A NEW TASTE OF TRADITION:
Chinese Snacks and Hawker-Entrepreneurs in Singapore

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This thesis is presented for the Degree of Master of Social Science of Curtin University of Technology

May 2008
DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese snacks have been part of Chinese food culture for years but many types of snacks have been disappearing in Singapore as a result of globalization and modernization. Since the late 1990s, however, some types of Chinese snacks have become increasingly popular as they are being marketed in new food retail spaces. In the 1940s, kaya toast started as an inexpensive breakfast snack for Chinese immigrants but has since evolved into a lifestyle snack enjoyed by Singaporeans at any time of the day. The growing popularity of kaya toast and some other types of snacks has revived the traditional Chinese snack food industry.

This thesis examines the re-emergence of a traditional Chinese snack culture in Singapore. It discusses the history of traditional Chinese snacks, its continuity and the changing nature of Chinese snack foods in Singapore. Based on case studies conducted in 2005 with retailers of selected traditional Chinese snack foods, the study examines when such food enterprises in Singapore were established, why they were established and the ways in which they were able to survive in the highly competitive market for various kinds of snack foods. It examines the business characteristics and strategies of the new vendors by comparing them to traditional hawkers in the past.

Techniques employed in this study include interviews, participant observation, spatial mapping and document analysis. The findings indicate that the adaptation of the retailers by fusing authentic recipes with new ingredients and flavours, using modern technology, adopting marketing techniques, using media promotion, as well as the offering of a diverse product mix and the setting up of numerous retail outlets have helped the new hawker-entrepreneurs to stay competitive in the growing snack food market in Singapore.

Terms & Keywords

Singapore, globalization, traditional, authentic, adaptation, diversification, Chinese snacks, hawkers
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all those who have helped me in the completion of this thesis.

~ **The Ministry of Education, Singapore**
   For the granting of the Professional Development Leave Award for this study

~ **Madam Sun Huey Min, Assistant Director, Staff Training Division, MOE**
   For her kind support in my Professional Development Leave application

~ **My supervisors, Professor Bob Pokrant (Associate Professor of Anthropology) and Dr Roy Jones (Professor of Geography)**
   For their invaluable guidance, comments and revision of my drafts

~ **Dr Vivian Louis Forbes, Adjunct Associate Professor, Curtin University and Map Curator, University of Western Australia**
   For his assistance in preparing the base map of Singapore for my diagrams

~ **Dr Patrick Jory, lecturer, Walailak University, Thailand**
   For his insightful article on Thai cuisine as well as his constant advice and encouragement in my research

~ **Mr Lori Bordoni, Humanities IT Division, Curtin University**
   For his help on the use of digitised images

~ **Miss Teo Pau Lin, food correspondent, Singapore Press Holdings**
   For her valuable feedback and opinions on the media advertising of Chinese snacks

~ **To all my respondents**
   For their precious time, information and access to photographic images of their outlets, products and preparation processes
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<td>ENV</td>
<td>Ministry of the Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>HDB</td>
<td>Housing and Development Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIA</td>
<td>Singapore International Airlines</td>
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<td>STB</td>
<td>Singapore Tourism Board</td>
</tr>
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<td>CBD</td>
<td>Central Business District</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1.1 Origins of Coffee and Toast

Singapore is a multi-ethnic society comprising a majority of Chinese (75 per cent); Malays (14 per cent); Indians (9 per cent) and other ethnic groups (2 per cent), (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2008). Singapore’s multiculturalism permeates through a diversity of food. Singapore’s gastronomic reputation is largely attributed to its melting pot of cultural cuisines brought by different migrant groups. Snacks are currently the hot gastronomic items in Singapore. Bright lights and colourful signs at take-away food kiosks at shopping malls tempt consumers to try an irresistible spread of local snacks. These food outlets have been attracting the crowds with all kinds of novel Asian snack foods, including traditional food items such as the Chinese toast.

*Kaya* toast, a common breakfast food in the past has become a significant and popular lifestyle snack in the Singaporean food culture in recent years because of the opening of many coffee-shop stalls incorporating a modern concept. The Hainanese immigrants from Hainan Island in China, first set up traditional *kopi-tiams* (Hokkien dialect for coffee-shop) which gradually evolved into the island’s modern coffee-shops. A typical coffee-shop in those days was commonly called a *kopi-tiam* and was located in a Chinese shop-house. Some of the Hainanese have worked for the British as cooks during the colonial era before 1965 and had learnt the techniques of brewing coffee. After a few years in the trade, some started their own coffee-shops, selling simple breakfast items such as coffee and toast (Tian & Tan, 1990).
Round, marble table tops with wooden chairs were placed around the main hall of a *kopi-tiam* which was a small, open-air shop with ceiling fans (Plate 1.1). At that time, coffee-shops were small, family-run stalls passed on from one generation to another. Most of the coffee-shops were owned and operated by different Chinese dialect groups, of which the majority was Foochows and Hainanese. In the 1930s *kopi-tiams* were popular venues for breakfast especially for male immigrants whose families had remained in China. The *kaya* (bread spread made from coconut milk and eggs) toast sold by *kopi-tiams* began as a cheap staple for immigrants. Two pieces of crustless, white bread was toasted on both sides of a charcoal grill and spread with butter and *kaya* and eaten with two half-boiled eggs with a dash of black soy sauce and pepper (Tian & Tan, 1990) (Plate 1.2).

![Plate 1.1](image)

Plate 1.1 A traditional *kopi-tiam* with round marble table tops

The *kaya* toast was often eaten with a cup of *kopi-o* (Hokkien dialect for black coffee) which was a blend of rich coffee powder from Java, Indonesia, served with condensed milk and sugar (Wibisono, 2001). Customers often pour the piping hot *kopi-o* from the cup into the saucer to cool their beverage before drinking. Besides selling coffee and toast, the coffee-shops served tea and other beverages. Takeaway drinks were available and were served in condensed milk tins, tied with a string to be hung round a finger instead of the styrofoam cups used nowadays (Wibisono, 2001).

Although the breakfast crowd dwindles in the late morning, the coffee-shops remain popular meeting places for people who often exchanged “coffee-shop talk” on various topics including national politics, television dramas and food (Wibisono, 2001:22). Coffee-shops gradually became an important feature of the landscape of Singapore. The coffee-shops also baked their own bread,
made their own kaya and roasted their own coffee beans over a charcoal fire (Tian and Tan, 1990). However, in the late 1970s, the government banned what was considered to be the fire hazardous practice of coffee roasting. Most owners now depend on pre-roasted coffee supplied by coffee companies and used gasoline grills instead of charcoal to toast bread. While a few coffee-shops continue to make their own kaya, most buy factory-made produce (Wibisono, 2001).

Since the 1970s, many coffee-shops have closed due to the lack of business successors and to the demolition of many of the pre-war shop houses, which housed many of them (National Heritage Board, 2008) (Plate 1.3). Single-storey shop-houses were found in many parts of Singapore before 1965 especially in the suburban and rural areas. They were built by early developers for sale as shops and homes for new settlers. Due to urban redevelopment and the building of high-rise flats in public housing estates, many old shop-houses have been demolished. This demolition has affected the number of coffee-shops. In the last decade, the number of old coffee-shops has dwindled to fewer than 100. According to the Singapore Ministry of Environment which issues licenses to hawkers and operators of food establishments, there were only 92 licensed coffee-shops in 1996 compared to 272 in 1986 (Yeo, 1997). With the gradual decline of old coffee-shops, the humble kaya toast fare almost disappeared from Singapore’s foodscape.
1.1.2 The First Kaya Toast Business

At first, apart from the prices at different stalls, there were no distinctions made between kaya toasts sold by different coffee-shops. The situation changed with the growth of numerous kaya toast businesses and the introduction of new types of toasts in the 1990s. Ya Kun Kaya Toast, now a well-established local chain of traditional coffee brews, was the first coffee stall to provide the local breakfast of coffee, kaya toast and half-boiled eggs. Trading on its rich tradition and experience in the kaya toast business dating back more than sixty years, Ya Kun Kaya Toast is noted for its brand of quality coffee and its signature kaya toast which consists of two pieces of toasted brown bread, sliced into thin halves and spread with kaya and a slice of butter (Leong S, 2006). The current owner
of Ya Kun Kaya Toast is a second-generation descendant of a hawker immigrant in Singapore, who first sold the snack from a small stall in 1944. The business relocated to a shop house unit at Far East Square in 1998, and has grown significantly since then, operating a chain of self-owned outlets and franchises which pay the parent company to run the business under the Ya Kun Kaya Toast brand (Plate 1.4).

Ya Kun Kaya Toast has introduced a new kopi-tiam concept by locating its outlets in air-conditioned comfort while retaining the old-fashioned décor of marble-topped tables and using thick porcelain cups and saucers. Each outlet
still uses the traditional methods of making its own *kaya*, hand-brewing its coffee and serving half-boiled eggs (*Ya Kun wants to keep ....*, *Business Times Singapore*, 2002, July 5). By May 2007, *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* had 25 outlets in Singapore, including its franchisees, and another 23 overseas in Indonesia, Taiwan and South Korea (Leong S, 2006).

