Itineracy immobilised: The linguistic landscape of a Singaporean hawker centre
Jakob R. E. Leimgruber
University of Basel

**Abstract**

A famous element in Singapore's food culture is the hawker centre, consisting of a large collection of individually-run stalls selling various kinds of foods and drinks. These centres, which dot the island and its public housing estates, were built on government initiative beginning in the 1970s, with the prime objective of sedentarising the large number of erstwhile itinerant street hawkers, based on a discourse of promoting 'cleanliness' inherent to the entire nation-building narrative of the country. The sedentarised hawkers, now divorced from their earlier way of life and often from their earlier neighbourhoods, had to start naming their businesses overtly. Some did so by including references to the geographical location of their earlier area of street hawking. The linguistic landscape of stall signboards in a hawker centre exhibits various attempts to come to terms with this immobilised itineracy.

## 1. Introduction

Chief among the food outlets found in the city-state of Singapore are the island's ubiquitous 'hawker centres': large covered markets with several rows of individual stalls selling a wide range of foods and drinks. These stalls advertise their merchandise on signboards fixed prominently above the counter. The names of the food stalls featured on these signboards are the topic of this paper, in particular, those with a seemingly displaced reference – for it is not unusual to find, on these signs, names of places far removed from the actual location of the stall. Consider the case of an outlet named *Changi Village*, located in the middle of the district of Toa Payoh, a mixed residential and commercial neighbourhood in the centre of the island: the historic Changi Village was formerly sited just north of Changi International Airport, well over a dozen kilometres away, on the north-east coast of the island. This discrepancy between name and place is by no means unusual and can be found throughout the country. The present paper, therefore, addresses three main questions: (i) how has the presence of food hawkers in Singapore's 'foodscape' (Kong & Sinha, 2015) changed after their sedentarisation, (ii) how is this immobilisation of the trade reflected in the linguistic landscape, and (iii) to what extent is the linguistic landscape of hawker centres a terrain for competing interpretations of what it means to be a 'hawker'. After a few introductory paragraphs, the next two sections will consider the hawking trade in Singapore from a historical viewpoint; this is followed by a case study of a specific hawker centre. Here, special focus will be put on geographically disconnected appellations in stall names.

Modern Singapore was 'founded' by the British East India Company in 1819, at which point there were only around 1,000 people on the island. It stayed under British rule for almost a century and a half, and became independent in the 1960s, first as part of Malaysia (1963), and then as a fully independent nation in 1965. The country is small (ca. 710 square kilometres), and almost entirely set on a single, heavily urbanised island. It is the perfect example of a fully-fledged modern city-state, in that there are no sub-national divisions beyond those used for purely administrative reasons, and the country does not depend economically, militarily, or politically from its large neighbour to the north, Malaysia (unlike other contemporary city-states, such as Monaco, Vatican City, which are heavily intertwined with their respective neighbour).

Under the British, Singapore became an important port on the shipping route connecting Britain with China (via Hong Kong, Singapore, and India, even more so after the opening of the Suez Canal). This position and its booming port attracted immigrants of various kinds (workers, soldiers, civil servants, merchants) from a number of places, but primarily from southern China, British India, and the surrounding Malay world. Turnbull (1996) and Gupta (1994) provide more information on the settlement history of Singapore; the effects of this historical immigration remain visible in the present-day ethnic composition of the population. The indigenous Malay population became a minority as early as the mid-19th century, with the Chinese becoming the dominant group. Peoples from South Asia (referred to locally as 'Indians' but including Indo-Aryans originally from Gujarat and elsewhere as much as Dravidians e.g. from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and southern parts of India) form the third largest group. While their relative proportions have changed over time, ever since around the beginning of the 20th century, the numbers have stabilised and remain roughly unchanged to this day: the 2010 census gives 74.1% Chinese, 13.4% Malays, and 9.2% Indians. This diversity has been managed in various ways (see e.g. Leimgruber, 2013), the bottom line being that interethnic relationships are exemplarily smooth – the constitutional recognition of the three main ethnic groups as constitutive of the nation, as well as official language status for all of Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English, certainly contributed to the absence of major interethnic tensions.

## 2. Hawkers and hawking

The number of people migrating onto the island in search of a better life resulted in many needing convenient and inexpensive food to survive their harsh labour. This is where hawkers come in. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *hawker* (n.2 a.) as 'A man who goes from place to place selling his goods, or who cries them in the street' (q.v.), with the first quotation dated to 1510. A more recent addition, in the OED's 2016 edition, is that of the *hawker centre*, 'a food market at which individual vendors sell cooked food from small stalls, with a shared seating area for customers' (q.v.), marked as specifically 'Singapore English and Malaysian English'. The hawker, therefore, was initially an itinerant salesperson. In this paper, I focus exclusively on food hawkers. In Singapore, the early hawker was typically male, selling food by walking them to where his customers were. They offered comparatively inexpensive and convenient access to a wide range of goods and services, to customers working menial labour in locations

otherwise not equipped with canteens, restaurants, or the like. Early hawkers were most often from China, with some from India and Malaya. A report from 1950, commissioned by the colonial government (quoted in Ghani, 2011: 1), states that 84% of hawkers were Chinese. The Hokkien and Teochew from Fujian province were the most numerous both in the trade and in the population as a whole. Hakka and Hainanese were also present, with the Hainanese earning quite a reputation for their excellent cooked food.

