representing the main reason for nostalgia. Whereas itinerant hawkers wholly produced the food, today many stalls are supplied by industrially manufactured products, in order to offer a faster service with fewer expenses. As a matter of fact, Singaporeans lately began to worry about the future of hawker food, already partly lost with the elimination of the traveling hawkers and their distinct 'traveling recipes'. Due to the particularity of transportable supplies and the standing consumption of the dishes, those recipes were created *ad hoc*, with simple raw materials such as coal, wood, and bamboo, processed by the hawkers and their families. However, the current situation of greater production and faster demands caused the loss of old methods of preparation, and the hawkers increasingly turned to companies that sell finished products. Moreover, the use of electricity expanded in place of charcoal, loved by the locals for the smoked flavor added to the dishes. The consequence of these

changes is a continuous search for the authentic, defined by the locals as the real flavor of the past, causing the birth of a form of 'self-tourism' (Chua in Kong, Sinha, 2016: 24), which pushes Singaporeans to short trips in the island with destination the kiosks of the preferred hawkers, turning over the model of meeting between the hawker and the consumer, once used to being served outside the door and forced now to mobilize.

The brief history of the causes that led to the construction of the hawker centres presented above aim to focus on the link between modernization policies and 'anti-hawkers' policies, in order to understand their related social consequences. The system of traveling hawkers, while popular with the residents, was unpopular for the government. They wanted a new Singapore, and they created it, on one hand educating public demand, with the schools teaching about hygiene and civics as a way of shaping new habits and needs. On the other hand, however, the problems were sometimes solved at the root, forcibly moving and re-settling the licensed hawkers in the covered markets. The consequences of rapid development processes as such of Singapore 'encompasses more than physical loss: displaced residents lose power and agency over their lives, risking the simultaneous loss of economic, social, and cultural resources (Oliver-Smith 2009). As an anthropologist interested in Singapore's path to development and concerned about small-scale entrepreneurs' rights, I focused part of my pre-fieldwork's readings on Development Studies, discovering how, according to Andreas Neef and Jane Singer, 'Asia is home to many of the most contentious displacement events and the world's largest displaced population, due to high population densities. China and India, the two most populous countries in Asia and globally, together account for a particularly large share of displaced people' (2015: 602). Singapore is evidently not far behind. Due to its fast growth, the majority of the street hawkers, which could not afford to pay the new required licence, have been forcibly re-settled or eliminated, leaving a totally different city-landscape, with cleaner streets and silent towns. Asian Studies expert Nicole Tarulevicz vividly describes the situation as such:

The hawkers and their trade were unseemly – dirty, visceral, a grotesquery of bodily functions. And so they were cleaned up, their hands washed, their cooking equipment inspected and standardized. The spaces in which they plied their trade were eradicated or repurposed, and hawker centres increasingly policed, cleaner, and more orderly at every turn, also emerged as more 'reasonable' and 'ordered' spaces.

(Tarulevicz, 2013: 57)

The phenomenon of forced displacement, which affected Singaporean hawkers, is just a simple example<sup>9</sup> of much bigger and more problematic development-induced phenomena. Above all, the million of people who fled their homes either as refugees, internally displaced persons, or asylum seekers as a result of big development projects, conflict and persecution around the world<sup>10</sup>. In my personal view, forced displacement

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<sup>9</sup> Another example is the recent resettlement of the Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo, Japan, the world's largest fish market in operation for 83 year, which has been closed and moved to Toyosu Fish Market in mid October 2018, as part of the redevelopment for the 2020 Olympic games.

<sup>10</sup> The UNHCR's (UN Refugee Agency) annual Global Trends report shows that an average of one person was displaced every two seconds in 2017, with developing countries most affected. The study found 68.5 million people had been driven from their homes across the world at the end of 2017, more people than the population of Thailand. Refugees who have fled their countries to escape conflict and persecution accounted for 25.4 million. This is 2.9

is not the only way to achieve development. Of course, it represents a fast and easy way for governments to reach their goals by exploiting their ruling power. But can the economic ambitions of the few cause the suffer of the many in 2018? Development-induced displacement is a social problem affecting multiple levels of human organization, from tribal and village communities to well-developed urban areas. It is widely viewed as an inevitable step towards modernization and economic growth in developing countries. However, for those who are displaced, the end result is most often loss of livelihood and impoverishment, as in the case of small-scale food entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, who are continuously affected by unexpected changes. As the brilliant political scientist Irene Thinker, who studied the symbiotic relationship of urbanization and street food in developing countries, said: ‘the biggest hazard is the government, especially in capital cities, which tend to take the view that in order to look good and modernize, you have to get rid of street-food vendors’<sup>11</sup>. Street food is the fast food of developing countries, it serves the same kind of need for inexpensive, available food. It also provides a service for people who cannot afford the time or money for a big sit-down meal. Nonetheless, cooked food hawkers are an interesting component for the tourism and hospitality of a country, representing a central cultural experience, especially in Southeast Asia (Henderson et al., 2012). The important economic and cultural role of street vendors is even recognize by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, which encourage its valorization:

By implementing policies, which help street food trade, low-income consumers are favoured. For example, more licenses might be allowed for vendors selling low-cost, nutritionally sound foods or for those with good records of hygiene. [...] Street foods deserve the attention of policy-makers and vendors should be given opportunities to improve their situation and develop their enterprises into city food establishments.

(F.G. Winarno and A. Allain, *Food, Nutrition and Agriculture*, No.1, 1991, published by the Food Policy and Nutrition Division of the FAO: Rome)

Auspiciously, Singapore’s leadership is nowadays acting in this way, with the announced nomination of hawker culture in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list, as the arrays of cultural practices and intangible elements, which demonstrate the diversity of the country’s heritage. The admission into the list, announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long during 2018 National Day celebrations, would underline the significance of hawkers and enhance their status, perhaps encouraging more to consider it as a career. Although the information about the compulsory relocation of the hawkers in the hawker centres between 1960s and 1970s are briefly narrated in Singaporean history books, which instead focus more on the economic benefits of modernization; in the last decades there has been a re-evaluation of the significance of those facts to the point that the hawker centres are experiencing an unexpected rediscovery as cultural symbols. Only a few years ago it would have seemed strange that a western woman was researching about these places. Yet, a huge increase in popular and academic interest encouraged public discourse in considering them as the symbol of the Nation’s path

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million more than in 2016, also the biggest increase UNHCR has ever seen in a single year (Adrian Edwards, June 19th 2018, UNHCR.org).

<sup>11</sup> Extract from an interview to Irene Tinker by journalist Marisa Robertson-Textor, in the online journal «Gourmet», September, 22nd 2009.

towards modernization and an integral part of Singaporeans everyday life. Moreover, due to the growing debate on the future of the hawker centres, which are threatened by the retirement of the old generations of hawkers, and the absence of youngsters willing to work as hawkers, the interest in this subject has been accentuated. The envisioned threat to hawker centres is the fear of the loss of familiar elements. It is the fear of losing a routine that Singaporeans has always taken for granted, and not something that could be regulated with bureaucratic rules, due to its people-centric aspect. As a young nation, Singapore still struggle to answer to the question of what it means to be Singaporean. Unlike the periodic loss of particular sites through developmental pressures, the loss of what hawker centres stand for in terms of food heritage is one that could potentially prove to be the most traumatic. It is a threat to the small inherent emigrant differences that remain intimately entwined with the everyday lives, despite the homogenization that started in parallel with nationhood processes. Indeed, these differences are considered by the locals as essential, and celebrated in what constitutes the intangibles of Singapore's social life. The hawker centres have evolved in step with Singapore's evolution through the years. Accordingly, Singapore's hawker centres should be allowed to evolve gracefully and adapt to the times. The original hawkers may retire, their recipes may change over time and generations, yet the people who populate the hawker centres will remain as long as the patrons have the promise of affordable, hygienic food. The new hawker centres may look better designed, however, the people behind the woks will be there as long as the career of a hawker is valued. As well as Singapore changes so fast to keep up with the progressing aspirations, people's identity is never static, making the social institution of the hawker centre to be either a measure of social change, either a vehicle for community and nation building, through that sense of belonging and connectedness once felt in the *gotong royong* spirit<sup>12</sup>, and now *emplaced*<sup>13</sup> in these peculiar food markets. As Lily Kong, Professor at the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore claims: 'hawker centres are not just eating-places. They are community places. [...] Hawker centres remain as much a central part of the everyday lives of Singaporeans today as their predecessors, the itinerant hawkers, were integral to life and landscape in days gone by' (Kong, 2017: 97).