### 1.1.3 Emergence of New Kaya Toast Establishments

Since 2005, a new group of competitors has emerged and expanded the market for *kaya* toast (Woon, 2005; Ng, S. 2005; Teo, 2006; *Toast of the town, The New Paper*, 2006, May 7). Opened in June 2005, the *Wang Jiao Kaya Toast* continues the theme of tradition and nostalgia by retaining the ambience of the past with similar “marble-topped tables, wooden stools and old-style coffee-cups” (Ng, S. 2005). *Wang Jiao* has seven outlets, one in a shophouse unit, five in shopping centres and the sixth at Changi Airport’s transit lounge. Another new entrant is *Ah Mei*, another *kaya* toast café, which opened two outlets in January 2005, one in a shopping mall in central downtown Orchard and the other in a food court in the Central Business district (Ng, 2005). Both newcomers to the *kaya* toast market offer cheaper prices for the bread and brew that *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* had popularized. Other smaller café and cake shops, as well as fashionable coffee bars have also added the *kaya* toast to their standard menu selections. *Han’s Café and Cake Shop* which sells pastries and Western set meals as well as *Gu Noodle + Bar*, a restaurant which specializes in Asian gourmet food, also offer the *kaya* toast (Wee L, 1999).

In June 2005, American fast-food chain, *McDonald’s*, also entered the market for traditional Chinese food by offering a touch of local flavour in addition to regular items. *McDonald’s* introduced *Kaya Roti*, (*roti* is Malay term for bread) which is a serving of a warm toasted bun sliced in half and spread with margarine and *kaya* (*Kaya Roti at McDonald’s, 23 June 2005*). According to a press report, new competitors of *kaya* toast are “rushing in because the players
in this market are doing very well" (Popular coconut jam..., Bloomberg News, 24 July 2005). The new McDonald’s Kaya Roti breakfast menu represents a move by a western-style fast-food chain to stay ahead in a market where the number of new kaya toast owners is rising.

Neighbourhood coffee-shops are also offering kaya toast fare. The construction of public high-rise flats by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Singapore’s public housing authority, has led to the growth of modern coffee-shops in neighbourhood housing estates (Koh, 2000). The coffee-shops are usually located on the ground floors of high-rise blocks of flats and offer brighter settings than the traditional kopi-tiams but lack the air-conditioning and the more sanitized surroundings of food courts in shopping malls (Plate 1.5). Today, the function of the coffee-shop has changed from merely providing breakfast snacks and drinks to one where both drinks and food are served. The modern coffee-shops no longer serve the food personally to customers but have introduced the concept of self-service. The coffee-shops are now common eating houses with about five to eight food stalls which are leased out to stallholders of different ethnic groups to ensure a variety of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western food. For families who do not cook at home, the preferred choice for a quick meal is the coffee-shop, which offers breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The expansion of kaya toast outlets by new retailers into shopping malls, modern coffee-shops and other eating spaces testify to the popularity of the snack. The increasing number of outlets selling the traditional kaya toast snack is one of the obvious changes in the Singaporean foodscape. As at December 2005, an estimation of Ya Kun Kaya Toast and other new retailers’ websites revealed that there were more than 70 outlets selling the snack excluding coffee-shops stalls in various neighbourhood estates around Singapore.
1.1.4 New Food Retailing Trends

In the late 1990s another new food trend emerged with stalls in food-courts (air-conditioned food centres built by the government) offering new food creations previously available only in restaurants. Until the 1960s, itinerant hawkers sold cooked food on mobile carts in the streets of Singapore but since then, they have been relocated to permanent hawker centres to ease traffic flow and maintain public hygiene (Plate 1.6). While stalls in hawker centres were allocated to lower-income families in 1975 as part of the government’s social welfare policy, private individuals with an interest in food businesses set up food courts in shopping malls. Air-conditioned food-courts were first set up in the city centre but since the early 1990s, more food-courts have been established in HDB neighbourhood housing estates by private entrepreneurs (Ha & Chin, 2006).
Food-courts serve the same types of food found at hawker centres, basically one-dish meals, but at a slightly higher price because of the better ambience.

The status of hawker centres was elevated in 1990 with the entry of a group of “professional” hawkers such as chefs. This occurred when the Ministry of Environment removed the regulation that only hardship cases were to be given hawker stalls in Housing Board food centres. Vacant stalls rejected by hardship cases because of their dislike for particular locations, were put up for open tender to the public (Yaw, 1990). The business success of the “professional” hawkers was further complemented by the entrance of another group of young, educated hawkers in the late 1990s during the economic recession caused by the Asian economic crisis. A press article reported that the economic recession
caused rising unemployment with about 13,000 graduates unemployed (Seah, 2003). Some of these graduates entered the food business, moving into vacant stalls in food courts and hawker centres formerly occupied by the older generation of hawkers. These new hawkers sold a different type of fare from the standard dishes such as chicken rice and noodles. This new fare ranged from Australian fish and chips, through Mexican chicken skewers and American chicken chops to Vietnamese noodles (Seah, 2003). They offered daily or weekly discounts and changed their menu frequently. The lower prices of their Western cuisine compared to most restaurants, appealed to most Singaporeans. The entry of this new group of first-time hawkers to fill stalls vacated by the older generation who were unable to adapt to higher costs or the changing tastes of younger Singaporeans, has changed the food retail scene with the availability of Western cuisines in simpler and less expensive settings.

1.1.5 Food Fads

Since the late 1990s other contemporary snacks have also gained popularity in Singapore. The success of some of the kaya toast businesses also drew in several new competitors eager to cash in on food fads over the past decade. For example, cinnamon rolls and Japan’s Miki Ojisan cheesecake were sold at shopping malls in 1995 and were followed by Portuguese egg tarts’ outlets at shopping malls in 1998 (Sng, 2001). Then came apple strudel from Perth, Australia, a pastry with layers of spiced apples, cream and custard (Sng, 2001). Since 2000, a number of bakery chains, Renaldo’s, Ritz Apple Strudel and The Strudel House, have been established with various outlets to replicate the taste (Teo, 2005a). In 2001, more than 70 bubble-tea outlets mushroomed island-wide following the opening of Cool Station, the first bubble-tea franchise from Taiwan (Sng, 2001). In 2002, Beard Papa, the Japanese franchise which offered a two dollar cream puff, also drew long queues around its shops (Tee, 2002). All these food fads have since declined to be replaced in 2005 by Rotiboy Bakeshoppe’s buns topped with caramelized coffee-cream and filled
with melted butter (Teo, 2004b). Since then, various outlets such as Pappa Roti, Roti Mum and other bakeries have sprung up in the market with similar versions of the hot-selling coffee bun. But within a year of its establishment, Rotiboy’s bread novelty ended with the closure of its outlets in February 2006.

While many local contemporary snack foods have faded into obscurity within a few months, some traditional foods have also disappeared while others are gradually disappearing due to changing tastes, new entrants to the market, and a lack of successors to continue the business of the owners (Teo, 2003c; Tan T, 2007 *Hawker food that’s…*). In the late 1990s, many hawkers set up stalls offering other traditional Chinese snacks and beverages such as curry puffs, peanut pancakes and soya bean milk. To compete with well-established leaders in the traditional Chinese food snack industry, the hawkers have marketed modern versions of some traditional snacks. The newly re-created snacks, thus, illustrate how a new group of hawkers in Singapore has invented a new category of modified traditional Chinese snack foods to cater to Singapore’s changing lifestyle consumption.

### 1.2 AIMS OF THE THESIS

Within the general field of work that looks at food, most work has tended to focus on issues such as ethnic identity (Lu & Fine, 1995; Appadurai, 1998) and the social construction of memory (Sutton, 2001). In the context of Singapore, apart from recent publications such as *Singapore Hawker Centres* (Kong, 2007) and Wong’s (2007) work on themed restaurants in Singapore, little academic work has been written about food retail businesses. Earlier work by Martin & Wong (2001) explores how the restaurants in Little India, an ethnic district in Singapore, have adapted their cuisine to suit the locals and tourists tastes. However, no attempt has been made to analyse food hawking businesses in Singapore. There is no study of present-day Chinese snack foods in Singapore. This thesis aims to contribute a new perspective to the existing literature on food
and cuisine, particularly by exploring the changing nature of traditional Chinese snack foods and their place in the Singaporean foodscape.

Singapore’s foodscape changes are also analysed through the changing nature of hawkers. The study examines a new group of hawkers and the ways in which they have been able to survive and expand in the face of intense competition from other established food retailers.

The study also seeks to contribute to the wider literature on food retailing by providing an analysis of the growth of food micro-enterprises and the reasons for their emergence after the Asian economic crisis of 1997. There have been several studies in Southeast Asia on the growth of small-scale food enterprises both before and during the crisis. However, there are few empirically based studies in Singapore on the growth of food retailing in the post-crisis period.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are to:

- analyse the changing nature of Chinese snack foods and the changing face of hawkers in Singapore
- explore the growth of new hawkers selling “repackaged” versions of traditional Chinese snack foods

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Who are the new hawkers of traditional snack foods?
- Where are they located?
- When were their businesses established?
- What are their reasons for entering the traditional food industry?
Did the economic crisis affect their decision to venture into food retailing?
- How is their food different from the traditional version?
- What are their reasons for introducing changes to their food?
- Which category of customers are they targeting their food?
- What strategies do they use to survive in the competitive market for snack foods?
- What are their aspirations for the future of their businesses?