The indispensable service provided by hawkers went beyond the mere provision of food to being an integral part of the social fabric of colonial and early independent Singapore. Chua (2016) explains this by the central role played by itinerant hawkers in the pre-urbanised area (or *kampong* 'village') of Bukit Ho Swee in the 1950s. Hawkers would follow 'routinised schedules and routes', thereby rhythmically 'structur[ing] the routines and cycles of social life of the consumers' (Chua, 2016: 23). The *kampong* that the author describes was but one stop on the hawker's circuit, these circuits themselves being 'unknown and of no concern to customers' (2016: 27) – however, as different hawkers brought their carts at different times of the day, this temporal sequence resulted in a segmentation of the residents' day. This temporal organisation was a daily one, but more 'occasional' appearances (of hawkers and of festival-related or seasonal foodstuff) also marked the passage of weeks and years (Chua, 2016: 27, 31–33). The place of residence of the hawkers themselves also had an impact on their tour, meaning that those from one's own *kampong* would be seen early in the mornings and late in the evenings. Thus, itinerant hawkers were providers of food, but also creators and maintainers of temporal and social realities.

The hawkers were a pillar of the Singaporean economy throughout colonial times and well into post-independence Singapore. It was a largely unregulated trade, and often provided a welcome buffer to those losing employment, as hawking itself required little training – and the demand (for food) would always exist (Thio, 1963). However, their presence also raised concerns among the (post-)colonial administration. The 1950 Hawkers Inquiry Report mentioned above (Ghani, 2011: 1) said 'there is undeniably a disposition among officials to regard the hawkers as primarily a public nuisance to be removed from the streets'. The main points of criticism from the authorities were threefold. Firstly, hygienic concerns saw the street hawkers linked with cholera and typhoid outbreaks and the presence of pests; a low awareness of food hygiene, a lack of proper equipment and of adequate water supply and waste disposal systems all combined to reinforce these apprehensions. Secondly, littering was a problem, with food waste and refuse being simply dumped in the streets, contributing to pollution, and generally degrading the image of the city. Thirdly, hawking had a negative impact on traffic (both vehicular and pedestrian), blocking up entire streets and generally taking up too much space. A licensing scheme introduced in the 1950s was not fully enforced, partly because of the politically sensitive issue of punishing comparatively poor people seen by the larger population as earning an honest living.

The soft-handed approach of early independent (post-1965) Singapore was more about encouraging voluntary sedentarisation and relocation to so-called hawker stalls, or food

centres with adequate amenities, which included water and gas supplies, toilet facilities, and organised waste collection systems. After this initial incentives-based approach, a large-scale registration exercise took place in 1968, resulting, over the 1970s, in the construction of hawker centres throughout the island, both downtown and in all the newly built residential satellite 'new towns'. By the early 1980s, all itinerant hawkers had been 'resettled', that is, 'sedentarised'.

Nowadays, modern hawker centres are managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA), which currently oversees and regulates 107 markets and hawker centres in Singapore. They are 'open concept' in that there is no air-conditioning (unlike 'food courts', which, in the Singaporean hierarchy of eating places, are just above hawker centres and similar in layout but enclosed and air-conditioned); individual hawkers rent stalls, or 'units' (usually around 3m wide by 2m deep), and there are shared public places for sitting and eating. There are toilets, washbasins, and regular cleaning schedules. Hawker centres in residential areas are typically centrally located and close to produce markets and other small retail shops.

The hawkers in the centres remain popular with Singaporeans, with 60% of adult residents usually eating out at least four times a week and 50% of adult residents normally eating lunch in a hawker centre (Health Promotion Board, 2010). The affordability and positive perception of hawker food goes hand in hand with a general decline in home cooking among the population (Sinha, 2016).

### 3. Immobilising itineracy

When considering the immobilisation of the initially itinerant hawkers, the official view of policy-makers becomes crucial. In general, policy-makers world-wide consider hawking a problematic activity, in terms of the three categories identified above: hygiene, environmental concerns, and traffic congestion. Equally important is the concept of social control: it is, of course, harder to control people who are constantly moving around – consider the many sedentarisation attempts of travelling people in various parts of the world. Hart and Rogerson (1989: 296) identify a continuum of official attitudes towards hawkers, ranging from outright negative, considering their presence as essentially anti-developmental and hindering progress and urban efficiency, to outright positive, in which case they are seen as economically relevant and actually contributing to urban efficiency by providing a proximity service to customers who require it. Notwithstanding this continuum of official attitudes, viewing hawkers as a 'problem' rather than a resource seems to be the prevailing stance (Wong, 1996; Mathur, 2014). As for non-sedentary populations in general, efforts at settling them into the mainstream, sedentary population are ongoing world-wide to this day (see e.g. Lu, Wu, & Luo, 2009). The resettlement of Tibetan nomads, for instance, is discussed in Ptackova (2011); there a combination of coercive and incentive measures was put in place, with monetary incentives often being sufficiently attractive to result in large numbers of households abandoning their ancestral way of life and settling into houses built or funded by the government. In this instance, too, the inefficiency of the economic output of a nomadic pastoral system was discursively highlighted, but the resulting

sedentarisation certainly also 'aids in the political control of the Tibetan plateau' (Ptackova, 2011: 2).

