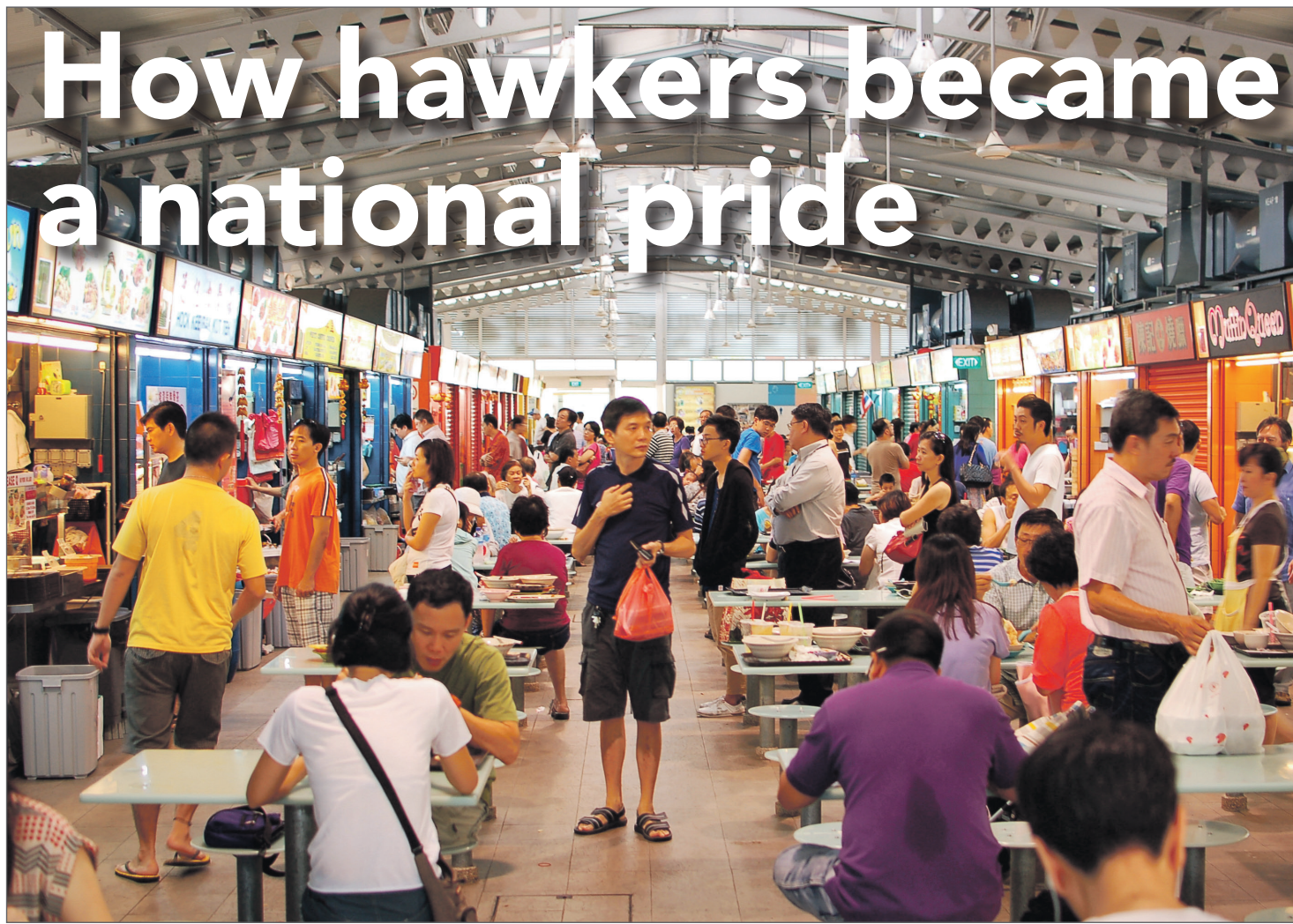


How hawkers became a national pride



TIBERIU ANA

Hawker centres offer a range of local cuisines under one roof.