1.5 METHOD AND PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

The data was drawn from fieldwork conducted between August and September 2005 and it includes the following:

- Personal interviews with 12 snack food retailers and a food correspondent of a major English newspaper organisation
- Participant observation at two snack food outlets
- Spatial mapping of food outlets
- Photography of snack food outlets

The study also included the following:

- An electronic database search for press reports on Chinese snack food businesses in Singapore
- An internet search of the locations of Chinese snack food outlets in Singapore
- Identification of respondents from various mass media sources
- Preparation of an interview schedule
- Analysis of cookbooks and local food guides
1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study examines one aspect of Chinese cuisine, namely snack foods and beverages. There are different categories of Chinese snacks in Singapore but the study focuses on one category of Chinese snacks, namely, traditional and festive snacks and beverages. It includes only selected types of traditional and festive snacks and excludes contemporary snacks as well as *dim-sum* snacks. Table 1.1 lists the categories of snack foods sold in Singapore.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Of Snacks</th>
<th>Examples of Snacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Traditional Snacks** | *Tau-sar-piah* (green-bean paste biscuit)  
*Lao por bing* (wife's biscuit)  
*Bao* (steamed meat buns)  
*Ang ku kueh* (red tortoise cakes)  
Curry puffs  
Peanut pancakes  
Kaya toasts  
Soybean custard |
| **Festive Snacks**     | *Nian-gao* (sticky cake) for Lunar New Year  
Rice dumplings for Dragon Boat Festival  
Moon-cakes for Mid-Autumn Festival |
| **Dim-sum Snacks**     | *Har-gow* (shrimp dumpling)  
*Siu-mai* (meat dumpling)  
*Cheong-fen* (rice noodle rolls)  
Fried spring roll |
| **Contemporary Snacks**| Doughnuts  
Cream puffs  
Muffins  
Octopus balls  
Barbequed sausages |

The snack foods chosen for the study include curry puffs, dessert soups, *kaya* toast, soybean milk and moon-cakes. The six traditional snack foods are
selected because their retail outlets are the most obvious feature in the Singaporean foodscape compared to other types of traditional snacks. They are also selected because they have undergone new variations as observed from the snacks sold to customers as well as from media reports.

The study also focuses on snack food establishments set up between 1995 and 2005 selling the selected snacks. It excludes the well-established businesses and market stalls selling the snack foods.

1.7 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

For the purpose of this study, traditional Chinese food refers to foods considered by Singaporeans to be those which have been eaten for generations. Chinese snacks include foods that have a traditional origin but which may have been modified over the years.

1.8 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The study is organized into eight chapters, including the present one.

Chapter One provides background information on the growth of kaya toast establishments in Singapore. It delves into the history of the coffee-shop and the rise of the charcoal-grilled toast, a common breakfast staple among early Chinese immigrants. It examines how the toasted bread and some other types of Chinese snacks have evolved into popular lifestyle snacks today. It also addresses the main objectives of the study.

Chapter Two provides a brief history of the nature of Chinese cuisine and examines how globalization affects traditional cuisines and foodways of Asian countries such as China and Singapore. It also examines the growth of western
fast food chains and how this has contributed to the habit of snacking, leading to the gradual emergence of Chinese snack markets in Asia.

Chapter Three provides the existing academic literature on food retailing. It discusses the formal and informal food retailing sector and examines the reasons for the growth of street food vending in Asian countries. It also discusses the growth of new food micro-entrepreneurs in Thailand and Singapore and examines the reasons for their emergence.

Chapter Four provides a discussion of the impact of the media on food consumption and retailing patterns in Singapore. It illustrates this with information and excerpts from newspaper, food guides, websites and television programmes.

Chapter Five describes the methodology used in the field research. Based on empirical data derived from interviews with food establishments in Singapore, it describes the type of research design, the selection of the sample, data collection procedures and methods to ensure data validity.

Chapter Six presents the empirical findings of the interviews with food owners and a food journalist, the data from media reports, the analysis of cookbooks and spatial mapping data.

Chapter Seven focuses on how traditional Chinese snack foods and hawkers have evolved over time as they are compared with present day. The data is presented under two main headings: the changing nature of Chinese snacks and the changing nature of hawking and provides a discussion of the main themes that emerge from an analysis of the findings.

Chapter Eight provides a summary of the main findings in light of the research questions, and suggests implications for future research.
1.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to the background of the study, its rationale and its main objectives. The next chapter describes the history of Chinese cuisine and how certain dishes are introduced into Singapore. It also examines how globalization affects certain aspects of food traditions and relates this to the eating habits of the people in some Asian countries such as Singapore.
CHAPTER TWO

CHINESE FOOD HISTORY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chinese cuisine has undergone many changes and an understanding of how it has been adapted to changing circumstances provides an important background to the study. The chapter begins with the development of Chinese food traditions. It describes the nature of Chinese cuisine generally and includes examples of Chinese food and snacks. The second section describes the arrival of the Chinese immigrants and traces the development of Chinese food in Singapore, from the peddling of street food to the selling of hawker dishes in cooked food centres. The third section examines how the nature of Chinese food has changed with the impact of globalization and analyses the transformation of some of the traditional Chinese food in Singapore. It also describes how globalization has led to the infiltration of Chinese snack foods markets in Asia.

2.2 CHINESE FOOD TRADITIONS

Tradition refers to customs transmitted from the past by oral means and culinary knowledge is an example of a food tradition (Billiard, 2006). The food tradition of China shows how certain foods have originated since ancient times and continues to be eaten today.

As China is a vast country, it has many rich culinary traditions and a diversity of cuisines. Regional differences due to topography, climate, resources, together with the eating preferences of the local people, have influenced the way in which food is prepared and cooked. Food preparation techniques such as stir-fry, deep-fry, steaming, simmer, roast and boiling are used to bring out different tastes and texture of food, thus creating different styles of Chinese cuisines.
The Chinese generalizes the different regional tastes as “sweet in the south, savoury in the north, spicy in the east and sour in the west” (Zhang, 2008:15). It is regional styles that create specialty dishes and recipes that have been passed down over millennia.

Traditional Chinese cuisine, thus, originated from the different regions in China which resulted in the creation of regional specialties with different cooking methods and use of ingredients. Chinese cuisine, however, overlooks regional differences and classifies all Chinese dishes as Chinese cuisine in most cookbooks. There is no categorization of dishes according to each province or city. Most of the specialties of regional cuisine are served in an atmosphere of fine dining at Chinese restaurants. The dishes are often authentic, rare delicacies which are prepared by professional cooks using expensive ingredients and elaborate cooking methods. The cuisine is categorized as “high priced cuisine” and differs from the home-style dishes in Chinese homes (Liu, 2004:42).

The Chinese customarily eats three meals per day, an age-old tradition in China. The three daily, home meals enjoyed by Chinese families are called “common home gourmet” (Liu, 2004:39). The ingredients used for cooking the meals are often bought from grocery shops. Such meals do not differentiate between regional styles of cooking.

Breakfast is regarded by the Chinese as the “simplest” meal of the day (Liu, 2004:40). A traditional breakfast item is the mantou (steamed buns) with a bowl of porridge (rice cooked with water) and eaten with pickled vegetables and other condiments such as peanuts and salted eggs (Plate 2.1). Congee, a thicker version of porridge cooked with savoury ingredients such as minced pork, sliced chicken, fish or peanuts, is sometimes prepared.
Those who are unable to have home-made steamed buns usually buy them from street vendors. Deep-fried dough sticks with soybean milk are also favourite breakfast items in China bought from breakfast shops (Liu, 2004). Soybean milk which is a milky liquid produced by soaking and boiling soybeans, has been regarded as a high protein and cheap alternative to dairy milk. Both soybean milk and soybean curd custard, in which curdling agent has been added to coagulate the soymilk, are usually sweetened with sugar syrup.

Lunch or noon meal is a smaller version of the evening meal. For some, lunch may be just a bowl of noodles while others have congee or porridge with condiments (Barer-Stein, 1999). Dinner, the main meal of the day, usually consists of a staple food such as rice (fan) or noodles (mian) accompanied by a few dishes of cooked meat, fish or vegetables, and a soup (Liu, 2004). Most
Chinese soups consist of a lot of liquid with small amounts of meat and vegetables. Soup is ladled into individual bowls to help diners digest their food between mouthfuls of rice and other dishes. All the prepared dishes are served together at the dining table except at banquets where the food is often served in courses or at one dish at a time (Liu, 2004).

Desserts and snacks also form a component of Chinese cuisine (Newman, 2004). If dessert is served at the end of a meal, the typical choice is fresh fruit, such as sliced oranges or sweet soups. Occasionally, the Chinese take tonic soups such as lotus root to balance the *yin* (cool) and *yang* (heat) forces that affect the body. Sweet soup such as green bean soup is taken to relieve summer heat and whet the appetite.