Regardless of the intent of the Singapore government in the sedentarisation programme, the exercise was clearly discursively framed as one of hygienic and environmental relevance, as can be seen in this quote from a retired health inspector:

> The way I saw it, the bigger objective was to *keep Singapore clean*. Of course, when you relocate them into proper premises, *public health benefits come in*. But the *main reason* was how to keep Singapore clean. These hawkers *polluted* the drains and you got rats, making the city resemble squatters. So it was decided that the government would build hawker centres.
> (quoted in Ghani 2011: 5, my emphasis)

Clearly, the emphasis is unmistakably on cleanliness vs. pollution, with even any public health benefits incidentally resulting from the policy relegated to an afterthought, a (perhaps desirable) side-effect of the main goal of the policy. This emphasis on cleanliness is in fact an ongoing concern of governmental policies, with many other campaigns and legal measures introduced over the decades in order to educate the population towards a more caring attitude towards public spaces: littering is an offence under the Environmental Public Health Act, and passible of fines and imprisonment. Offenders may be sentenced to community work, known as 'corrective work order'. A particularly Singaporean concept is that of 'killer litter', which is rubbish thrown out of the windows of high-rise buildings – while actual fatalities remain uncommon, resulting injuries are widely publicised in an effort to further crack down on the practice. As a result, apart from the legal measures flanking the system, public advisory posters are displayed prominently in the public areas of housing estates. One may also mention the near-prohibition of chewing gum as well as wide-ranging bans on smoking, both of which translating into reduced litter in the form of gum and cigarette butts on the floor. In the course of 'nation-building', all of these measures combined with larger political issues aiming to project a 'clean image [that] the Singapore government wants to promote' (Tan, 1993: 36–37), with cleanliness here being used metaphorically for the transparency and incorruptible nature of those in power (further highlighted by the ruling party's choice of clean, all-white clothing for their members on the campaign trail). Unruly hawkers trawling the streets in a disorderly fashion do not fit into this narrative.

The process of immobilisation affects the hawker at several levels. First, he stops being a street hawker moving from one place to the next and he ends up in a centre, a stationary location in a clearly defined place, which will have to be kept for at least a certain amount of time in order to make economic sense. Secondly, these hawker centres are more promiscuous, with a large number of hawkers concentrated in a comparatively small area, resulting in more competition for customers. Thirdly, the hawker is no longer completely 'unskilled' – Singapore law requires all food handlers to be trained and certified, food outlets are graded for hygiene standards. Finally, the

traditional street crying gives way to touting or written advertising. The question to be addressed next is how this relocation is visible in the linguistic landscape.

There was a certain shrewdness in the government's implementation of its 'relocation' policy. It tried to relocate hawkers to centres close to their original site of operation, to ensure that their regular customer bases did not disappear entirely. Much more than a simple act of generosity towards the hawkers, this policy was also steeped in the government's concern that it might do it political damage: lost clientele, revenue, and therefore livelihood due to a government scheme would likely translate into vanishing votes, a risk that the policy-makers were not willing to take (Ghani, 2011: 9). However, this proximal relocation was not always possible, especially in the densely populated and consequently densely hawked financial district, so a number of hawkers had to be relocated to satellite 'new towns' built by the Housing Development Board (HDB) in the outskirts of the city, where centres were built to serve the large numbers of new residents there. This expansion of the population took place primarily in the late 1970s, when an average of nine new centres were built each year.

An unexpected side-effect of the sedentarisation of food providers in Singapore was the reversal in the movement of hawkers going to customers. With hawker centres now spread all over the city, and in plentiful supply in every residential neighbourhood, not only have many Singaporeans increasingly abandoned their kitchens to consume 'outside' food on a daily basis (Sinha, 2016), but many are quite happy to travel the island in search of 'the most authentic and the best of a particular category of food' (Chua, 2016: 38). In fact, Chua argues that 'hawker food has become the motivation for Singaporean auto-tourism' (2016: 38) – internal movements of customers travelling to particular hawker centres for the food they provide. Therefore, with the sedentarisation of hawkers, it is the customers that have become more mobile and that make the journey to the hawkers. The reason for the willingness to undertake such journeys stems from the high degree of importance attached to food, perhaps to the extent of fetishisation: food is often called a national pastime, and the existence of an edited volume (Kong & Sinha, 2016) on food, part of a series commemorating Singapore's 50th anniversary of independence, is just one illustration of this state of affairs. In said volume, Chua (2016) describes how websites, blogs (see also Tan, 2016), and television and radio programmes, combined with a lack of other, more tangible cultural monuments, work together to endow the rich culinary diversity in Singapore with this special meaning it has for the majority of the population.

This is not to say that the concept of hawker food and hawker centres is not subject to change. In her chapter, Duruz (2016) explains how some areas of Singapore have become veritable food destinations, in a touristic sense as well as in making the outlets in those areas more upmarket and expensive. This, in turn, led to the overall gentrification of the neighbourhood. In so doing, the food outlets, some of which sprang forth from traditional hawker fare, play an active role in reshaping the urban social fabric.

Having shed some light on the hawker trade as a whole and its move from itineracy to immobility, I now turn to a specific case study, sited in the Ghim Moh Hawker Centre. This recently-renovated first-generation hawker centre will serve as an exemplar for various ways in which the hawking trade has reinvented itself in the wake of its sedentarisation.