Since 2002 the management of hawker centres is entrusted to the National Environmental Agency (NEA), which takes care of the administration of all 109-hawker centres of the island, with monthly inspections and temporary closures for deep cleaning of all the spaces. During my six months of fieldwork, I had the great opportunity to get

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<sup>12</sup> Singapore of the sixties and seventies provided the ideal environment for the growth of the spirit of *gotong royong* (communal work). Fresh from independence, Singapore was struggling with its economy and national identity, and the racial tension was high. The rural areas, though, were relatively more peaceful and harmonious. Residents living in multi-racial villages continued to look out for each other in the turbulent years. The *kampong* (village) spirit was more than just little aspects of daily life, such as borrowing a few pinch of salt and a couple of eggs or sharing a dish. The neighbours were able to share and help out one another based on trust and friendship, forging bonds and strong ties within the community. *Gotong royong* was promoted through the voluntary works by the national servicemen, students and committee members, which included clearing paths, paving roads, filling up potholes and repairing houses that were damaged by thunderstorms or floods. The majority of the volunteers would be touched by the overwhelming appreciation and gratitude shown by the *kampong* residents (*Remember Singapore*, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2013, see URL in sitography).

<sup>13</sup> The concept of *emplacement*, or the sensuous reaction of people to place, has received increased attention thanks to the pioneering work of Steven Feld (1996), among others. His contribution in considering the word 'sense' in the expression 'sense of place' by asking: 'How is place actually sensed?' and affirming that 'as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place' (1996: 91). Noting how the ecology of natural sounds was central to local musical ecology among the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea, and how this musical ecology maps onto the rainforest environment (1994), he encouraged others to seek similar connections between the landscape and society, and to frame work on space, place and identity.

in contact with the hawker centre office of the National Environment Agency. With one of the officers, which name is Huay Koon Tan, we discussed the worldwide uniqueness of the hawker centres, made clear from the name itself. In fact, the very definition of a hawker, as we have seen previously, is someone who travels around selling different items. A hawker centre, instead, shackles the vendor to a fixed spot. As a matter of fact, the expression ‘hawker centre’ is actually an oxymoron. The choice to juxtapose the term *hawker* (an itinerant seller) to the term *centre* (a fixed space) was made to encase the denomination with the historical path and the unique features of these new public spaces<sup>14</sup>. Not only made of hawker centres, the culinary scene of Singapore is presented today in different forms. In addition to modernization, the influence of the western world has further changed food habits. Fast food chains, restaurants offering all-round kitchens and luxury cocktail bars, as well as food courts (modern versions of the hawker centres found in shopping malls). Singapore is today globally known for the variety offered in terms of food and culinary experience. Indeed, Singapore is also recognized as a leader in culinary tourism. The city-State not only promotes food as a tourist attraction but also actively promotes itself as an exceptional culinary destination. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) presents plenty of food imagines in its information brochures and in websites (Fig. 8), and there are campaigns full of information about it both abroad and within Singapore (Chua and Rajah, 2001). Special places in the experience of the varied Singaporean cuisine; the hawker centres have also become a tourist destination, even if limited to the most central and advertised ones. Yet, during my period of observation I questioned several times why if these places are defined on the paper as national symbols they are not treated as such. The name of the hawkers is valued, but much less their hard work and their salaries, which based on the sales are still low. Indeed, above it being efficient, rapid, and diversified, the service offered by the hawkers in the hawker centres must be cheap and affordable to everyone. The question is whether it has to be considered just cheap or rather undervalued. Singaporeans balk at the idea of paying more than \$10 for local food, and because they live in one of the most expensive places in the world they are proud to still be able to say ‘at least our food is cheap’. However, it is time to recognize how selfish can be to own a fat paycheck while demanding faster, better and cheaper local food from poorer yet longer-hours working artisans. Hawker centres are one of the country’s most-loved institutions, providing meals and local delights for few dollars seven days a week, in some cases 24 hours a day. Yet, to ensure their survival diners must accept that they might have to pay more for some dishes in the future. In fact, with the growing trend of serving food assembled from ready-made components that come out from large-scale kitchens, those who keep producing by hand and use age-old recipes and local ingredients should be able to charge more without diners’ complains. This is the vision of the Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee, tasked with breathing life into a sector suffering from an aging workforce and a shortage of new blood (See Tan Hsuen Yun, 2017, *Hawker Culture Must Evolve to Ensure Survival*, «The Strait Times», url in sitography).

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<sup>14</sup> From my field notes, informal conversation with Huay Koon Tan, January 15, 2016.





Figure 8. 2010's Campaign image on the Visit Singapore website. See url in sitography.

The impact that modernization policies had on the formation of the current hawker centres has been and continues to be important. The emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene remained constant since the era of the battle against traveling hawkers and the government. Entering any hawker centre, one will immediately notice the abundance of prohibitions and warnings for water saving, hand washing, and general safety, a feature among other things, of the whole city. Singaporeans treasure the rich heritage of their hawker centres. However, to ensure its survival over the years, the hawker culture must evolve, going to be even more efficient and streamlined that it is presently. In March 2015, the Ministry of Environment and Water Resources, which oversees the National Environment Agency, planned the construction of twenty more hawker centres over the next 12 years, in a bid to moderate hawker rentals and keep food prices affordable<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, the aim is to offer an even faster service with cashless payment, better amenities, and other innovations. It will be interesting to follow the next steps.

In addition to the discussed anxiety of progress, hawker centres also witness the multiracial policies of the government, and its ambiguity between theories and practices. The CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) model is present in the food markets, where ethnic membership rules meant to harmonize but are instead causing differences and incoherence.

### ***A 'multi-racial' food in a 'multi-racial' society***

After landing in Singapore, on the subway ride between the airport and my new flat, I looked at the people in the MRT (Mass Rapid Transportation). A family I thought from India and other people with a physiognomy that in my mind figured as Chinese. In categorizing those faces I was making more than a mistake. In fact, everyone in that wagon was Singaporean. But what does it mean to be Singaporean? Talking about identity everyone would know how to define his or her own. I am Italian because I live in the Italian territory, I speak Italian, I share the history of my country with other Italians, and so on. But how can we talk of a Singaporean identity in a State which was founded after the migrations of people from many other, near and far, countries, whose

<sup>15</sup>See Audrey Tan, *First of 20 new hawker centres will open in Hougang in August 2015: NEA*, Published online on «The Strait Times», June 8<sup>th</sup> 2015. URL in sitography.

population belongs originally to different territories, each one with its own language and history? People heterogeneity in this part of the world is such that Singapore represents an exception compared to other colonized countries of the world. In its peculiar case, the ethnic variety was written in the Constitution in the very first moments of the foundation of the city-State. In the first session of the first Parliament of the country on December 22nd, 1965, the Minister for National Law and Development, Mr. Edmund William Barker, announced:

One of the cornerstones of the policy of the government is a *multi-racial* (Italics mine) Singapore. We are a nation comprising peoples of various races who constitute her citizens, and our citizens are equal regardless of differences of race, language, culture, and religion... To ensure this bias in favor of multi-racialism and the equality of our citizens, whether they belong to majority or minority groups, a Constitutional Commission is being appointed to help formulate these constitutional safeguards.