The eating of snacks or *xiaochi* (small eats) is also a tradition in China. Snacks are often designed to satisfy the palate and not fill the stomach. Snacks are often eaten between meal times such as mid-morning or mid-afternoon to satisfy an impulse or a hunger pang and can be bought from street vendors, itinerant peddlers or small food shops. Savoury nibbles such as spring rolls, *baozi* (steamed buns) and fried *bing* (pancakes) made from flour and water and filled with meat or vegetables are favoured as snacks (Liu, 2004). Snacks also include various types of cakes, dumplings and noodles which are prepared by deep frying, steaming or boiling.

Larger food shops such as tea houses have tables and chairs where customers enjoy small sweet and savory snacks called *dim sum* (Cantonese term which means “to touch the heart”) for breakfast or lunch. The bite-sized appetizers are usually filled with meat, seafood or vegetables and wrapped with thin pastry skin before being steamed, braised or deep-fried. The snacks come in small plates or bowls, usually three to four pieces in a dish or steamer basket, so that diners can try a variety of foods (Plate 2.2). They are whisked around tables on individual trolleys by servers from which customers choose their selection. The
small dishes are presented in the middle of the table and shared amongst diners, accompanied by pots of Chinese tea. When snack time is over, the empty bowls or plates left on the table serve as a bill, although some tea houses tick the selected dishes on a bill whenever a serving is requested by diners. *Dim sum* is often enjoyed during social occasions with friends or family members (Leong B, 2002).

The making of traditional foods and snacks is an age-old tradition in China. The Chinese celebrate festivals such as Lunar New Year, the Dumpling Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival or special occasions such as births and marriages with the preparation of a rich variety of special foods. One example is the eating of
festive snacks such as *nian gao* (sticky glutinous cake) and *tang yuan* (glutinous rice balls) during the Lunar New Year, *zongzi* (rice dumplings) on the Dragon Boat Festival or having moon-cakes during the annual Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival in September (Liu, 2004).

According to China’s *Dictionary of Customs*, the tradition of eating moon-cakes began in the Tang Dynasty. Emperor *Tanggaozu*, celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival with his ministers and served them some round cakes which were tributes from Tibet. From then onwards, the eating of moon-cakes became popular in China (Qi, 2007). During every anniversary of the Moon Festival which is on the 15 day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, people made sweet, round pastries called moon-cakes using intricately carved wooden moulds. The moon-cakes were about three inches in diameter and were stamped in red with a Chinese word that indicates their contents (Newman, 2004). Besides enjoying moon-cakes as a form of culinary tradition, the Chinese also offered them as a form of sacrifice to the moon in order to celebrate their bountiful harvests (Wei, 2005, Moey, 2006). The moon-cakes were filled with lotus seed paste or mashed bean, salted duck egg yolk and melon seeds. When the moon-cake was sliced, the egg yolk or the “moon” in the middle would be exposed (Qi, 2007) (Plate 2.3). After the ceremony, all family members would get together to enjoy the moon-cakes while gazing at the full moon.

Chinese traditions regarding festival foods have been handed down through many generations. In Chinese food culture, however, there is a clear division between festive snacks and everyday food. Moon-cakes, as in other types of Chinese snacks, are not taken together with the staple diet of steamed rice but are often eaten between meals or during special festivals. The Chinese perceive the eating of Chinese snacks and Western food items such as hamburgers as light bites or “small eats” because they do not constitute the elements of a proper meal (Yan, 1997:47). Although snacks are not considered
as part of a Chinese meal, nonetheless, many traditional Chinese food and
snacks have a great influence on Singapore’s foodways with the arrival of the
Chinese immigrants.

Plate 2.3  Traditional baked mooncakes with lotus seed paste and salted duck egg yolk

2.3  CHINESE IMMIGRANTS IN SINGAPORE

Singapore flourished under the administration of the British. When Stamford
Raffles, the founder of Singapore, declared the Singapore as a free port in 1819,
it attracted migrants from China, India, the neighbouring Malaya states,
Indonesian islands and the Middle East who came in search of a better
economic opportunities in the early 19th and 20th centuries (Barber, 1978).
The Chinese immigrants from Southern China were the dominant group and included the Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas and Hainanese (Tan T.W, 2004). Many of these Chinese immigrants had been sold as indentured labourers or coolies while the wealthy ones became traders and were involved in various types of businesses. The Hokkiens were involved in the provision shop businesses such as trading in spices, coffee and rice. The Teochews became *kelong* (a Malay term for fish traps built on stilts in the sea) owners, fishermen or boatmen. Others set up gambier and pepper plantations. The Cantonese became medicine wholesalers while the rest worked as artisans, craftsmen, carpenters and mechanics. The Hakkas were involved in the pawnbroking business while the Hainanese worked in the restaurant and catering field, where they operated coffee-shops, bakeries, and food-stalls serving good quality food (Tan T.W, 1990). The Chinese population expanded rapidly, reaching 13,749 and making up 46 per cent of the total population by 1839. By 1849, the Chinese population had increased to 27,988 (Sit, 1994) and was concentrated in the area around Chinatown.

### 2.3.1 Chinese Street Hawkers

Many of the Chinese immigrants became hawkers as this was a quick way for people with few skills and little capital to earn a living. They brought with them their style of cooking food to many roadside stalls and street or hawker food became popular as it provided cheap meals for many of the poor immigrants. Cooking was not possible for the majority of the Chinese immigrants who lived in the cramped living quarters in Chinatown so street food also developed to cater to their needs.

Street food is normally cooked and served from a cart or stall (Withey, 2004). Some hawkers would station themselves permanently at a specific road or area such as those selling *satay* (wooden sticks of grilled meat) around a bus depot at Beach Road (Tan S, 2004). Some hawkers would roam the streets by
balancing two large rattan baskets of food from a pole carried on his shoulder (Chan, 2003) (Plate 2.4). Other hawker immigrants would move from place to place to sell their food using pushcarts, tricycles and bicycles.

Patrons of itinerant hawkers had to squat by the roadside or perch on a wooden chair provided by the vendor, to eat their food. Char kway teow (flat rice noodles fried with sweet, black soya sauce), laksa (rice noodles in spicy coconut gravy), rickshaw noodles (thick yellow noodles stewed with vegetables and dried shrimps), and fried oyster omelette were examples of food sold from pushcarts (Ismail, 2000). Other itinerant hawkers on bicycles sold snacks such as rice dumplings (glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves), kueh (sweet or savoury bite-sized cakes), otak (spicy fish paste), and nasi lemak (Malay term for coconut rice wrapped in banana leaves, topped with fried anchovies and peanuts, a piece of omelette, sweet chilli and sliced cucumber). A basket was
firmly placed on the back of the bicycle in which the food would be stored. Such snacks did not require cooking or the provision of significant eating spaces.

Some itinerant hawkers sell their food during performances such as puppet shows or Chinese wayang (street opera) held during feasts and celebrations such as the birthdays of Gods or the Hungry Ghost Festival, where the souls of the dead are released for entertainment on earth (National Heritage Board, 2008). One group of street food hawkers would follow the transient Chinese wayang troupes who performed in different areas, and set up temporary food stalls selling cooked food to simple dessert soups such as cheng tng (a sweet soup with different nuts and seeds), green bean or red bean soup and sweet potato soup (Tan S, 2004). The classic cheng tng, peddled by the itinerant hawkers, was made with more than 20 types of ingredients including dried persimmon, gingko nuts, black longan, lotus seed, barley, brown seaweed, white fungus and jelly strips, and was boiled with sugar. It is taken to cool and dispel heat from the body (Tee, 2001a).

The hawkers announced their presence by tooting a horn, striking two pieces of bamboo wood together making a rhythmic “tick-tock” or simply shouting (Chan, 2003). Others promote their foods through colourful hand-painted signs (Oseland, 2006). In the 1950s and 1960s, street hawkers were a common sight in the central city area. These hawkers plied the streets, side lanes and five foot ways (five feet wide pavement in front of shop-houses) of the city.

2.3.2 Development of Hawker Centres

Government authorities such as the Ministry of Environment (ENV), in their push to modernize the economy and appearance of Singapore, considered the street hawkers who thronged the area as causing noise and littering, food contamination and traffic obstruction. It was difficult to track down itinerant hawkers when investigating outbreaks of food poisoning linked to the food sold
by them. In order to sanitize street food and provide proper cooking facilities and other services such as water, electricity, garbage collection and disposal, the ENV re-located them to permanent stalls inside newly built food centres called hawker centres in 1971.

A hawker centre is a covered, non air-conditioned open complex with common seating areas for customers and consists of several stalls selling different types of cooked food, predominantly but not exclusively local fare (Chinese, Indian, Malay) and beverages (Kong, 2007). Hawker centres have ready-built seating areas with proper amenities and facilities such as water and electrical supply, drainage systems, toilets and bin centres (Kong, 2007). In 1988, about 18,878 hawkers were relocated to various hawker centres, by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the statutory board set up in 1960 to develop public housing (Bhowmik, 2005). Before long, more hawker food centres were built in various industrial and public housing estates which bring the convenience of cooked food to workers and residents.

The “first-generation” street hawkers who were relocated to hawker centres rented stalls from the government under the “subsidized rental scheme”. The cheap rentals cover the cost of utilities, service and conservancy charges, and license fees (Kong, 2007:141). The development of industrialization after Singapore’s independence resulted in many people joining the industrial workforce. The creation of full time employment, thus, created the demand for cheap and convenient street food available at cooked food stalls found at hawker centres.