## 4. The Ghim Moh Hawker Centre

Ghim Moh is located to the West of the downtown area, between Bukit Merah and Clementi. It is a public housing estate built in the late 1970s and takes its name (Hokkien *kim môˊ* 'golden hair') from the former British barracks in nearby Holland Village, where, presumably, fair-haired British personnel were stationed. The estate consists of thirty-three blocks, including residential high-rises, car parks, shops, a junior college, a community centre, a bus terminal, and, in its centre, a 'wet market' selling fresh groceries as well as other sundries and, crucially, the food hawker centre. Like all HDB estates, it is designed to be self-contained.

The hawker centre was built in 1977. In the period from June 2014 to March 2016 it was closed for renovation (or 'upgrading'), during which all hawkers were made to move their stalls to a temporary centre across the street specifically set up for the task, while the old location was demolished and rebuilt with improved infrastructure. The market now comprises seventy-two food stalls and 158 market stalls; only the food hawker stalls are considered in this paper. A floor plan of the centre is provided in Figure 1, each stall is numbered. Tables and stools (bolted to the floor) are in front of the stalls; these are communal and there is free seating. The centre consists of six 'blocks' of twelve stalls each, separated by walkways.
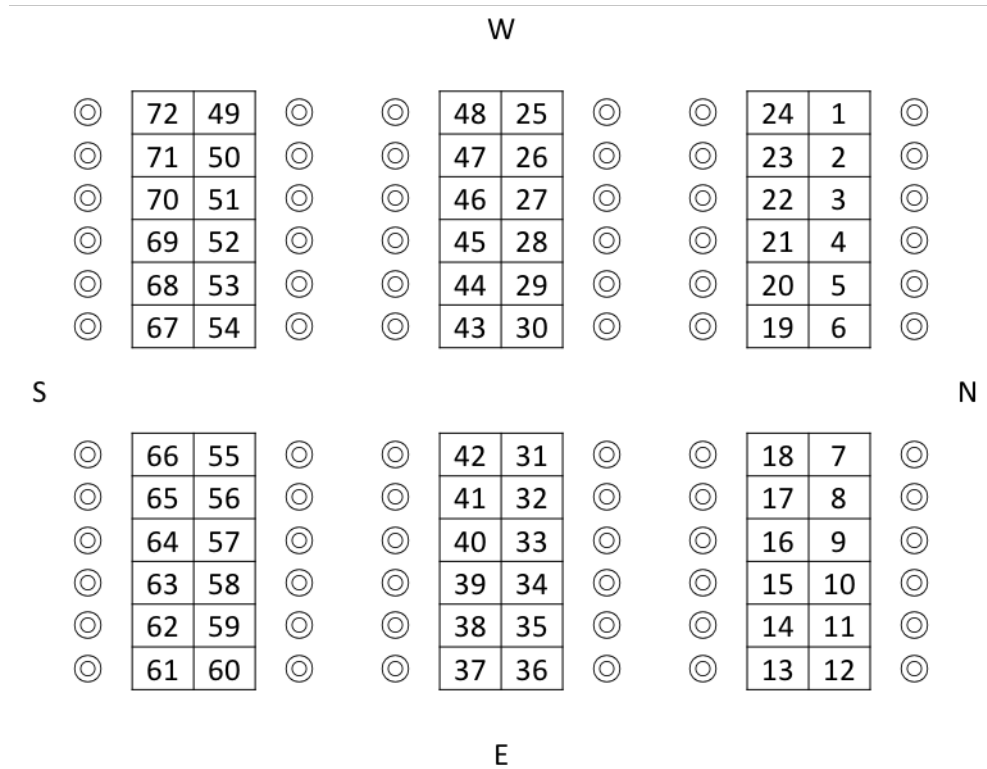
Figure 1: Floor plan of Ghim Moh Hawker Centre, not to scale. GMHC is aligned east–west, which is in fact the longer dimension. Stalls are numbered 1–72 beginning in the northwest corner. Tables with chairs are represented by two concentric circles (not to scale and shown only for general location). Space between the 'blocks' of stalls are walkways. Toilets and washbasins are located in the southwest corner.

For the purposes of this study, the signboard atop each stall was photographed (see below) over the course of one week in August 2016. Additional informal and unstructured interviews were carried out with stallholders of interest on the occasion of a subsequent visit in August 2017. Of the centre's seventy-two food stalls, one was vacant at the time of data collection, and one enterprising hawker owned two adjacent stalls with the same signboard, resulting in seventy unique stalls. Of these, fifty-six sell food only, eleven sell drinks only, and three sell a combination of both (see Table 1). In terms of ethnic distribution, sixty stalls sell food that falls under the general label 'Chinese cuisine', four of them sell Malay food, and three sell Indian cuisine. The last three have other kinds of cuisines, namely Peranakan (a mixed Sino-Malay group indigenous to Malaya), Japanese, and Vietnamese/Thai. Two of the three Indian stalls label themselves as 'Indian Muslim', which means that their food is certified halal, which the Malays (predominantly Muslim) may therefore also consume. All 'Malay' stalls are assumed to be Muslim, and as such, are certified halal.