(Barker, 1966: 1)

Since then, the ‘multiracial’ ideology has been incorporated as a basic logic for many public policies, aimed at preserving the cultures of the various groups and maintaining cultural harmony. However, these same public policies are in part used, as I will argue, as a system of social control, with examples also in the apparently neutral space of the hawker centres. The population of Singapore consists of 76.2% Chinese, 15% Malaysians, 7.4% Indians and the rest, about 2%, of other nationalities, grouped under the definition of Others. Hence, the categorization in the CMIO system: Chinese, Malay, Indians and Others. Every citizen of the island is required to report the belonging ethnic group in the identification document, under the voice *Race*. In Southeast Asia, as emphasized by Geoffrey Benjamin in his essay on Singaporean multiracialism (1976), since social groups have historically mixed, individuals are not necessarily limited to one, unchanged, ethnic identity from birth. The reality shows that, especially in the case of Singapore, there is often the possibility of choice with respect to which ethnic group you decide to be part of<sup>16</sup>. Language represents a good example of this trend. In late 1960s Malay was often the lingua franca, not only amongst people of different races who did not speak English, but also amongst the Chinese themselves, particularly to bridge dialects divides. The Speak Mandarin campaign was initiated to change all that. When ‘bilingualism’ became equated with English plus ‘mother tongue’, the position of Mandarin as the ‘mother tongue’ of Chinese Singaporeans was reinforced. This was in line with the ‘one race, one language, one mother tongue’ approach to multiracialism

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<sup>16</sup> An example of this possibility is the ambiguous Bilingual Policy of the Singaporean educational system. As it may seem at first glance, this policy is not the answer to the need for inter-ethnic communication in a multilingual society, since it is not limited to the knowledge of English as first language for all. Instead, it emphasizes the need to culturally classify each Singaporean, with the mandatory study of the tongue of the original culture as a second language, be it Chinese, Tamil (the most widely spoken Indian dialect in Singapore) or Malay, although the language spoken at home may already be English. If this is the system in theory, in practice there are different behaviors. In fact, there are cases in which ‘The choice of language can be a serious source of parental disagreement and / or economically determined strategic decision’ (Chua, 2005: 61). In the case of the child of a couple formed by an Indian father and a Chinese mother, for instance, the rule says that the children are assigned the ‘race’ of the father, but may choose to study the mother’s tongue. Between the study of Tamil or Mandarin, however, the choice of Mandarin is much more probable, as Singapore is a predominantly Chinese country, and the knowledge of the language is seen as a boost in the working and economic future. The matter becomes even more complicated if the mother tongue is a dialect, such as the Chinese *hokkien*, *hakka* and *teochew* dialects. Here too the rule says to choose between Tamil or Mandarin, since the study of the minor dialects of the groups is not foreseen.

that had evolved in the 1970s and become entrenched in the 1980s. Malays had Malay, Indians had Tamil, and the Chinese had Mandarin. It was logical that the message to Chinese Singaporeans was ‘speak more Mandarin and less dialects’. From 1979 to 1991, this message was carried to targeted groups and places. Groups included Chinese parents, hawkers, taxi drivers, and white-collar workers. Places included markets, food stalls, hawker centres, shopping centres, bus exchanges, and, of course, schools. What I personally discovered in my Singaporean experience is that these policies, which tend to enhance the original cultures in order to create social harmony, have conversely brought great emphasis on differences, despite the desire to unite the citizens as all Singaporeans. In my daily life I had direct testimony of this while talking with people, who defined themselves as Chinese Singaporeans, Indian or Malay Singaporean, always adding their original nationality to their citizenship, which in some cases was perceived less important to mention.

In the field of food, intrinsically linked to the social sphere, the main feature of Singapore cuisine is variety, as a result of the history of transcultural encounters. As we have seen, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board promotes the choice of different and delicious food as one of the main reasons for visiting the island. In this representation, food and consumption patterns are characterized by a great multitude of styles, reflecting the official CMIO categorization. Therefore, the Singaporean tendency to ‘ethnicize’ is also expressed in the dishes, making food a register of ethnicity:

The very public-ness and inscribed ‘ethnicity’ of a particular item of food is itself the result of a social process in which a style of cooking and its results come to be their own representation as an ‘ethnic’, cuisine. [...]. The first step towards the inscription and codification of ‘ethnic’ food is when it is (re)presented to a consuming public by vendors through a ‘menu’; the menu is part of the process of giving an identity, an ethnicity to an item of food.

(Chua, Rajah, 2001: 162)

The recipes that make up the very wide range of Singaporean dishes can be defined as ‘bearers of ethnicity’. Taking into consideration the three main cuisines: Chinese, Malay, and Indian, Singaporean cuisine may superficially be defined as an hybridization between the three. Generally speaking, food always constituted a field characterized by exchange, appropriation, fusion, diffusion, absorption, and invention transmitted by generation and constantly re-produced. To state that the result of all these elements is the hybridization between different cuisines is a simplification of reality. In other words the concept ‘hybrid’ presupposes that elements, which hybridize, are pure, and when in contact they give shape to a third form, no longer pure. This concept is as false as that of the existence of a single, fixed identity<sup>17</sup>. Questioning the term, Singaporean social scientists Chua Beng Huat and Ananda Rajah, in their essay *Hybridity, Ethnicity and*

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<sup>17</sup>As Lévi-Strauss already observed about identity: ‘It is situated at the point of confluence not simply of two but of several paths together. Interest (ing) practically all the disciplines’ (1996: 11). In more recent times Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti states: ‘Otherness is presented not only on the margins, beyond the borders, but in the very core of identity’, therefore, ‘identity [...] is also made of otherness’ (Remotti, 2007: 63, my translation). And yet, Remotti describes identity as a ‘mask’ and the process of identity construction as ‘a fact of decisions’ (2007: 5, my translation), which consists of a negotiation, a selection of elements and connections. According to Remotti, scholars’ objective is to go beyond the belief of a fixed identity, discovering how it is an element, proper to every community, as a reassuring decision in the constant flow of events and circumstances of the world, a decision that involves at the same time: ‘violence against web of connections, but it is also an attempt, at times heroic (and indispensable) of salvation with respect to the inexorability of flow and change’ (2007: 10, my translation).

*Food in Singapore* (2001), take into consideration the itself very variable Chinese cuisine and compare it with Singaporean recipes coming from Chinese tradition:

In referring to certain categories of food as hybrid we wish to draw attention to the fact that it is the social actors, the producers and consumers of food in Singapore, who assume the existence of 'pure' cuisines, but it is not an assumption we make in this essay. [...] It is important to recognize that among "Chinese", "Malay", "Indian" and "Others", despite the hybridization that has occurred in 'their' cuisines, they see the products of hybridization in terms of pure categories, i.e. "Chinese", "Malay", "Indian" or "Others" [...] In other words, even hybrid food may be seen mistakenly as pure cuisine.

(Chua, Rajah, 2001: 166-167)

The Singaporean trend to look at different social aspects in terms of race also takes place in the field of food. This attitude is the result of colonial history but has been amplified in post-colonial Singapore as a product of the rigorous imprinting that nationalist leaders made possible through the educational system. This classification system, as well as the 'ethnicization' of foods, has been central in making different recipes as representations of different ethnic groups. As well as in the identity document of Singaporeans the race of belonging has to be clear, so in the hawker centres the type of cuisine has to be indicated, being it Chinese, Malay, Indian, Western and so on, making the definition of a Singaporean cuisine difficult and ambiguous. However, Singaporeans consider the ethnicity expressed 'in the plate' as a feature that has always existed and it is considered a plus, as the concrete possibility to enjoy a myriad of delicacies with no chance to bore taste, their most important sense. Christopher Tan, a local writer of Singaporean recipes books, to the question 'what is Singapore food?' answers:

Singapore food, in the final analysis, is the product of many different lives lived and cultured side by side. And for so many generations, what other countries might call *audacious fusion*, we simply think of as normal. Chinese fried noodles with belacan-laced sambal<sup>18</sup> on the side, Indian mee goreng<sup>19</sup>, Hainanese kaya<sup>20</sup> on English toast. We think nothing of having dosa<sup>21</sup> for breakfast, char siew rice<sup>22</sup> for lunch, Italian for dinner, and a nightcap at a whiskey bar. It is the natural outcome of a *densely packed* history and population. It is an openness to adaptation and combination.

(Tan, 2010: 15)

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<sup>18</sup> *Sambal Belacan* is a popular spicy Malaysian chili condiment consisting of chilies, *belacan* (shrimp paste), and lime juice.