2.3.3 Humble Hawkers

Hawker centres gradually became the common eating places for most Singaporeans while hawker food became part of their daily meals. The hawkers who were relocated from the streets to hawker centres in the 1970s, however,
have worked hard over the years to develop their business and continue their trade. Although the businesses of the hawkers were small, they require multiple skills such as customer relations, time management and finance to make their business a success (Kong, 2007).

Most of the hawkers had little or no formal education and most of them sell traditional foods which they acquired the culinary skills of their families. The continuation of the business was often a family tradition. The child or children will inherit the business upon the death or retirement of the parents. Many hawkers have inherited the family business across several generations (Kong, 2007).

The hawkers often have to wake up early to prepare the food. Many hawkers have family members to help them prepare food or tend the stalls. Many hawkers relied on strong interpersonal relationships to attract customers. For instance, most hawkers communicate using the customers’ language. The hawkers were adept at different languages and some speak the dialects of their customers (Kong, 2007). With the introduction of the “Speak Mandarin” campaign, an initiative introduced by the government of Singapore in 1979 to discourage the speaking of different dialects among all Chinese, Mandarin became the common language used by hawkers and customers at food centres (Kong, 2007).

The convenience of neighbourhood hawker centres and the affordability of the food gradually made street food popular. The innovations of new hawkers, however, have turned street food into a unique Singaporean cuisine which is different from the country of origin.
2.3.4 Hybridised Chinese Food


The male Chinese immigrants without families had to eat at coffee-shops and street food stalls for their daily meals. Among the Chinese immigrants, who had families or access to cooking facilities, domestic food was generally "mainstream" Chinese food which they follow the cooking styles of the various regions in mainland China. It was only after the 1940s that people began to marry and start families that home-cooked meals replaced street food (Chung & Ong, 2006). Many of the home dishes cooked by Singapore families today are representations of "mainstream" Chinese food but are improvised with changing times (Rosemary, 2003:209).

With the development of hawker centres, street food became part of Singapore’s culinary culture. The Chinese street food that developed in Singapore also originates from the Chinese immigrant community and includes the cooking of the Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese and Foochow. Certain dishes would be identified with the food niche of a particular dialect group such as Hokkien prawn mee (noodles fried with prawns and squid), Hainanese chicken rice (steamed chicken with chicken flavoured rice), Teochew fishball noodle (round balls made of fish paste in noodle soup), and Cantonese wanton mee (noodles with roast pork and minced pork dumplings). Street food, too, was modeled on the cheap but wholesome home-style cooking food. Chinese street food, however, has evolved over time and produced many dishes which are unique to Singapore (Rosemary, 2003:209).
Most of the Chinese hawker food today is created by a combination of the culinary traditions of different ethnic communities. Chinese street food cuisine gradually evolved into Singapore’s unique hawker food which are hybrid or multi-ethnic, and may encompass blends of the dishes of the Chinese, Indians, Malays, Indonesians, Japanese, Thai and other cultures that live together in the country. The Chinese hawkers gradually modified certain dishes by replacing the original ingredients with local ingredients or by combining the ingredients and flavours from other ethnic races. For instance, the Hainanese Chicken Rice in Singapore is an example of a hawker dish which has been modified with local ingredients. Although called Hainanese Chicken Rice, the dish has been adapted to include aspects of Singapore’s multi-cultural influences. Wenchang Chicken was originally a dish of plain rice and steamed chicken in Hainan, China. However, the dish comes in a different version in Singapore. The chicken stock is used for cooking the rice and also serves as an accompanying soup. While the rice comes with chilli sauce, ginger sauce and dark soy sauce in Singapore, the original dish is not served with any of these dips in China (Hutton, 1984) (Plate 2.5). The dish evolved through the Hainanese immigrants and gradually changed due to ethnic influences such as the Cantonese in Singapore who modified the chilli sauce with the addition of lime. This version of Singapore-style Hainanese Chicken Rice has been promoted by the STB as one of country’s national dish in its magazines, brochures and website (STB, 2008).
With a multi-ethnic population, Chinese hawker fare has integrated Malay and Indian food as much as Malay and Indian cuisine have incorporated Chinese food. For instance, there are now *halal* (food prepared under Islamic guidelines) versions of the Chinese rice dumplings as well as curry puffs (*Dumplings go…*, *Straits Times*, 2002, June 8). *Satay* or the little skewers of meat that are grilled and eaten by all ethnic groups is a Malay food but are also served by Chinese hawkers as is *rojak*, a fruit and vegetable salad mixture. Indian hawkers, however, have created their own version of *rojak* which includes fried crispy fritters of beancurd, potatoes, hardboiled eggs, squids, fishcakes and other ingredients served with a sweet chilli dip. Similarly, the Malays have incorporated Chinese ingredients such as noodles, bean sprouts and bean curd.
to produce dishes such as *mee soto* (chicken noodle soup) and *tau hu goreng* (fried bean curd with peanut sauce).

Chinese cuisine in Singapore also includes the food of the Straits Chinese from Indonesia and Malacca. Malacca’s status as a great trading port in the early 19th century, attracted many Chinese traders, who settled there and married the Malay women. When the British established settlement in Singapore, some of the descendant families migrated to the region. Over time, these people were known as “Baba Chinese”, “Straits Chinese” or “Peranakan” (Rosemary, 2003). They created a new taste and a new cuisine called *Nyonya* or *Peranakan* food which integrates Chinese and Malay ingredients and cooking styles. Besides the integration of Chinese food with other ethnic influences, Chinese food has also undergone Western fusion.

The early fusion of Western and Chinese cuisine was already successfully achieved by the Hainanese cooks who learnt the techniques of preparing Western food while working for the British in Singapore. After leaving their colonial employers, some set up their own restaurants specializing in Western food but hybridized some of the Western dishes to suit local palates. An example is the Hainanese pork chop which is served in hawker centres today as well as in a home-grown restaurant chain – *Jack’s Place*. Owned and operated by the Hainanese, the chain is also well-known for steaks often cooked in local styles. Besides serving Asian-style Western food, the Hainanese who were famous for their curry and custard puffs, set up the first *Polar Café* which has evolved today into the *Polar Puffs and Cakes* group of franchise chains. It was the fusion of Western and Chinese cooking styles that has led to the creation of the Hainanese baked curry puff sold by the confectionery chain today (Plate 2.6).
Chinese street food in Singapore evolved originally from an immigrant Chinese cuisine. Many street food dishes served at hawker centres and restaurants today have been transformed through the modification of ingredients and the hybridization of cooking methods. A variety of ethnic influences on Chinese cooking has contributed to the creation of hybridized Chinese hawker food in Singapore. Despite the hybridization of Chinese cuisine, migrant Chinese food culture in much of Southeast Asia came from South China. However, the original form of some of the traditional Chinese food as well as the hybridized hawker food has further changed with the forces of globalization and urbanization.
2.4 TRADITION AND CHANGE

Centuries-old culinary customs are often followed by generations of a culture. The eating of specific foods carries cultural meanings and an essential symbolic function of food is the confirmation of cultural identity (Kittler & Sucher, 2008). In the Middle East, for example, a person who eats pork is probably a Roman Catholic and not a Jewish or Muslim as pork is prohibited in Islam (Kittler & Sucher, 2008). In Hong Kong, the culture of *yum cha* (going for *dimsum*) is used to reinforce the identity of Hong Kong people with the return of sovereignty to China in 1997 (Tam, 1997). Similarly, other Asian countries have their own cuisines to symbolize their own culture. For instance, *ramen* (Japanese noodles made of wheat flour) is a national dish of Japan and "symbolizes the evolution of Japanese noodle-eating culture" (Ayao, 2001:76) while the promotion of Singapore’s hawker food such as chilli crab, *roti prata* (Indian pancakes) and *satay*, during the annual Singapore Food Festival, strengthens the status of Singapore as a multi-racial and multi-cultural country.

The traditional cuisine of a country, however, may change over time as a result of many factors such as new developments in food retailing, changes in living standards, and economic and cultural trends. Migration is one of the reasons for the transformation of the original cuisine of a country over time. Immigrants may leave their homes for a number of reasons such as war, political instability, poverty or for better job opportunities. The movement of people from their original homes to new regions often results in a change of food habits. Traditional food habits are in a state of change during the process of adaptation or acculturation to the diet of a new culture. New foods are introduced and accepted into a majority cuisine (Kittler & Sucher, 2008). Ethnic foods influence traditional local cuisines and vice versa, resulting in new hybrid dishes. Acculturation often occurs because of the lack of available native ingredients so some immigrants adapt the foods of the new culture to the preparation of
traditional dishes. This process is reflected in the preparation of dishes in Chinese restaurants by immigrant cooks in the United States (Lu & Fine, 1995).