Table 1: Distribution of stalls by cuisine and type of service (food vs. drink)

| | Cuisine | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Chinese | Malay | Indian | Other | |
| Drinks only | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 11 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Food only | 47 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 56 |
| Drinks & food | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 60 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 70 |



Figure 2: 'Alexandra Village Avocado Fruit Juice' signboard

The unit of analysis is the stall's signboard. These signboards share a number of common features (see Figure 2 for an example). All of them are of an identical size mandated by the NEA, equal to the width of the stall by a height of 50cm. The signboards prominently display their hygiene standard score in their right section. In this centre, all stalls have an advertisement from a cooking gas supplier in the left section of the sign. Finally, all signs display their 'unit number', in its Singaporean format, beginning with '01', which indicates the floor level (redundant in this single-storey centre, but nonetheless present following common local practice). The centre section of the sign, which takes up around three-quarters of its length, is reserved for the stall's name and any descriptions that might be required to clearly identify the product sold – advertising, in short. Forty-eight stalls feature pictures of the food served, typically presented as they would appear on the plate or in the bowl. This visual representation of the product can be contextualised in the importance attached to photographic documentation of food with high aesthetic value as found, for instance, in the food blogs and websites discussed in Tan (2016). Textual elements that are commonly found in this section of the sign include (but are not limited to) personal names (surnames or given names, such as *Mohamed*, 記, *Kenny*, 德興, 福順 – which by themselves may identify the ethnicity of the hawker, thus allowing guesses as to the cuisine served), food items, i.e. describing what is being sold (e.g. *kway teow*, *pancake*, *curry*, *coffee*, *braised duck*, *kuay chap*, *beehoon*, *mee pok tar*, *yong tau fu*), religious text (e.g. بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ limited to halal stalls), and geographical elements, to which I shall turn in the next section. Table 2 shows that the majority of stalls in this centre opt for the combination of personal name and food item or just food items alone. Place names occur in nineteen instances.

Table 2: Number of stalls displaying combinations of food items served, personal names, and place-names, with illustrative examples.

| Combinations | Count | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Food only | 20 | CURRY CHICKEN BEEHOON |
| Food and Name | 25 | 利记茶室 LI JI COFFEE STALL |
| Food, Name, and Place | 8 | 幸運寶香港麵飯 LUCKY POH HONG KONG NOODLE & RICE |

| Food and Place | 7 | 锦茂懒饭 Ghim Moh Porridge and Rice |
| Name only | 5 | V. O. Mohamed Kassim |
| Name and Place | 1 | Mohamed Faisal Seeni Eating House |
| Place only | 3 | Viet Thai Food |

In terms of the languages used on the signboards, words in English appeared on sixty-three stalls, and Chinese[1] on sixty-two, with much overlap between the two. The concurrent use of English and Chinese does not necessarily mean a full translation of the content of the sign: often the name of the dish on sale would be rendered in English in addition to Chinese text giving the owner's name, sometimes without the dish's name appearing in Chinese. In short, knowledge of both languages is useful in understanding the sign's linguistic content fully. As far as Chinese is concerned, traditional characters were used more often than the official simplified characters (33 vs. 29); in ten instances, the two character sets were used simultaneously.[2] The official pinyin romanisation was used on thirteen signs, other forms of romanisation on thirty-four. Malay words appeared on eight stalls' signs and Arabic (in all instances fixed religious expressions) on four.

## 5. Geography in GMHC stall names

Geographical references in stall names can be divided into three main categories. The first, and most widely used (nine of the nineteen stalls using place names), simply denotes 'cuisine' in its widest sense. This may be for stalls selling Hainanese chicken rice, Teochew-style porridge, Hakka *yong tau fu* (a kind of stuffed braised tofu), or Hong Kong desserts. While these labels are not intrinsically interesting for this study, they do serve to illustrate the variety of food available in the centre. Furthermore, they are somewhat indicative of which cuisines are the most established: four of the nine stalls reference Hainan and two Teochew, whereas the others are unique instances of less widespread cuisines in the Singaporean hawker scene (Hakka, Hong Kong, Vietnam/Thailand).

A second category consists of three stalls referencing what one might term 'imaginary' spaces: *Heavens* (Indian food), *Rice gardens* (rice dishes with chicken, fish, and pork), and even *Sea City* (noodle dishes). The first two could be said to bear some relation to the food served: *Rice gardens* is where the primary ingredient for the dishes is harvested, and *Heavens* is a hint at the purportedly heavenly taste of the food on sale. *Sea City*, on the other hand, has little to do with noodles, and can be interpreted as a reference to Singapore, the port city. Overall, all three 'imaginary' spaces remove the reader and consumer from the very urban and congested reality of the hawker centre in which they are located.

Finally, and perhaps more interestingly, we find a third category of seven stalls with instances of Singaporean place-names, the kind illustrated in the introduction that

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[1] 'Chinese' in any form: traditional characters, simplified characters, pinyin, or any other romanisation scheme.

[2] At least two stalls use variant characters that do not appear in the standard set: 〇血豕 (a variant of 眾/众 *zhòng*) and 〇米麿 (a variant of 饃 *mó*).

sparked the idea for this study. Of the seven stalls in this category, four explicitly name Ghim Moh, the neighbourhood as well as the name of the hawker centre itself. This local anchoring is relevant in indexing an authentic history in the place at hand, although, as will be shown later, sometimes for reasons of mobility outside of Ghim Moh. One stall opted for a 'binational' name with 新馬 *xīn mǎ*, made up of the Chinese initials of the countries of Singapore (新加坡) and Malaysia (馬來西亞). In what follows, I will look in more detail at three stall names: Alexandra Village Avocado Fruit Juice, Fort Canning Hill (Huat Kee) Bak Kut Teh, and Ghim Moh Carrot Cake.