<sup>19</sup> *Mee Goreng* is a flavourful and often spicy fried noodle dish common in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore. It is made with thin yellow noodles fried in cooking oil with garlic, onion or shallots, fried prawn, chicken, beef, or sliced meatballs, chili, Chinese cabbage, cabbages, tomatoes, egg, and other vegetables.

<sup>20</sup> *Hainanese Kaya* is a delicious and nutritious custard made with coconut milk, pandan green leaves, eggs and palm sugar, popular in Singapore and Malaysia. Like regular jam, and because of the British influence in the territory, it is most often used as a bread spread at breakfast or at afternoon tea. Because of its sweet taste it is also used as an ingredient in various local desserts throughout Southeast Asia, from Thailand to Indonesia. While in Singapore I enjoyed it every morning.

<sup>21</sup> *Dosa* is a type of pancake from the Indian subcontinent, made from a fermented batter. It is similar to a French crepe in appearance, but it is usually eaten with curry sauces.

<sup>22</sup> *Char siew rice* is a dish made with Cantonese roasted or barbecued meat over a bowl of rice.

This openness to adaptation and fusion was shared with me in a spontaneous, unrecorded conversation with Anthony, a Chinese Singaporean man in his fifties, who curiously talked to me one day in a café saying: ‘(Singapore food) it’s about different foods, we are open people. Open to different cultures, to try their food. We look through the color we do not look at the color. We get along well in the differences. We look at similarities, not at differences. [...] We (Singaporeans) are exposed to change, as we are exposed to differences, different cultures. Respect for the differences is something we achieve from education<sup>23</sup>.

In this situation of constant explication and acceptance of differences, food assumes the role of an inclusive element, creating a space of personal and at the same time collective experience. Consuming food people also ‘consumes’ history: ‘Singaporeans reflect their multiracial character at table, making it a site that reveals the complicated history of the island state’ (Tarulevich, 2013: 24). Ethnic identity and its boundaries are continually associated with elements such as language, religion, customs, and food. This tendency to look at the concept transforming it into concrete social facts is not exclusively of anthropologists. Social actors themselves perform constantly what they consider to be their own identity. In the case of Singapore food, ethnic identity is incorporated and represented on a daily basis. As stated by Geoffrey Benjamin (1976), the logic of Singapore’s multiracialism has meant that the Singaporeans look at themselves in terms of race, and this is evident in the different aspects of social life. For example, more than 80 per cent of the populations live in public housing estates, all of which must keep a quota of each race according to the national average to prevent the formation of ghettos, another example of a ‘multiracial’ policy. The challenge to build a Singaporean national identity lies in this habit, encouraged by the system - and described above in different daily-life patterns - to think in terms of race rather than a whole. As Ajun Appadurai noted about Indian regional varieties, which create a ‘polyglot culture’ arising from many different ones (1998: 21), likewise - and paradoxically - what unify Singaporeans is the fact of being different. An emblematic representation of that, as well as an example of the use of food as a tool for national building, is the semiology behind a popular dish called *rojak*. *Rojak* is originally a Malaysian dish, also found in Indonesia and Singapore. There are several variations of the recipe, but the most common one is composed of fruit (pineapple) and vegetables (cucumber, celeriac, roots) thinly sliced and served with a spicy condiment made with palm sugar, salt, spices, ginger, lime, pepper, and toasted fragrant peanuts (Fig. 9). The taste is a triumph of opposite flavours and textures, such as savory, sweet and spicy, crunchy and soft, saucy and hard. In the Singaporean variations of the dish the Chinese influence is in the presence of fried tofu and sweet batter pancakes, whereas the Indian recipe use fritters served with a thick, spicy, sweet potato sauce. In addition to the reference to this recipe, the term *rojak* also means ‘mixture’ or ‘eclectic mix’ in colloquial Malay, and is often used as an example of Singaporean multiculturalism, as a mix of different elements that create a successful dish. Using it as a food metaphor, Singapore call itself a *rojak* nation, where the variety of flavours represent the race distinction and where the union in the differences create a powerful nation.

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<sup>23</sup> From my field-notes, informal conversation with Anthony, February 18th 2016.





Figure 9. *Rojak*. Ph. Claudia Squarzon.

In my research, I have chosen to analyze the role of Singaporean food as a marker of identity, rather than as a result of hybridization between cultures. Discussing hybridization means to eliminate the belief that exist ethnically pure foods, and consequently ethnically pure groups. In defining the recipes as ethnically pure my interlocutors often used the term ‘authentic’, on one hand referring about those reproduced exactly like the original ones (Chinese, Indian or Malay), whose originality itself, as seen above, has not to be taken for granted. On the other hand when talking about dishes prepared as the itinerant hawkers used to do (for example using charcoal instead of electric ovens, grills instead of electric plates, broken noodles to be eaten with a spoon instead of using chopsticks, easy to be consumed standing on the street). *Authenticity*, as well as *hybridization*, is a word to carefully examine, since it assumes a precise idea about what a specific culture (and its food) represents, and in which ways it is considered genuine. It refers to the idea of something *traditional*, another word often used inappropriately. Among the meanings of the word ‘authentic’, there is a clear reference to something prototypical, true and reliable, the opposite of something imaginary, fake, reproduced and copied. In many respects, authenticity encodes the expectation of truthful representations, linked to the identity of people or groups, to the authorship of products and producers, to cultural practices. Contemporary anthropology has gone beyond the bounds of the essentialist conceptualizations of culture, given that there are no single cultures closed within their own boundaries, and in the same way there is no single, fixed definition of authenticity. Dissociating from the limitations of the vision of a single, original and authentic culture, I also have moved away from the idea of *tradition*, which although carefully used in the academic field, was used inappropriately in fieldwork’s everyday speech. This is why, I suggest, researchers need to be able to interpret local terms, after having considered them on the analytical level,

to understand the hidden meanings, without the presumption of not investigating because they are considered wrong regardless. Following this method and only thanks to a prolonged exposure to the field I could conclude that the elements, which make hawker food authentic and so symbolic of a Singaporean identity for Singaporeans, are the following:

1) The whole experience of eating in a hawker centre, which includes experiencing the true heat of the island, sweating and feeling relief from the air moved by the fans placed in every corner of the food markets. And so the sounds, the smells and the birds, which attracted by the food on the tables lurk on the roofs, the fast service of the efficient hawkers, who skillfully skip food in the wok or prepare fragrant soups, offering to the customers a huge selection of items at low prices, accessible to everyone.

2) The recipes that recall the flavors of childhood, which in the Singaporean case are those prepared as the traveling street hawkers used to do. It is interesting to note how hawkers have always been such important figures to be placed in people's memories, as usually are mothers or grandmothers and their missed dishes.

At the time of traveling hawkers the experience of creating the recipes *ad hoc* and of consuming them on the street was central. Today, with the construction of the hawker centres and the elimination of the street experience, the missed recipes have acquired more importance as markers of authenticity. However, nowadays the new kind of food markets represent themselves a peculiar experience, and they are valued as symbol of the Singaporean willingness to preserve old cooking methods in a still informal environment, with safer hygiene rules. Unique in their features, the hawker centres are more than just eating-places; they are part of Singapore's heritage. The mobility may be gone, but the dynamism of hawking is far from disappearing, despite the big changes. Indeed, it is right in their constant transformation that lays the pulse of the changing demographics and lifestyles of the island-nation.

### ***Fieldwork methodologies: practicing theories***

The first time I entered a hawker centre I felt overwhelmed. The number of people, colors, noises, voices, smells, seemed to me like a confused whole, difficult to become familiar with and carry out my research. On that occasion, I decided to just enjoy the moment as a customer, a visitor who was there to dine with a local friend, leaving the gaze of the ethnographer for the following days. I was wrong. If my mind decided it was too early to start my observation, my body already started to feel the new environment as soon as I got off the plane. The powerful air-conditioning in the indoor spaces, the sultry heat outdoor, the continuous temperature shift, the smell of the air, the unreal traffic order and the confusing atmosphere in the hawker centers. If I wanted to leave my researcher's gaze closed in the first day, my ears, my nose, my eyes and my entire body were naturally open and subject to constant stimulation. 'The senses are a way to 'make sense', against the inexhaustible background of a world that never ceases to flow; it is the senses that produce the concretions that make it intelligible' (Le Breton, 2006: XII, my translation). Spaces like the hawker centres represent an overwhelming and unpredictable experience. 'Many researches who have undertaken ethnographies that attend to the senses have done so without any special preparation: the multisensoriality of the research context is often something that emerges through one's encounter with both people and the physical environment one is participating in' (Pink: 2015: 51). In the peculiar context of food markets, of which the Singaporean hawker

centres represent a typology, one must take into account the multiple points of view possible to analyze it. Excluding the other disciplines, which could have scientific interest in the study of food markets, within anthropology itself the study can follow different paths, and if the researcher is not aware and open to the unexpected, there is the concrete risk of being run over by the amount of empirical data and theoretical implications.