The nature of traditional food may also change in response to globalization which is defined as the integration of local, regional and national companies into worldwide organizations (Kittler & Sucher, 2008). Globalization encompasses ideas that transform food production and consumption. Modern technologies and financial networks aid the globalization of mass food production and marketing. In an age of increasing globalization, new information technologies such as the internet allow greater access to world markets and thereby enhance consumer choice. Wright & Nancarrow (2001:354) in discussing the theory by Usunier (2000) in his article "Food Taste Preferences" noted that Usunier (2000) described the impact of globalization and explained how it leads to three types of consumption pattern. Usunier (2000) is of the opinion that the modern “conspicuous consumption” drives consumer desire for new products and a willingness to display diversity, leading to the creation of “taste cultures”. Hence, this consumer behaviour may account for the changing nature of cuisines by food retailers in order to satisfy their food taste preferences.

Traditional recipes are also lost as working housewives do not have time to prepare food in the traditional way. With the marketing of many types of commercial premixed preparations, traditional recipes may be changed to incorporate new convenience preparations such as pasta sauces or marinades for those who want a quick, home-cooked meal. In countries such as Singapore, traditional Chinese cuisine has been transformed because of ethnic influences, resulting in the hybridization of food styles. Food retailers in Singapore have also transformed certain original Chinese snacks to cater to the changing tastes of consumers. Traditional Chinese snack foods such as moon-cakes were not accepted well by consumers initially until they were transformed by food retailers. Some consumers, particularly younger Singaporeans, do not like the unappetizing taste of moon-cakes. To revive an interest in moon-cakes
among the young, hotels and food retailers realized that they must adapt to the market in order to increase their sales. This need has prompted them to create new versions of traditional moon-cakes. The transformation of moon-cakes was reported in a press article which stated that in order to “turn young people on to tradition, there’s nothing more effective than a chocolate-cheese snow-skin moon-cake” (Lin, 2005). This contrasts with the situation a few years ago, when many vendors complained of a slump in sales and lamented the passing of a tradition of eating moon-cakes. Traditional cuisines, thus, are changed to accommodate changes in tastes and trends.

2.4.1 New Consumption Lifestyle in Asia

The traditional dishes and eating habits of countries have also changed as a result of economic growth and affluence. This has led to a new lifestyle trend where people have more money to spend on consumer products and food.

One of the features of this new lifestyle trend is the development of new eating habits with the growth of Western fast-food restaurants. As globalization speeds up, the Western fast-food market, too, has expanded in many Asian countries. The proliferation of Western fast-food restaurants around the world offers a prominent example of the process of globalization. The establishment of U.S. fast-food chains such as McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King and Subway Sandwiches constitute a large sector of the foodservice market in many Asian countries.

The spread of McDonald’s hamburger restaurants has made fast food become increasingly popular and is influencing local consumption in many cities across Asia (Watson, 1996). In Japan, McDonalds has become a popular venue for families and friends to strengthen their bonds as evident in the sharing of drinks and food such as burgers, nuggets and fries among each other (Traphagan, 2002). The food and drinks of McDonalds are also popular because they are
considered as gifts that one brings back for the family or takes to give to a host when invited to a home for dinner. Many drive-thru McDonalds outlets have also expanded in the district of Mizusawa, Japan, to facilitate take-away food by motorists due to the emergence of a “car culture with many households having two, three or more vehicles” (Traphagan, 2002:132).

The expansion of McDonald’s in China has also affected the Chinese local food industry and eating preferences. For instance, culinary preferences have also changed with the gradual acceptance of Western products such as cheese which was once considered unpalatable for many Chinese (Wong S, 2006). The introduction of Western fast food in China has forced some Chinese restaurants serving local favourites to wind up their businesses as they were unable to compete with the Western fast food chains (Jing, 2000). The younger generation considered the eating of fast food as “an integral part of their new lifestyle, a way for them to participate in the transnational cultural system” (Yan, 1997:49).

McDonalds opened in China in 1989 and has since grown to 235 restaurants in 1999 (Watson, 2000). The opening of McDonald’s has started a “consumer revolution” led by children by encouraging them to make their own purchases and choose their own food (Watson, 2000:125). McDonald’s introduction of American-style birthday party packages which includes food, cake, gifts, toys and the use of the Ronald Room, a children’s enclosure, appealed to many Chinese children. The entry of Western fast food chains such as McDonald’s has affected the eating habits of not only the Chinese and the Japanese but also Singaporeans.

Rapid economic growth and new lifestyle trends has led to an emerging “culture of consumption” or consumerism in Singapore where branded products are perceived as status symbols (Chua, 1998). Today, Singapore is an affluent society and the per capita income has increased from S$6500 in 1985 to almost
S$27,000 in 2005 (Wong, Y.H. 2007). The size of the mass affluent households in Singapore is estimated at S$62,500 in 2005 which accounts for 5.9 per cent of total households. Mass affluent households are defined as those earning S$100,000-S$250,000 per year (Wong Y.H, 2007). With increasing affluence, people have changed their social tastes with higher expectations for food, which can be seen in the growth of many new food and beverage establishments in Singapore, specializing not only in Chinese cuisine but also American steaks, Italian pasta, Japanese ramen and Thai food. With the growth of many food and beverage establishments as well western fast food chains, dining out has become more common in Singapore.

2.4.2 Singapore and Western Fast Food

Most Singaporeans do not eat breakfast at home because of the laborious task of preparing the food early in the morning especially for families where both parents are working. Most people prefer to eat at a hawker stall or simply to grab a bite from one of the coffee-shops. The opening of Western fast food chains such as McDonalds, however, has increased the meal options of Singaporeans.

With the opening of McDonald’s in 1979, the fast-food restaurant has become a place of “cultural consumption” as it represents an icon of “American-ness” (Chua, 2000:188). The opening of McDonald’s introduces consumers to another new item, the hamburger, as an “everyday food” besides the usual street food available at hawker centres or food courts (Chua, 2000:195). McDonald’s gradually markets itself into the local culture by introducing food items with names which were familiar to the locals. For example, a chicken burger was marketed as kampung (villages which existed before the 1960s prior to the building of public housing estates) burger to enable consumers to remember the nostalgic good old days (Chua, 2000).
The promotion of gifts with purchase or the provision of places for birthday parties has also popularized the Western fast food restaurant in Singapore. The Hello Kitty toy promotion introduced in 1974 along with its Extra Value Meals created a queue frenzy which helps to popularize the restaurant’s fast-food. McDonald’s became popular “meeting places” for students and people (Chua, 2000:191). The popularity of McDonald’s outlets in Singapore gradually led to the opening of other Western fast-food chains.

It has been reported in a press article that nearly 90 per cent of Singaporeans eat at Western-style fast food restaurants as revealed in a survey conducted by the National Institute of Education, Singapore (Ng J, 2007). McDonald’s has expanded to 125 outlets in public housing estates in 2008. To meet the needs of people who require meals at any time, McDonald’s offered McDelivery, a 24-hour delivery service to consumers’ door-step while 18 of its restaurants has been operating 24 hours since 2005.

While McDonald’s has introduced delivery service to attract customers, other western fast food chains such as KFC and Pizza Hut are gaining fast on chicken and pizza as Singaporeans’ favourite western fast food with similar delivery service and take-away specials. Since 2007, Subway, a leading sandwich brand, has entered the western fast food market in Singapore with more than 20 outlets. With numerous western fast food chains, western fast food has become a major meal for some and yet a snack for others.

2.4.3 New Snack Foodscape in Singapore

With the growth of Western fast-food, a new consumption pattern, namely snacking, has emerged in many Asian countries. The daily three-meal pattern is no longer a practice as meals are reduced to snacks taken in between meals (Fischler, 1980). The new habit of snacking has led to the infiltration of Chinese snack foods into new markets in Asia.
Chinese-style fast food outlets are expanding in many Asian countries. In China, a variety of Chinese fast-food outlets has emerged in recent years such as those selling Chinese-style fried chicken (Liu, 2004). Snack foods also occupy an important place in the food culture of Singapore. The disappearance of many traditional food vendors in Singapore (Kong, 2007; Teo 2003c), have led to the growth of other types of snack foods retailers. The changing lifestyle in Singapore has also contributed to changes in production with the retailing of new snack food products. Hence, the number of snack food retailers has increased in recent years.