The first stall has the signboard reproduced in Figure 2 above. The 'Alexandra Village' element in the fruit juice stall refers to Alexandra, a relatively ill-defined neighbourhood located near Bukit Merah, some 3.5km from Ghim Moh as the crow flies. The neighbourhood is named after the former British army Alexandra Barracks, themselves named after Alexandra of Denmark, Queen consort of the United Kingdom from 1901 to 1910. However, this particular stall has in fact always been located in the Ghim Moh hawker centre, ever since it first opened there in 1987. The *Alexandra Village* in the name is a reference to Alexandra Village Food Centre, another hawker centre located in the Alexandra neighbourhood and which has a long tradition of serving avocado juice, boasting a number of competing stalls offering variations on the drink. The owner of the Ghim Moh stall explained that he had learnt the trade from hawkers in Alexandra Village. The name is, therefore, an index of this rich heritage and, although located in a different hawker centre, works well in terms of placing the product sold within the collective imagination of a place where the ideal avocado juice is served, and whence the recipe for the delicacy actually stems.



Figure 3: 'Fort Canning Hill (Huat Kee) Bak Kut Teh' signboard

A second stall is the one with the signboard in Figure 3. Besides naming the owner, Huat Kee, it makes reference to Fort Canning Hill, which is an actual geographical feature some seven kilometres away from Ghim Moh. Fort Canning, named after the Viscount Charles John Canning, Governor-General of India at the time of its completion in 1861, was a major British army fort up until after the second world war, and served as a residence for early Governors. Its strategic location allowed it to overlook much of the city centre and the old port. The owner of this stall relocated to Ghim Moh after the closing and subsequent demolition of his previous hawker centre on Hill Street, at the south-eastern foot of Fort Canning Hill, in 2000. The Hill Street Centre was a primary settlement spot for hawkers trading in the downtown area and achieved quite a reputation for its concentration of quality local food. Upon its closure, motivated by its

prime location in a well-developed business and government neighbourhood, some hawkers moved elsewhere while rebranding themselves: there is a 'Hill Street Char Kway Teow'[3] stall in a Bedok (east coast) hawker centre, a 'Hill Street Fried Kway Teow' in Chinatown, and a 'Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle' in Crawford Lane (in the Kampong Glam neighbourhood; Leslie Tay, p.c.; Wong, 2016; Johorkaki, 2008). The owner of the bak kut teh[4] stall in Ghim Moh opted for another descriptor, that of the location of the bygone centre at the foot of Fort Canning Hill, likewise hinting back to a geographical area that marked his business' history. The Chinese name, 皇家山脚 'Foot of the Queen's Hill', is in fact the popular name of Hill Street[5] that is inspired by the colonial heritage of the former 'Government Hill' (Wu, 2014); the Chinese name, therefore, more than the English one, harks back to the stall's previous location.



Figure 4: 'Ghim Moh Carrot Cake' signboard

The third stall, Ghim Moh Carrot Cake, has the neighbourhood's toponym in its name, visibly anchoring it in the estate. Of interest is that when the stall first opened in the year 2000, it went by a different name, namely 'Lien He, Chye Tow Kway'. *Chye tow kway* is a variant (and obviously English-inspired, viz. the diphthong in the digraph ‹ye› of *chye*) spelling of Hokkien *chhàithâu* 'radish' and *kóe* 'cake', leading to 'carrot cake' (where *carrot* is actually a radish). Crucially, the Ghim Moh element was not present at that time. When the hawker centre closed for renovation in 2014, the owners, rather than moving their stall across the street into the temporary hawker centre provided by NEA, moved to the ABC Brickworks hawker centre in the neighbouring town of Bukit Merah, where they named it 'Ghim Moh Carrot Cake' to indicate where they came from. After the renovation was completed in 2016, the family's son took over the Bukit Merah stall, while the parents relocated back to the renovated Ghim Moh hawker centre, keeping the new name.

Other hawkers use less immediately obvious devices to indicate their trajectory in their names. One example, here not so much of relocation but of immobility, is that of the stall named 'Mohamed Faisal Seeni Eating House'. It belongs to the first generation of

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[3] Stir-fried rice cake strips with cockles, prawns, beansprouts, etc. From Hokkien 炒 *chhá* 'fried' 粿 *kóe* '(rice) cake' 條 *tiâu* 'strip'.

[4] Pork ribs in a garlic and pepper soup. From Hokkien 肉 *bah* 'meat' 骨 *kut* 'bone' 茶 *tê* 'tea'.

[5] Distinct from the street's official name of 禧街 *Xǐ Xié*, this popular name is taken from the hill's Chinese name of 皇家山 *Huángjiā Shān*, itself distinct from the hill's official Chinese name of 福康宁山 *Fúkāngníng Shān* (Wu, 2014), clearly a transliterated version of the English *Fort Canning*.

stalls that have been present in the Ghim Moh centre since its opening in 1977. Upon moving back into the newly renovated centre in 2016, the owners made it a point to move back to exactly the same spot, with the same unit number. What did change, was their name, if ever so slightly, and for a reason: what used to be called 'stall' was now changed to 'house', a change that can be conjectured to index some kind of increased stability, a house being even more immobile, if anything, than a stall. Also, *Seeni* was added; this is the given name of the son of the original owner, Mohamed Faisal. Family continuity as well as geographical immobility are here combined in the change of name.