As a regard to my own ethnography, I decided to consider in all its components one of the 109 Singapore hawker centres active on the island at the time of my fieldwork (2015-2016). Its name is Dunman Food Centre and it is situated in the neighbourhood of Joo Chiat, in the East part of Singapore. Starting from the physical space, the people, the relationships, and the activities carried out daily, as well as with paying attention at the history and the linguistic dynamics in that context, I gradually achieved familiarity with it. However, the process required time and patience, respect for the workers' daily commitments and adaptation to a vibrant atmosphere of fast moves and rhythms. I proceeded with delineating all the different aspects of the market's everyday. Firstly the whole space features (structure, timing and people), deepening the analysis to only one hawker (his stall, his family, his everyday at the market and his recipe). My inspiration was the ecological perspective inaugurated by psychologist James Gibson (1979) and reinterpreted by Tim Ingold, who states that 'in the individual there is the whole history of its environmental relationships' (2001: 92)<sup>24</sup>. Through the analysis of the place they use to visit on a daily basis to feed themselves and their families, actively observing their practices and habits, while becoming myself more confident and familiar with the popular hawker centres, I felt more familiar with the Singaporean people, with which I shared a warm affection to the informal space of the hawker centres. At the same time, I understood in the very early stages the need to pay large attention to the empirical sphere of this research, together with my subjective feelings, which I did not (and could not) want to put aside. I contemplate the concept of *embodiment* in the field, and the need to understand how to manage and transmit sensory experience, along with the importance to consider the bodily experience as an epistemological tool. As anthropologist Rachel E. Black, on her Ph.D.'s fieldwork research of Porta Palazzo food market in Turin, Italy, says: 'Despite spending seven years frequenting and working at the Porta Palazzo market, I felt unable to capture every aspect of the place. It took me some time to find a narrative frame for discussing and analyzing this market - through its complexity, it evaded a straightforward ethnographic description' (Black, 2012: 8). With the expression 'straightforward ethnographic description' Black refers to conventional ethnography, where 'ethnographers privilege how people share knowledge through speaking and/or writing, and communicate their research in written texts published by academic houses and in lecture halls to academic audiences' (Elliott, Culhane, 2017: 46). With the Canadian curators of the book *A Different Kind of Ethnography, Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*, Denielle Elliot and

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<sup>24</sup> The ecological approach theorized in his environmental psychology by James J. Gibson (1979), represents a radical departure from the way perceiving, and knowing more generally, have been traditionally conceptualized in psychology and philosophy. At the heart of Gibson's ecological approach is an original analysis of the environment, which in turn leads to a new view of person-environment relations, with significant implications for psychology and epistemology. Anthropologist Tim Ingold, taking inspiration from this approach in *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skills* (2000), writes on the relationship between people and environment arguing that the environment (nature) is not a neutral background, nor separated from the individuals (culture). 'Because an environment can only be recognized in relation to an organism of which it is environment; since, in other words, it is the figure that creates the background, the process of formation of the organism is also the process of formation of its environment'. (Ingold, 2000: 91).

Dara Culhane, from the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography in Toronto (referred to in the above citation) I share the belief that: ‘to become critically aware of our sensory experiences, the meanings we make of these, and how we apply them is challenging and requires purposeful work’ (2017:49) that begins with cultivating what Sarah Pink called ‘sensory embodied reflexivity’: ‘a form of reflexivity through which the ethnographer engages with how his or her own sensory experiences are produced through research encounters and how these might assist her or him in understanding those of others’ (Pink, 2015: 58). This call for a new and stimulating ‘sensuous scholarship’ (Stoller, 1997) is strongly pointed by Michael Herzfeld as such:

It is a matter of political as well as epistemological urgency for the discipline to become much more sensitive to the messages couched in alternative sensory codes. [...] The older mode of sense-less description indeed now begins to smell rather fishy

(2008: 437, 441)

In keeping these lessons from the giants’ on my shoulders, bringing theory in the field, I was open to welcome any new lessons, which will have come from the practice. This is why a whole chapter of my Master thesis was dedicated to the lived experience and the sensorial implication within the context of the Singaporean food markets. Clearly, in a place where they prepare, sell and consume a vast amount of dishes, food is the central element. Therefore I also indicated some food-related theories to explore why and how hawker food is exploited as a vehicle to reinforce the need of national identity. Space, senses, food, and issues of identity have then been the macro-themes covered in my work, themes that lend themselves well as lens for the observation of the hawker centres context, but that only through the concrete everyday experience of them, become relevant.

### *Space*<sup>25</sup>

The study of space in anthropology focuses on *relationality*, as defined by Wendy Hollway as the intersubjective foundation of identity (2010), a founding argument in a discipline that deals with the discovery of ‘the other’. Starting from the body, through the study of human-relationships, unto the context in which these relationships take place: the space, the human-space link has been problematized in recent years, placing it within a multidisciplinary research perspective. In this regard, I considered as fundamental: ‘the analysis of the social organization of space through forms that reproduce certain social values, the role of history and social institutions in generating the built environment, the relationship between space and power and the way in which space and human actions are connected to mental processes and the perceptions of the self’ (Ligi, 2003: 244, my translation). The physical space is never neutral, independent, in fact human beings and their environments are produced in relation with one another. Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino in *La Fine del Mondo* (1977), describes the nature of human beings as ‘being there’ rather than ‘being’ in the world, always connected with specific space and time, *hic et nunc*, in which they act. This vision comes from philosopher Martin Heidegger’s concept of *dasein*, whose analytical discourse in the book *Being and Time* (1927) connotes it as ‘being here and now’, which involves a

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<sup>25</sup> I divide this paragraph in the three sections: *Space*, *Food* and *Senses*, in order to better present the analytical concepts specific of the three fields, as well as the specific methodologies I used to dialogue with them in the field.

double constitution within specific forms of presence and world (individuality and society). The *dasein* is not something abstract, transcendental: individuals *are there* rather than *they are*. In this sense De Martino's *relationality* is recognized not as a metaphysical abstraction but as a concrete experience of the self (and its body). It is from *relationality* that the world arises and not vice versa. This localized nature of human beings and their social actions is object of many sociological studies (Bourdieu 1972, Giddens 1984, Lawrence, Low 1990, Ingold 2000, 2001). Therefore the understanding of emic meanings by ethnographers cannot happen in language nor in the mere observation anymore, but in the first hand practice: 'it is not enough to be there, we must act with' (Malighetti, Molinari, 2016: 195, my translation). Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, and Anthony Giddens's Theory of Structuration represent the fundamental interpretative model for an anthropology of the space. The two sociologists unite the human activities of being and acting in an uninterrupted process of autopoiesis. An autopoietic system continually redefines itself, through a network of processes, creations, transformations, and destructions that, interacting with each other, sustain and regenerate the same system continuously. The process is called *antropo-poiesis* in the case of human's systems<sup>26</sup>, and refers to the ability, proper of all living beings, 'to organize themselves by exploiting the environment and referring it to themselves' (Ligi, 2003: 254, my translation). Therefore, the process of biological development and culture acquisition are operations of self-organization. According to the social anthropologist Tim Ingold, scholars must learn a know-how through practice and exercise, to acquire the skills specific of an interested field. In his ecological approach, the only way to represent and signify people's practices is to do it practically, implementing learning by doing as cultural learning. This is the way to become an active and competent member of a community, to build, at the same time, a sense of belonging, an identity. Cultural variability consists, in fact, in a difference of abilities. Therefore, the researcher will have to approach the study of these skills in an ecological way, practicing them in turn (Ingold, 2000, 2001). Through sensory, practical and social training, mediated by the interaction with the people in their everyday contexts, the anthropologist can access that horizon of tasks that Ingold calls *taskscape* (2000), the effective fusion of the concepts of landscape and practices, which once again emphasizes the relationship between space and people's practices.