Snack products in Singapore consist mainly of sweet and savoury snacks. The local market for snack foods consists mainly of four categories - contemporary, dim sum, festive and traditional snacks (Table 2.1). Contemporary snacks are becoming popular in recent years with the expansion of basement food halls in shopping malls for new food and beverage outlets and take-away food kiosks (Huang, 2008b) (Plate 2.7). Contemporary snacks include a wide range of Western and Asian-style snacks such Japanese cream puffs from Beard Papa, XXL crispy chicken from Shihlin Taiwan Street Snacks, yakitori (chicken meat skewered on bamboo sticks) from Tori-Q, doughnuts from Donut Factory, sausages from Gogo Franks and many more. Such snacks cater mostly to the “grab-and-go crowd” who needs a quick bite (Huang, 2008b).
### TABLE 2.1 CATEGORIES OF SNACK FOODS AND RETAIL LOCATIONS IN SINGAPORE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Of Snacks</th>
<th>Examples of Snacks</th>
<th>Retail Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Snacks</td>
<td>Doughnuts, Cream puffs, Octopus balls, BBQ sausages</td>
<td>Shopping malls, Shopping malls, Shopping malls, Shopping malls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dim-sum Snacks</td>
<td>Har-gow (shrimp dumpling), Siu-mai (meat dumpling), Cheong-fun (rice noodle rolls), Fried spring roll</td>
<td>Chinese tea restaurants, Chinese tea restaurants, Chinese tea restaurants, Chinese tea restaurants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festive Snacks</td>
<td>Nian-gao (sticky cake) (Lunar New Year), Rice dumplings (Dragon Boat Festival), Moon-cakes (Mid-Autumn Festival)</td>
<td>Market stalls (festive period), Selected kiosks (throughout the year), Confectioneries, hotels &amp; shopping malls (festive period)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Snacks</td>
<td>Tau-sar-piah (green-bean paste biscuit), Lao por bing (wife's biscuit), Bao (steamed meat buns), Ang ku kueh (red tortoise cakes), Curry puffs, Dessert soups, Peanut pancakes, Kaya toasts, Soybean custard</td>
<td>Pastry shops, Pastry shops, Coffee shops, food shops, Market stalls, Shopping mall kiosk, hawker centres, Shophouse units, Shopping mall kiosk, market stalls, Shopping mall kiosk, shophouse unit, Shopping mall kiosk, market stalls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While contemporary snacks are commonly found in the food halls of shopping malls, *dim sum* is available at several types of eating outlets, mostly in Chinese tea restaurants, dumpling restaurants and Hong Kong-style cafes (Plate 2.8). *Crystal Jade*, a chain of Chinese-style restaurants with retail units in shopping malls, serves ready-to-eat Chinese cuisine and *dim sum* snacks as well as retails many types of take-away Chinese snacks and pastries at their outlets. Since 2005, several new *xiao long bao* (steamed soup-filled dumpling) restaurants have also opened in Singapore, serving the Shanghai steamed snack as well as a variety of *dim sum* (Cheah, 2005). *Din Tai Fung*, *Nanxiang Steamed Buns Restaurant* and *Pu Dong Kitchen* are some of the new restaurants offering the dumplings and other steamed delights. Since 2006, a
number of casual-style *cha chang teng* (Cantonese term for tea cafes) adopting Hong Kong's snack house concept has also emerged in the *dim sum* scene (Cheong, 2006; Huang, 2007; Mak, 2007). The *Hong Kong Café, Old Hong Kong Tea House* and *Xin Wang Hong Kong* offer a variety of Hong Kong-style noodle dishes and desserts such as mango with sago (Huang, 2007).

Festive snacks in Singapore are often eaten during festivals. Since the late 1990s, some festive snacks such as *zongzi* (rice dumplings), made of glutinous rice with meat fillings and wrapped with bamboo leaves, which are eaten during the Dragon Boat Festival in June, are sold throughout the year at selected outlets in shopping malls. *Daun Pandan Rice Dumpling* and *Eastern Rice Dumpling* are examples of two business chains selling rice dumplings
throughout the year and operate several outlets around Singapore. Other festive snacks such as moon-cakes, however, are sold only during the month of September although some bakeries sell small pastries which resemble the original baked moon-cakes. As the eating of moon-cakes in Singapore is one of the most popular traditions among Chinese festivals, every shopping centre holds a moon-cake bazaar at the atrium with stalls from restaurants and hotels promoting their signature moon-cakes in August, prior to the commencement of the festival.

Traditional snacks range from hand-made pastries and biscuits to *kueh* (soft cakes) and buns. Pastries such as *tau sar piah* (sweet or salty mashed bean pastries), wife’s biscuits (made with winter melon and almond paste), almond biscuits and egg sponge cakes, are often sold by pastry shops (Plate 2.9). As highlighted in a press report, the number of shops selling traditional food and pastries has declined in recent years because of lack of business successors (Teo, 2003c). Hence, there are not many locations selling traditional pastries in Singapore although a few shops which retail the snacks are found at shophouse units in Chinatown and along Balestier Road (National Heritage Board, 2008). The eating of traditional pastries has been passed down from Chinese ancestors but not all of these snacks are as popular as it is today. This is because traditional pastries are mostly biscuits and tarts with dry textures and flaky crusts so consumers are unlikely to eat them as snacks during a hunger pang. Such pastries do not seem to appeal to the younger generation. Other types of traditional Chinese *kueh* such as *ang ku kueh* (red-tortoise cake), are soft and sticky, and are bought for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings and the birth of a new-born baby.
With the growth of many retail outlets selling different types of Chinese snacks, one group of food retailers has emerged by selling updated and repackaged versions of traditional snacks and revived the market for traditional Chinese food. This includes retailers selling traditional snacks such as kaya toasts and curry puffs. With the establishment of well-known curry puff retailer, Old Chang Kee in the 1980s and the re-branding of Ya Kun Coffeestall to Ya Kun Kaya Toast in 1984, the popularity of snacks such as curry puff and kaya toast has increased (Plate 2.10). With their success stories featured in various press reports, new snack food establishments selling similar snacks gradually emerged since the late 1990s to capture a slice of the Chinese snack food market. Gradually, other snack food retailers also set up stalls selling modern variations of traditional snacks such as peanut pancakes, soybean curd dessert...
and soybean milk. Today, one can find at least a food kiosk selling one of these traditional Chinese snack foods at a shopping mall.

Plate 2.10  An Old Chang Kee curry puff kiosk outside a shopping mall in Orchard Road
Source: http://oldchangkee.com  <accessed 20 Feb 2008>

2.4.4  Chinese Snacks versus Western Snacks

Eating-on-the-go is increasingly popular in Singapore and this has led to the growth of many types of Chinese snack foods. The numerous media reports and food guidebooks also contribute to the growing trend of snacking in Singapore. Chinese snack foods in Singapore are generally inexpensive, ready-to-eat finger foods which are deep-fried, pan-fried, steamed or baked food items (Plate 2.11). From observation, contemporary and certain types of traditional snacks are popular selling snack foods among consumers. Such snacks are
popular with consumers who want a quite bite during lunch or with adults who are seen in a hurry in the mornings, with packets of snacks in their hands, rushing to take the public transport to work.

Unlike Western snacks which have dine-in facilities, Chinese snack foods are usually available from “take-away” kiosks along pedestrian malls such as along Orchard Road or are located inside and outside shopping malls. The Chinese snacks are prepared and displayed in glass shelves to enable customers to grab and go. Chinese-style fast food or snacks are in many ways similar to Western fast food. They use standardized menu and are mostly finger foods. The only difference, however, is the price of the snack. While most Western fast food snacks are generally more expensive, Chinese snack foods are relatively cheaper, with prices ranging from S$1-S$2. Although there is a popular demand for western fast food, there is also an interest in Chinese snack foods. With the growth of Chinese snack food businesses in Singapore, a variety of meal choices can now be enjoyed at any time of the day, from traditional to Western-type.
2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a description of the evolution of Chinese cuisine and how some of these cuisines have been modified and hybridized in contemporary Singapore. While such changes are found throughout many societies in Southeast Asia, the marketing of traditional Chinese foods has become an important business strategy for a new group of food retailers or micro-entrepreneurs selling local street foods in countries such as Thailand and Singapore. It is to this new group of micro-entrepreneurs selling variants of traditional Chinese food that the study now turns. As a background to the growth of micro-entrepreneurship, the next chapter discusses the literature on street food vending in Asia. It explains the recent growth of small-scale street
food vending businesses in certain Asian countries by relating this to factors such as rural-urban migration, the Asian economic crisis, and as a means of employment for women. It also describes how local street food has been used by some countries, including Singapore, to target the tourist trade.
CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a review of the literature on street food vending in Asia. The first section presents an overview of the growth of food retailing in Asia. It also examines how new lifestyles have changed the food retailing systems in many countries. The next section examines the reasons for the growth of street food vending in Asia such as economic changes, changing gender roles and tourism. It also examines the impact of the Asian economic crisis on the growth of small-scale food vending businesses and the ways in which entrepreneurs in Thailand and Singapore have responded to the crisis. The last section discusses the future of street foods. This review provides a basis for the empirical study of changes in selected aspects of food retailing in Singapore in the post-economic crisis years, including an examination of the reasons for the growth of traditional food micro-enterprises and their survival strategies.

3.2 FOOD RETAILING

The last two decades have brought tremendous change to food retailing in Asian cities and in many parts of the developing world with the emergence of food retail enterprises such as supermarkets, convenience stores, restaurants, fast-food outlets, cafeterias and new forms of small-scale food vending businesses such as street food vendors or hawkers, and home-based food catering operators (Robison & Goodman, 1996).
3.2.1 Formal Sector Food Retailing

With rapid economic growth and urbanization in the 1980s, many women have less time for cooking as they worked outside the home. The longer working hours have led to the demand for ready-to-eat meals or food that is easy to prepare and serve. This demand has led to the growth of modern retail foodstores such as hypermarkets, supermarkets, convenient stores and grocery shops. In Latin America and South Africa, supermarkets and hypermarkets account for 50 to 60 per cent of the food retail sector (Reardon & Timmer, 2003). In China, the number of supermarkets and superstores are also growing rapidly. A local Chinese newspaper stated that “…over thirty supermarket companies and six or seven hundred branches of supermarkets have arrived” (Veeck & Burns, 2005:646). With the emergence of both national and international supermarket chains, the number of stores in Singapore has also risen from 60 in 1987 to about 153 in 2000 (Norris, 2003).