Food hawkers were once seen as a nuisance and chased off the streets by inspectors. Today, Singapore's hawker culture is considered a heritage worth preserving. SHEERE NG tells us more.

If someone in the streets shouted “di gu” some 60 years ago, food hawkers there would run for their lives, sometimes leaving behind their pots and pans. “Di gu” was an informal name for the health inspectors whose job was to chase hawkers off the roads and sidewalks.

The authorities disliked hawkers because they blocked the way of cars and pedestrians. Since there was no running water to clean ingredients and utensils, hawker food sometimes made people sick, too. If caught by the “di gu”, these street food sellers could be fined or even have their wares destroyed.

Today, our hawkers are celebrated as heroes. Hawker food is a poster child for Singapore's multicultural heritage. In 2018, Singapore even nominated its hawker culture to be included in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This is a global list of precious traditions and skills passed down from generation to generation.

Turning point

The turning point for hawkers happened after the creation of hawker centres. They were first built by colonial officials and then carried on by the post-independence government. Despite seeing hawkers as nuisances,

the authorities recognised that they provided affordable food to the people. Hawking was also a good source of income for many Singaporeans in the 1960s, when there was not much work available.

The sheltered food centres gave hawkers a clean environment with running water to cook and sell their food. Keeping the hawkers in a fixed location also allowed the authorities to regularly check on their hygiene.

Even though hawker centres were built to **sanitise** street food, they have evolved to become a social glue, holding together Singaporeans of different backgrounds.

Hawker centres gather the foods of many cultures, so that we can eat mee rebus, chicken rice, roti prata, and sandwiches under one roof.

This practice of different ethnicities

eating and mingling in the same space is what the authorities today promote and hope to preserve. “It will also let the rest of the world know about our local food and multicultural heritage,” says Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Challenges

Preserving Singapore's hawker

culture has its challenges. The average age of our hawkers today is 59 years old, because not enough young people are joining the trade. When these hawkers retire in the next 10 to 15 years, many stalls will close. Gradually, hawker centres and their culture

will die out if they stop offering the food varieties and attracting the mix of people they do today.

There are several reasons why young people do not want to be hawkers. One

of them is because of the **strenuous** work. Many hawkers start preparing their dishes before daybreak to serve the breakfast crowd. They also stay on their feet all day long in a baking-hot kitchen. Well-educated young Singaporeans generally prefer more comfortable jobs, usually in air-conditioned offices.

The government, at one point, also discouraged young Singaporeans from becoming hawkers. Between 1974 and 1990, they stopped giving out hawker licences, except to those who could not find other jobs. Only people above 40 years old could apply because younger workers were wanted in the new factories Singapore was building. Meanwhile, the government stopped building hawker centres in 1986, after there were enough to house the street vendors.

Another reason is that hawkers have been making smaller profits over the years. Hawker food in the past was cheap and convenient for the people. It is still expected to be so, even though Singaporeans today can afford to pay more.

Hawkers need to charge more because their costs have been going up. The prices of ingredients such as eggs and flour have increased, and so have the salaries of hawker assistants. If hawkers do not increase their rates, they will earn less and less profit.

Attracting new hawkers

The government has tried to ease the burden of hawkers. For example, they offer grants for the purchase of machines that can **automate** some of the cooking. New hawker centres are also being built to increase the supply of stalls and make their rental costs more affordable for new hawkers.

With more hawker centres to come, there is now an even greater need for new hawkers. The government hopes that getting UNESCO's recognition for our hawker culture will raise the profile of hawkers. If people across the globe admire the trade, then maybe more Singaporeans will be encouraged to explore this career option too.

The UNESCO results will be announced at the end this year.

VOCAB BUILDER

sanitise (say “se-ni-taiz”; verb) = make clean and hygienic.

strenuous (say “stre-new-us”; adjective) = needing a lot of effort.

automate (say “aw-to-may’t”; verb) = to use machines to make work easier.

UNESCO (say “u-nes-ko”; noun) = acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation.



KEES RENARD

A street hawker in 1962. You can see him in a film of old Singapore posted on our website.

Watch the video:
more.whatsapp.sg