Stated the existing link between individuals, their activities and the context in which they move, a kind of ethnography, which take in consideration the analysis of the physical components of the place, the relationships and the daily practices, with a look also at the linguistic and historical dimensions, has characterized the method of my research. The fieldwork was divided in two phases: observation and immersion. The first one included the detailed description of the physical structure and the daily activities. Yet, observation was never passive, rather used to interact with the people in informal conversations, and to plan the next steps based on daily discoveries. The second part included interviews and practice. Unfortunately I was not allowed to prepare food

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<sup>26</sup> Francesco Remotti officially presented the concept of anthropopoiesis in 1996, in the introduction of *Le Fucine Rituali*, Turin, Segnalibro Publishing. The Italian anthropologist has devoted much of his research to the definition of the concept and processes of *anthropopoiesis* starting from the study of the rituals of circumcision among the Nande people of Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo). The word *Anthropopoiesis* is composed by the Greek *anthropos* (man) and *poiesis* (manufacture, from the verb *poiein*, to make, to model, to manufacture), and here is the meaning of the process of construction and definition of human identity. Through the modification of the body and the rituals (for example Nande's initiation ceremonies) the individual model him/herself as a human being and defines his/her own identity.



in the hawker centres, due to State policies. So I used to write down and video-record each step of preparation, and reproduce it once at home. Needless to say there was no comparison with the hawkers' final product, but trying to cook the dish myself I understood the effort, the usage of the ingredients and where to source them, I learnt to follow instructions as well as to be creative, because cooking is always an inventive performance. The ways hawkers described the preparation process were diverse. Someone detailed each single passage, starting from the origins of the dish, the ingredients and the cooking method, others only showed me the action without words and let me follow and film. Interesting to note is also that the ways they talked about their activities while doing them was much different from when we met outside the food centre for a planned interview, or when we randomly met on the neighborhood's streets. In the making, they were more detailed and they would let me smell or taste here and there. A sense of proudness to show me their work and their recipes emerged more inside the market, where they were more open to offer information, also due to the fact that the customers and the other stallholders were looking. I concluded that the food market space and the hawkers' stalls were absolutely not neutral, and rather they were considered a comfort zone a familiar ground, both for the workers and the customers, who would visit the food centre on a daily basis to feed their families.

### ***Food***

The relationship between food and culture is obvious and complex at the same time. It is trivially obvious because people have to eat in order to survive. It is complex because the choice of what and how to eat is dependent on a combination of different elements. Pierre Bourdieu, in *La Distinzione* (1979), focuses on the ways in which individual taste is strictly related to social stratification. David Sutton (2001, 2010) proposes to consider eating as an 'incarnate practice' and anthropology of food as 'Proustian anthropology', closely related to memories and reminiscence of affective pasts, as the Proustian narrative child memories derived from eating a madeleine (Proust, 1961: 47). Food is a 'total sensory object' (Le Breton 2006: 335), which brings together sensations and memories. The properties that distinguish it, such as smell, taste, consistency, and color, remain over the years and substantiate the stories of memory. Also, the cultural models conveyed in the process of eating make people express and affirm their sense of community belonging, their national identities. However, as David Bell and Gill Valentine point out in *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (1977), there is a fundamental contradiction in the equation between the field of food and the sense of national identity: 'the history of any nation's diet is the history of the nation itself, with food fashion, fads and fancies mapping episodes of colonialism and migration, trade and exploration, cultural exchange and boundary making' (1977: 186). The meeting between different cultures, trade models, and migrations has produced kitchens whose origins have nothing to do with a unique definable national feature. From an academic point of view it is then irrelevant to focus on the existence of national cuisines, but rather on why and how certain foods and styles of preparation continue to be identified with specific ethnic groups and nationalities. Not strictly revealing national identities, food is rather the mirror of the history of contacts between cultures, both in the ingredients and in the recipes. Food is like a language that 'articulates notions of inclusion and exclusion, national pride and xenophobia' (1977: 192) and the incorporation of these notions into the same foods and their uses make it an important actor in the process of creating boundaries between different groups. Ethnic identity and its boundaries are continually

associated with elements such as language, religion, customs. This tendency to look at the concept of identity by transforming it into realistic facts is proper to the social actors, who constantly (and often unconsciously) perform what they consider to be their own identity in everyday practices, also related to food. The work of Carole Counihan and Susanne Højlund *Making Taste Public* (2018) takes an ethnographic approach to show how social relations shape - and are shaped by - the taste of food. Recognizing that different cultures have different taste preferences and flavour principles embedded in cuisine, they ask how these differences are generated, showing evidence of how taste is made public through everyday practices in different ethnographic cases. With the aim to get an insight of Singaporean everyday practices related to food preparation and consumption, my ethnographic work focused on hawker food, inspired by models that proceed according to the concrete details of everyday life (Franceschi, Preveri, 2013) and giving large importance to the sensory experience in the process of 'rewriting taste through the taste of rewriting' (Franceschi, Preveri, 2013: 7, my translation). In Singaporean society, food and consumption patterns of the past occupy a prominent role in the common and public construction of nostalgia. Singaporeans express their shared nostalgia in terms of childhood plates prepared by the hawkers on the streets, and this reflected on the importance given to the places and events that preserve and enhance these memories. Places like the hawker centres and the *kopitiam*, as well as food festivals and heritage food tours are all about this, and through my search of cultural meanings in these contexts I defined Singaporean food as 'multi-racial', highlighting the Singaporeans' tendency to consider themselves in terms of race and group membership. Besides, Singapore's food is the intermediary to reproduce the social roots that anchor individual and collective belonging. In this way it is an instrument through which people reproduce continuously what they consider to be their identity, closely linked to their lived experience. Taste is the sense of the perception of flavours, which responds to a particular sensitivity marked by social and cultural belonging and by the way in which each individual adapts itself according to the specific events of its history' (Le Breton 2006: 351, my translation). People do not just eat the food products; people eat their own identity.

Focusing on the recipes and the food preparation, in the second part of my fieldwork I began by listing all the stalls and the respective dishes. Once I had the overall situation clear, I concentrated on four different stalls and their recipes, the ones more willing to collaborate. In these cases, the observation was more meticulous, and when possible, I came in close contact with the hawkers of reference, learning and following step-by-step, and day-by-day, the whole preparation process behind their recipes. The characteristics, the hawkers' response to my attempt to approach, as well as the recipes, the style of preparation and the service to customers was interestingly totally different. The peculiarities of every hawker were evident, due to character differences, personal history, age, gender, and depending on them working alone or in a family run business, on the success of their stall and the subsequent support of customers, which leads to a satisfactory salary or, on the contrary, on the fact of being hawker for just economic necessity and the lack of knowledge in other fields, seeing this profession as a simple way to earn enough to live. In the very last steps of the work, receiving a positive response from one of the four stallholders, whose name was Steven, I decided to consider his stall as the focal point to observe all the detailed techniques, the gestures and the practices involved on a daily basis, together with the privilege of a continuous exchange of views, thoughts, historical and cultural insights on Dunman Food Centre,

family's stories from the street to the food market relocation, and visions for the future of the hawking profession. Many spontaneous conversations, together with structured interviews, allowed the creation of mutual trust between us. Steven, and the detailed explanation of his work inside the stall to create his successful *wanton mee*<sup>27</sup>, allowed me to make considerations on the issue of the transmission of practices and skills. Space, furniture, timing, movements and ingredients' knowledge were embodied and put into practice every day as expert practices, which defined the identity of Steven. The representation that he offered me of his daily-life inside Dunman Food Centre, once I asked him what the place represented for him, was clearly accounted, without any hesitation, in his quick and direct answer: "It's my life! It's my income, my family! Nine years old I was already here, it is my second home"<sup>28</sup>.