A final example may serve to illustrate the importance of continuity in the trade. The stall 'Thye Hong Handmade Fishball Noodle' has kept the name of its pre-sedentary mobile street hawking business, which used to operate in the region of Alexandra Road – the name was kept upon relocation to the newly-built hawker centre in 1977 (Leow, 2016). Here the business is mobile, but the name is immobile, so to speak, pointing to the importance attached to a name (the 'brand'), leading to high resistance to change.

## 6. Business names

It is worth pointing out that in Singapore, the linguistic landscape as such is fairly unregulated. There is no legislation such as the signage laws of Quebec (Charter of the French language, section 58) or even the standards in Wales (Welsh Language Standards (No. 1) Regulations 2015), which attempt to ensure the presence of a language on all or a subset of commercial signage. The only legislation that exists deals with a highly specific type of signs, namely those of a transgressive nature, such as graffiti or illegally erected posters. These are banned under the Vandalism Act and are punishable by fine, imprisonment, and/or caning. The commercial linguistic landscape is only affected indirectly by legislation. The Companies Act contains generally-worded rules stipulating that certain business names may not be registered: this includes pre-existing names and others that are deemed 'undesirable' by the ministry – presumably including offensive words or terms in one way or another disrespectful of an ethnic or religious group or, just as likely, of the government. Such limitations on business names naturally prevent them indirectly from appearing in the linguistic landscape. Apart from this statutory legislation, NEA has regulations as to the design and display of the signboards in hawker centres, the most important being the physical dimensions, which are standardised, and a ban on the advertising of tobacco products. Crucially, there is no statutory provision or subordinate rule that regulates the actual language that has to be used on the sign. Technically, if a business owner wanted to advertise their business in (say) the Inuktitut syllabary, they would be free to do so. The only rule, if any, is that the Latin script must be used at least for the official registration under the Companies Act.

Furthermore, it would seem that the sedentarisation of hawkers brought about such business names in the first place. Historically, the itinerant hawkers would have little need for advertising, relying instead on street crying or on the daily scheduled routes mentioned by Chua (2016, see above); some had assistants announcing their presence, e.g. 'by beating a wooden stick on a piece of hand-held bamboo' (Chua, 2016: 25–27). As such, the travelling hawker was rarely known by his name or that of his 'business', but rather by the food on sale: it was 'the laksa man', 'the ice kacang uncle', 'the hawker

selling rojak'. It is only once settled in a hawker centre and surrounded by competitors that identification and advertising by means of a stall name became important.

The business name, therefore, is vital: it is branding, it is reputation, it is intimately tied to economic success or failure. A brand, according to Muller (1998: 91–92), needs to index three elements: (i) quality products and services, (ii) flawless execution, and (iii) symbolic imagery that is consistent, meaningful, and graphic (icons, trademarks, etc.). While much of this is obvious for larger-scale companies, it remains important for the small family-run businesses such as those of the hawkers discussed in this paper, who may have a higher-than-usual attachment to the 'brand name', which may, after all, be their own surname. Therefore, while financial success is paramount, reputation and identity-marking are at least as important. This marking of identity through the naming practices of hawker stalls operates at several levels. First, there is the personal, individual level: when a given name is used in identifying one's business, it is one's very own personal identity that is reflected in the name, and that is at stake in the competitive market of the hawker centre. A second, higher level is that of the family: by using the surname (rather than an individual given name), a claim is staked to family ownership that encompasses, potentially, a far larger number of people, and which may translate into economic success or failure being projected well beyond the individual onto the entire family – something not unlikely given the often heavily family-based way in which such stalls are operated. Thirdly, there is an ethno-cultural level visible in many names. Names themselves are not divorced from ethno-cultural connotations; while a 'western' given name such as *Tom* may, in the Singapore context, adequately blur ethnic divides in the city-state, the same is not true for any surname or non-Latin script. Should *Tom*, for instance, resort to spell his given name in Chinese characters or in Tamil, the erstwhile ethnic neutrality of the name is removed. Names like *Keng Kee* or *Faisal*, despite their Latin spellings, are also immediately ethnically transparent in the local context. Further, personal names rarely appear alone on signboards, with rich semiotic resources usually very clearly placing the stall within a given ethno-culinary tradition. The use of dish names, actual geographical or ethnic appellations, pictures of the dishes, and even the colour scheme all combine to index a particular tradition. One such intra-group reference has been described above in the form of the religious slogans on the signboards of stalls run by members of the Muslim minority.

Choosing a name is, therefore, a crucial step for a hawker, much as it is for any other business. The culinary or cultural tradition conveyed by the food outlet is often a prime choice (Gentile, 2015). This choice, however, needs to be weighed against any commercial interests at play: Bletzer (2003) reports of Latino grocery stores and restaurants in Florida marking cultural roots but at the same time allowing for commercial accommodation by avoiding any defiance of the mainstream Anglo culture. Others, on the other hand, have found very little cultural evocation in restaurant names, with most being highly localised (Gordin, Trabskaya, & Zelenskaya, 2016). Once a particular business has achieved a high level of visibility and positive resonance within the customer base, its brand has acquired economic value that can be drawn on to gain further customers and maintain high prices (Davis, 1992). A well-chosen name and

brand results in 'psychic value', through which buyers actively identify with the brand, for instance happily displaying Harrods shopping bags but refraining from serving 'cheap' brands of wine, as doing so is perceived to reflect on one's own worth (Davies, 1992: 31). When it comes to food outlet naming, the importance of the process is evidenced by the amount of advice found online (see e.g. Gentile, 2015; Mealy, 2017; Szala, 2017).