### *Senses*

In describing the features of the Dunman Food Centre in my field notes, a picture of the daily life of the market gradually formed. At the same time, the new sensorium I was experiencing, and how my perceptions of the place gradually changed over time, was taking shape. The reflection on my subjectivity and the personal journey made in familiarizing with the food market began with considering fieldwork as a strong individual experience, which modify usual habits and rhythms. The first time I visited Dunman Food Centre in Singapore as the hawker centre of my choice I felt nervous. I was an outsider in a fast moving and organized context. Its dynamics were confusing at first. I was not able to distinguish the noises, the voices, the movements of pots, knives on cutting boards, blenders, ladles in the woks, the rubbing of food poured into hot pots, the arrangement of trays and dishes in the cleaners' carts, the launch of the chopsticks in the buckets of soapy water in front of the kiosks, the paws and the birds singing and resting on the roofs, waiting for free tables to steal some surplus, the hawkers shouting announcing dishes ready and the bells used for the same purpose...An endless series of sensorial stimuli, all united to create that unavoidable synaesthesia defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as such:

Synesthetic perception is the rule [...] and if we do not notice it, it is because scientific knowledge removes the experience, because we have unlearned to see, hear and, in general, to feel, to deduce instead from our body organization and from world, which the physical conceives them, what we must see, hear and feel. [...] The senses communicate between them, opening themselves to the structure of the thing. [...] We are all unconsciously synaesthetes.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 308)

A combination of elements belonging to different sensorial levels. Inside Dunman Food Centre I felt clumsy and observed. At the beginning, the physical element of the entrance's stairs represented for me the passage towards the immersion in its atmosphere. In those steps I used to mentally prepare myself to savor every aspect carefully. I was consciously insecure, but I tried not to show it, being convinced that over time my insecurity would have decreased. Once inside, it was hard to focus on

<sup>27</sup> *Wanton mee* or *wanton noodles*, is a Cantonese noodle dish very popular in Singapore as a breakfast staple. The dish is composed of noodles served in a hot broth, garnished with leafy vegetables, wonton dumplings and smoked pork slices.

<sup>28</sup> From my fieldwork notes, informal conversation with Steven, February 17th, 2016.

single elements, as the different sensory degrees came into play in unison. Canadian anthropologists David Howes and Constance Classen, in their avant-garde writings on the importance of the sensory world in anthropology, discuss on synesthesia as ‘the union of the senses’ (2013: 153). Listening to new noises, sniffing mysterious smells, and tasting unusual flavours, I was unable to understand where did they come from. Consequently, I realized that my mind was engaged to guess where they could come from and the tendency was to bring them closer to what I already knew, instead of falling into the uncertainty that created disorientation. As Sarah Pink describes, this kind of cultural ‘jolt may be gradual, enjoyable, perhaps disturbing if the disorientation experienced leaves the ethnographer grasping out for points of familiarity’ (2015: 52). Understanding that bodily aspects are linked to mental elements such as memory, related so to the cultural and social sphere, sensorial perceptions must be studied not only from a psychological and neurological point of view, but also in the social and anthropological field. According to Canadian anthropologist David Howes and historian Constance Classen:

We intend to show that synesthesia is too multifaceted and too culturally important to be left solely to neuroscientists to define. We also hope, on the one hand, to encourage neuroscientists interested in sensory integration to take more account of cultural factors, and, on the other, to stimulate historians, anthropologists and other scholars to look beyond, beside, and behind neurological models to explore the ways in which the senses- and the sensory models- are shaped by culture.

(Howes, Classen, 2013: 153)

Exploring the innovative field of Sensory Studies, the link between nature and culture is reaffirmed, with the conviction that what we physically perceive, in the continuous multitude of stimuli caused by living in a specific environment, is culturally constructed and linked to what we know, in a continuous operation of comparison.

The constitution of society is seen as shaping the constitution of mind and body, and hence, of synesthesia [...] There is no strict division between the biological and the cultural in experiences of this multifaceted phenomenon. Even the idiosyncratic synesthesia of the individual, as we shall see, can show the influence of the social and material environment in its formation.

(Howes, Classen, 2013: 156-157)

Initially, every element under the roof of the market attracted my attention and watching, feeling, smelling, tasting, touching were my daily actions. The light green color predominant throughout the market gave me peace of mind. The outer walls and the roof, the tables and chairs all were green, and recalled the green of the plants on the right side of the entrance. The circular-shaped lamps, hanging on the ceiling, created good lighting. The air of the fans, at each corner of the ceiling and in the columns that supported the entire structure, moved the air in the terrible heat, and offered momentary relief. The anti-bird system, with the classic pins on the roofs, was not very successful, and occasionally there was the song of birds perched in the corners. In the most crowded hours, especially at lunch and dinner time, the hawkers’ movements inside the kiosks and the customers between the tables a great confusion. And again the knives on the cutting boards slicing food, the air in the ventilation hoods above the stove, the ladles in the woks, the sizzling of food in the hot oil, the loud voices. Sitting at the tables many

hours a day, in the simple plastic round chairs fixed to the floor, I tired my legs and back and I do not remember a single day without feeling the sweat drops under the clothes, especially after eating the spicy foods. The smells of the food trays, which passed by, brought by the customers or by the hawkers themselves serving at the table were multiple and in the smoking area of the market the smell of cigarette mixed with the smell of food. After being exposed to all these elements daily for six months, in the last weeks of fieldwork they became familiar, and being able to describe them with words in a writing piece was proof of this. I felt part of the market, a sensation diametrically opposed to the initial one. The confusion had become the normal atmosphere in which every day I expected to immerse myself. The noises were recognizable and, as such, they got less my attention, as it happens with the noises of the houses in which we live, to which we no longer pay attention. Going on the spot had become a certainty, I knew (with exceptions) who I would find at certain times of the day and on different days of the week, which kiosks I would find open and which ones closed, which full of customers and those mostly empty, who would have greeted me and who I should have greeted first to get in touch, what dishes I wanted to eat and how to order them, and even who would have wear the flip-flops that I would continuously heard shuffling for the whole market!

Only thanks to my concrete fieldwork experience and to the great example of the studied and mentioned scholars, I am strongly convinced that the sensuous implications of the researcher in the field are a fundamental prerequisite for the construction of knowledge. Bodily experience is central in a methodological proposal that renews the concept of participation. This new vision of ethnographic method is enriched with sensoriality, as opposed to a vigilant rationality as the only source of knowledge. The recent anthropology of the senses has given a positive answer to the question whether the sensory world represents or not the real world and if it contributes, therefore, to knowledge. Michael Herzfeld responds in *Practice of Theory* (2006) highlighting the importance of a close conceptual convergence between theory and practice. According to the author, the observer is always placed in the observation, and he accuses anthropologists of presumption in wanting to understand the world despite ethnocentrism, their interpretative frame, inevitably present. The misunderstanding that exists in every ethnographic work is the constant evidence of this ethnocentrism. Given this, Herzfeld believes that anthropology deals with misunderstandings, since they are the result of different 'common senses' (2006: 94), which must be the real objects of study in anthropology. With 'common sense' Herzfeld refers to the daily understanding of how the world works, rooted both in sensory experiences (individual) and in political practices (society). Before anthropologists, two media scholars, Marshall McLuhan and his pupil Walter Jackson Ong, dealt with sensoriality. In particular, they encouraged the idea of a study of the senses in which 'given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium used in a culture one could probably define the culture virtually in the totality of all its aspects' (1967: 6). Among nowadays-major scholars on the senses, Canadian Constance Classen (1993, 2013) and David Howes (1991, 2013) from the Concordia University of Montréal, which exhort an increasing number of researches to pursue a sensory approach to culture, with an optimistic and enthusiastic perspective in this regard. I use the term optimistic because there is still a concrete difficulty in recording the data of the sensory world, one of the reasons why the development of studies in this direction has been inhibited in the past. Precisely for this reason further research by Concordia University and others will be essential. Thanks to the increasing study on the senses, a new



approach is moving to a vision in which anthropology is considered as a clear practice of difference, and not of identity, and for this reason we can and must allow a sort of right to opacity in the lenses with which we look at other cultures. Anthropologists should be interested in the sensory sphere, not only because it is the first to come into play once in the field but also because it is the parameter with which they measure the encounter with the other and with a different range of cultural elements, regardless of the research questions. Therefore, the proposal is to work for the establishment of an anthropology, which starts from the corporeal sphere. This transition from embodiment as an object of analysis to embodiment as a research method is hoped by Paul Stoller in his words:

It is really fundamental to incorporate the sensoriality of the body into ethnographic works - smells, tastes, appearance, sensations. This inclusion is of particular relevance in the ethnographic descriptions of society in which the Eurocentric notion of text - and textual interpretations - is not important. I have emphasized elsewhere why it is important, at a conceptual and analytical level, to consider how, in non-Western societies, perception unfolds not only from vision (and the related metaphors of reading and writing), but also from the sense of smell, from touch, taste and hearing. In many societies these minor senses, which as a whole cry out for a sensory description, are central to the metaphorical organization of experience.

(1997: XV-XVI)

In this last paragraph I intended to express the central importance that field experience has had in the outputs of my research. Despite the difficulty of writing an experience so intimate and new, I wanted to bring out the awareness gained on the importance and the inevitability of living a field experience by immersing completely, letting be touched, moved, changed, and with regard to the effort of transmitting, through words, these spontaneous methodological practices. In doing so, I strongly followed Paul Stoller's thesis on the need for more tasteful ethnographies: 'In tasteful fieldwork, anthropologists would not only investigate kinship, exchange, and symbolism, but also describe with literary vividness, the smells, tastes, and textures of the land, the people, and the food' (1989: 29). In the case of Singapore, whose daily essence is even more difficult to understand because of the aforementioned elements of multiculturalism and incessant modernity, it is important to dwell on the concrete elements, those that express the daily lives of local people, before venturing to make general considerations of a theoretical type, through a 'recording of the complexities of the individual's society experience. [...] In this way ethnographic research creates voice, authority, and an aura of authenticity' (Stoller, 1989: 29).

### *Conclusion*

In this article I presented the historical, political and social context, which led to the construction of the hawker centres food markets in the island-State of Singapore. Through a long-time fieldwork experience, my aim was to knowledge the reasons why these places are pointed as the symbol of Singaporean identity, both in the State's discourse as well as by the people. Starting from historical sources and local literature on the general features characterizing the hawker centres, I then selected one of them, based on criteria of accessibility. In the ethnography of the Dunman Food Centre, as a singular case representing Singaporean hawker centres' features, I used three different

approaches, looking at the space, the food and the sensorial implications to arrive at the closest understanding of the existence of a Singaporean identity. While on the analytical level the field of space, food, and senses can be precisely distinguished, as I did in the previous pages, in the hawker centres' everyday life the perception of the place, the flavors of the foods and the sensory implications are all experienced at the same time. In a scheme that seeks to summarize this vision (Figure 1a), identity is placed at the center, in the intersection of the three elements in which the experience of the hawker centers revolves (space, food, senses).

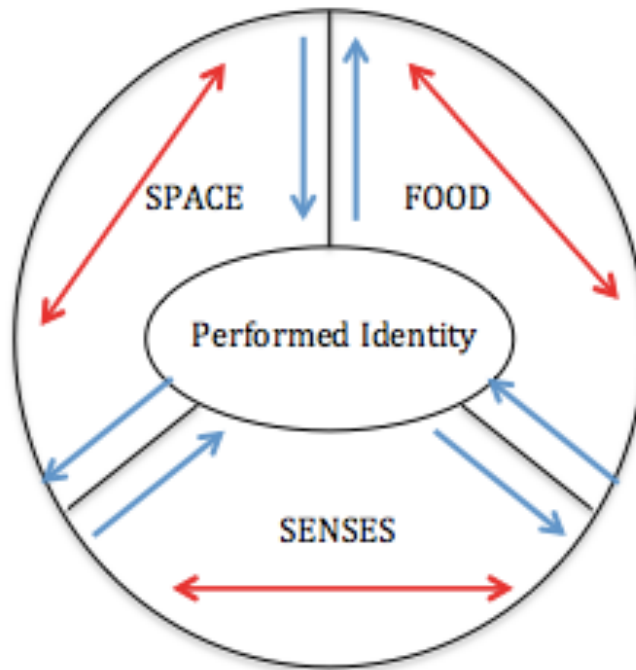


Figure 1a. Graph representing the three field of analysis included in the ethnography of a Singaporean hawker centre, also representing the three elements for the construction and constant re-definition of Singaporean national identity.

The blue arrows highlight the constant interaction with identity itself, which is constantly shaped and modified, never fixed but fluid, a consequence of the actions and for this reasons I name it *performed identity*. The red arrows mark the omnipresent relationships between the space, the food and the sensory perceptions in the overwhelming but thrilling experience of studying this type food markets. As a proposed ethnographic methodology (suitable for other food markets contexts), I dedicated a large part of the field and post-field reflections on the subjective experience of the researcher, and the sensorial and emotional implications of researching highly sensorial stimulating context as food markets.

Singaporean identity lies in the hawker centres, it springs from the relationship between the people and the physical place, full of unique culinary and sensory experiences which, thanks to this research, I have felt in first person. The future challenge will concern the changes that will involve these places. The new spatial form of the hawker centres, which today characterizes the entire territory of the country, has proved over time an effective solution for several reasons, not only to make safe and hygienic the sale of food cooked outdoors, but also, paradoxically, to keep alive some

recipes historically born on the street and kept in today's covered stalls preparations. Hawker food is a key element of Singapore's culture, a people daily necessity and a treasure to preserve in the new market structures, which themselves became the symbol of the Nation. Now, taking Singapore as an example, what will be the future solution of the chaotic street food in other Asian metropolises, like Bangkok and Hong Kong, which are also dealing with this kind of problems? Is Singapore only the first example of how modernity and the influence of the West will gradually change the appearance of Asian cities and their urban space? Will modernity goals in the governments decisions take away the vibrant confusion of colors, noises and smells offered by the myriad of stalls and itinerant vendors in the streets of other cities as it happened in the Lion City? These questions remain open for further researches.

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## SOMMARIO

Il cibo di strada si sviluppa per definizione lungo le vie di una città, all'aperto, nelle piazze. Nel particolare caso dell'isola-stato di Singapore, la corsa verso una modernità di stampo occidentale ha causato un radicale cambiamento nelle abitudini di vendita, acquisto e consumo dei prodotti cosiddetti di strada, con la creazione dei mercati coperti *hawker centres* e la conseguente eliminazione di qualunque forma di vendita itinerante. Attraverso il percorso storico che ha portato alla creazione di questa nuova tipologia di mercati alimentari, caratterizzato da una forte enfaticizzazione da parte della classe dirigente di elementi quali la pulizia e l'ordine, saranno esposte le caratteristiche principali di questi luoghi, definiti oggi il simbolo dell'identità singaporiana. Parallelamente ai cambiamenti del paesaggio urbano, le abitudini delle persone si sono dovute modificare a loro volta, specialmente in un ambito così legato alla quotidianità quale l'acquisto e il consumo di cibo. Oltre alla rapida modernizzazione, tra i fattori principali che nella breve storia del paese hanno fortemente interagito e reso arduo il consolidamento di una sua identità vi è la straordinaria eterogeneità sociale, conseguenza delle numerose migrazioni. Il cibo *hawker*, quello venduto nelle strade in passato e negli *hawker centres* oggi, non solo è testimone delle trasformazioni volte a modernizzare il paese, ma racchiude anche elementi di categorizzazione etnica, causati dalla tendenza singaporiana a ragionare in termini "multi-razziali".

Un metodo di analisi su più livelli è stato attuato nel comprendere la quotidianità degli *hawker centres* e il loro ruolo culturale. Attraverso l'esperienza in prima persona dello spazio fisico, del paesaggio sensoriale, della varietà dei cibi, dei gesti tecnici e delle dinamiche relazionali all'interno di un mercato di quartiere, ho percepito un forte orgoglio locale nel voler valorizzare questi luoghi, quali ultimo esempio del percorso storico del paese e di un'identità culturale condivisa, pur nell'estrema diversità sociale, di uno dei paesi più globalizzati e cosmopoliti del pianeta.