In the case of Singaporean hawkers, one additional identity that can be seen indexed in some business names is that of the traditional, itinerant street hawker, a heritage shared by all hawkers (either through personal experience, or simply through exposure to the discursively constructed hawker identity/tradition). This is where geographical references in stall names come in. This indexing works on three main points. The first is culinary authenticity, e.g. in the case of chicken rice stalls labelling themselves 'Hainanese'; whether the owners are Hainanese or not, the adjective links them to the famous and locally well-known Hainanese heritage in the hawker industry. Secondly, there is the itinerant past, such as in the case of stalls being named after their owners' original place of actual itinerant street hawking, much like the avocado juice stall above and like 'Beach Road Prawn Noodle Eating House' located on East Coast Road and named for the area where the current owner's father used to operate in the early 20th century (Wee Sile, 2016). Thirdly, there is simply the desire for delocalisation, with potentially exotic or imagined places temporarily removing the stall from the very urban environment in which it is situated; in these cases, 'Heavens' or 'Sea City' are perhaps not so much a link to the past as to an imagined future.

## 7. Conclusion

Shop signs are widely discussed in studies of linguistic landscapes (MacGregor, 2003; Schlick, 2003; Lou, 2007; Peck & Banda, 2014; Lou, 2016). The reasons behind their ubiquitous presence in the literature is perhaps found in the prominent place they take in the urban cityscape of late capitalism: increased competition brought about by material wealth and almost boundless choice requires business owners to constantly outperform one another to attract the clientele necessary for their economic survival. Besides the obvious positive impact this has (or is meant to have) on the quality and price of the product or service on sale, the marketing and the advertising of this product or service becomes increasingly important. The linguistic landscape reflects this competition with ever more elaborate displays of linguistic prowess in shop names, in the graphic design efforts invested in the signs, and in the amount of public space the signs monopolise. On the average shopping street in any metropolitan area, commercial shop signs vastly outnumber signs of a nature more clearly identifiable as 'top-down' (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht, 2006) or 'municipal' (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003). Besides the standardised signs and globally-known logos and brand names on shops selling items from multinational corporations (including chains in the clothing, electronics, and food industries, to name but a few), which, one might argue, can be found in virtually unaltered form on high streets around the world (Gorter, 2016), there are also more locally-produced signs, which, however, leave no less of an impact on those exposed to them on a daily basis (Lou, 2016). This impact, combined with the vast diversity of signs present in any one location's linguistic landscape, results in a

locally relevant landscape that contributes to and is influenced by imagined concepts of local identities.

In the context of Singapore, food and hawker centres have been discursively constructed as part of a national narrative, becoming a quintessential part of national identity (Kong, 2007; Khanna, 2012); some have suggested the institution of the hawker centre merits recognition from UNESCO (Seetoh, 2013; Bennett, 2014). Policy-makers themselves are actively involved in elevating culinary experience to the level of an indissociable part of Singaporean identity: tributes to local dishes can be seen in the form of floats during National Day parades (Chow, 2015), food plays a central role at events organised for overseas Singaporeans (OSU, 2017), and the Tourism Board prominently places food consumption as a prime attraction of the country ('Where foodies meet') on their website (VisitSingapore.com). Therefore, the linguistic landscape associated with food, particularly so in the hawker centres, becomes one of the loci where identity work is being carried out by the various actors involved.

Such identity work is achieved in several ways. Inside the hawker centres, stallholders use their signboards to index a wide range of meanings, including those of local history in the form of references to the bygone era of itinerant hawking. In so doing, they contribute to the construction not only of their own individual brands and identities, but also of a larger identity-marking context at the societal level, spurred on, as it were, by the nation-wide elevation of food to an icon of Singapore. The hawker centre can thus be seen as a microcosm of the nation as a whole, with its ethnic, culinary, and linguistic diversity, its emphasis on hard work for high-quality products, and peaceful coexistence in a highly heterogeneous metropolis. The discourse of national identity construction ('nation-building') has a high level of salience within the population and encompasses a wide range of political, societal, cultural, and economic topics. Given the top-down and bottom-up efforts invested in promoting the culinary element, elevating hawker food to a key element of Singaporean identity, it makes sense to regard the formerly itinerant and now sedentarised hawkers as being more than just products of this process of national identity construction, and rather as intimately intertwined to the project and, therefore, playing their part in shaping it.

Future research might build on the findings presented here by extending the analysis of traces of personal and societal migration rendered visible in the linguistic landscape beyond transnational migration (see e.g. Edmond, 2017) to include internal movements, with particular focus on non-voluntary resettlement. Likewise, more attention could be devoted to the search for historical traces in the present-day linguistic landscape. Such work should also combine the approaches of Pavlenko (2010), who attempts to reconstruct historical linguistic landscapes, and Blommaert (2013), who emphasises the importance of the historical context onto any analysis, ethnographic or otherwise, of the linguistic landscape. In so doing, the place of food in Singapore's LL might be considered in more comprehensive detail, explaining how, when, and why it achieved its current place in society.

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