Supermarkets in Singapore display a wide variety of fresh produce, branded and own label processed foods from different countries. With their longer opening hours, they provide convenience to working families who are unable to patronize wet market stalls because of full time employment. For example, the supermarkets have stocked a variety of Western frozen snack food products including frozen pizzas, pre-baked pies and other local frozen snacks such as roti prata (Indian pancake) and buns which can be reheated by steaming or microwaving. Bottled convenience preparations such as chilli and soya sauces from Asian countries also enable housewives to make the preparation of dishes easier. With the latest introduction of bottled chicken rice seasoning, the Hainanese Chicken Rice dish could be made without elaborate preparation (Hutton, 2007).
The food industry further responded to the development of employment outside the home with the marketing of many types of convenient ready-to-eat meals and snacks. In Thailand, cooked food is available at food shops which are often patronized by working housewives on their way home to buy food for their families. Some Thai families subscribe to neighbourhood catering networks in which cooked food is delivered at a regular time every day in a tiffin or tiered lunch kit. This new trend of home-based catering operators has in part developed in response to the growing number of women in paid employment who do not have the time to cook for their families (Yasmeen, 1996).

The traditional Chinese system of cultivating personal relationships with family, friends and colleagues or the establishment of *guanxi* or “connections” has contributed to the trend of dining out in China (Liu, 2004). Most office professionals often dine at nearby restaurants or in cafeterias of work areas (Liu, 2004). Singapore, too, has a number of food shops and small eateries, ranging from high-end Chinese restaurants serving haute cuisines to informal *dim sum* restaurants, Hong Kong-style cafes and snack food kiosks. The growth of the formal food retailing industry such as supermarkets, restaurants and food shops in Asia, however, did not obscure the importance of street vendors who operate smaller businesses selling street food.

### 3.2.2 Informal Sector Food Retailing

Rapid urbanization in Asian cities has also encouraged the growth of street food vendors or hawkers, selling street foods. Street foods have been defined by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) as “ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors especially in streets and other public places” (Dawson & Canet, 1991:135). The street foods include meals and snacks sold on the street for immediate consumption. Operating from stationary locations or moving from place to place with carts or baskets, the street food vendors serve customers with local fare at reasonable prices (Plate 3.1).
There have been several detailed empirical studies on street food vending in Asian countries (Bhowmik, 2005; Tinker, 1997, 2003; Yasmeen, 1996, 2000). Some researchers have taken up the issue of legal recognition of street food vendors. Tinker (2003) examined the needs and concerns of female street food vendors. Her study comprised the Street Food Project which was based on empirical studies conducted in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Nigeria and Senegal. Tinker’s work shows the importance of street food micro-enterprises as a source of income for poor households. The information gathered was used to develop profiles of both male and female street food vendors, and to describe the role of women and families in these businesses, the customers they serve, and the safety and nutrition of street foods. She showed how the economic, cultural and nutritional benefits of street foods helped to persuade national authorities and international agencies to value...
these micro-enterprises. For example, the local authorities in the Philippines provided potable water in vendor areas and designed carts with display cases shielded from contaminants. Tinker’s findings also influenced the FAO to move away from supporting laws that restrict the sale of street foods to supporting countries that train vendors in safe food practices, facilitate contacts and give vendors a voice, and encourage the establishment of vendor organizations.

Another recent project on street food vending in Asia was conducted by Bhowmik (2005). The study assessed the size and composition of the street food vending sector in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Korea. Bhowmik (2005) found that the reasons for the rapid increase in street food vending differed from country to country. In some countries, the growing number of street food vendors was mainly related to the increasing volume of rural migrants who were unable to find other jobs in the cities due to their lack of skills or education. For example, poverty in the rural areas in countries like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia has pushed the migrants out of their villages in search of jobs in the cities. In countries such as the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia, the number of food vendors increased after the financial crisis in the late 1990s when both urban and rural inhabitants lost their jobs because of the closure of businesses due to mergers of some of the corporations in which they worked. Family members in both urban and rural areas turned to street food vending to survive.

The study documents that most food vendors were not recognized by their governments and were considered as “…irritants to the city’s development…” except in Malaysia, the Philippines and India which have state policies for regulating and protecting street vendors (Bhowmik, 2005:2263). Malaysia was cited as the only country where street vendors were provided with credit facilities by the government. Information gathered on the extent of unionization and self-
help organizations showed that trade unions of street vendors were few and were not represented in local bodies.

3.2.3 Street Food Vending in Asia

The growing numbers of street food vendors is evident in many Asian cities. In a 1993 study conducted by the FAO, it was found that there were about 20,000 street vendors in Bangkok, including those selling cooked food. Another study by the FAO in 2001 reported that there were over 100,000 food vendors in the city (Bhowmik, 2005). The number of food vendors in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, has also increased in recent years. According to a report from the Department of Hawkers and Petty Traders (DHPT), the number of food vendors rose by 30 per cent between 1990 and 2000. The total number of licensed food vendors in 2000 was about 35,000 while another estimated 12,000 were unlicensed (Bhowmik, 2005). In Kolkata, India, it was estimated that in 1992 the number of street food vendors was about 130,000 (Chakravarty & Canet, 1992). In Bangladesh, many food vendors are regarded as “illegal traders” by government authorities (Bhowmik, 2005:2257). Under such circumstances, unlicensed vendors are frequently victimized by the police and corrupt officials are able to extort bribes (Tinker, 2003; Bhowmik, 2005). In Singapore, the enforcement of government regulations on street food vending has led to the relocation of street hawkers into permanent food stalls or hawker centres. There were about 14,346 licensed hawkers selling food in markets and hawker centres in 2006 while food vendors operating in other private food establishments such as food shops, factories, and supermarkets totaled about 26,240 (National Environment Agency, 2006).
3.2.4 Reasons for Street Food Vending

Street foods have become increasingly popular all over the world. Several reasons have been given for the popularity and demand for street foods which leads to the flourishing of street food vending.

Street foods are the most accessible, cheapest and most nutritious source of local food for the working population, students and their family members. For example, the low prices of street food benefit many poor labourers and rickshaw pullers in Bangladesh. The affordable prices of street foods also enable low-income families to buy their food on a daily basis since they do not have enough money to purchase large amounts of food (Bhowmik, 2005). In countries such as Singapore, working families depended on street (hawker) food for their breakfast (Seah, 2003). In Indonesia, street foods constitute the main diet for students while in Senegal nearly one-third of all street food customers are children or adolescents (Winarno & Allain, 1991).

Men and women’s full-time employment has also stimulated the demand for inexpensive, prepared foods as opposed to home-cooked meals. Street food is popular with busy families and working professionals in many Asian cities who do not have the time to prepare elaborate dishes at home. Women have less time to devote to housework and to cooking as they worked outside the home. The need to provide convenient ready-to-eat food for busy families has prompted the growth of food micro-entrepreneurs or street food hawkers who sell cooked food in the streets or in covered food centres. In Singapore, eating out at the hawker centres or food-courts is common in families where both parents are working. Most families have to depend on street foods because they do not have time to “…shop for food and cook after work” (Home cooked vs hawker food, Straits Times, 15 December, 1992). In countries like Thailand, where women are employed outside the home, some people have turned to food caterers to provide prepared food for themselves and their families.
(Yasmeen, 2001). The demand for street foods in Thailand is also due to the complexity of Thai food preparation, the high price of cooking fuel and the lack of cooking facilities as in the “kitchenless” apartments in Bangkok (Yasmeen, 2000:346).

Family survival is another reason which accounts for the establishment of street food businesses. Street food vending provides a source of employment for many families in Africa and Asia. It is usually a family operation where couples work together in preparing and selling the food (Tinker, 1999). According to Tinker (1999), employment related to street food vending in various developing countries made up 6 to 30 percent of the total labour force in the mid 1990s. In Indonesia, 26 percent of the labour force was involved in street food vending. In the Philippines, the figure was 15 percent, and in Senegal and Bangladesh, 6 percent of the labour force worked as street food vendors.

The street food trade provides some vendors with relatively high incomes in their local contexts (Bhowmik, 2005; Dawson & Cannet, 1991; Winarno, & Allain 1991). In Southeast Asian countries, the average earnings of a vendor may be three to ten times more than the minimum wage, and this is often comparable to the wages of skilled labourers employed in the formal sector (Winarno & Allain, 1991). In a study conducted in Penang, Malaysia, it was found that street food vendors received a daily net profit of M$8.28, which was higher than the minimum wage of M$6.14 for food operators. In Sri Lanka, the average monthly income of street food vendors was around SL Rs 31,250 compared to the monthly income of urban Sri Lankans of SL Rs 23,436 (Bhowmik, 2005). Other studies in Morocco, Nigeria, Colombia, and Peru also show that most street food vendors earn more than the minimum wage for those countries (Dawson & Canet, 1991). Street food vending, thus, provides an attractive source of income for most Asian vendors.
Changing gender roles also contribute to the demand for street foods. Central to the survival strategy of street food vending businesses in many countries is the role played by women (Tinker 2003; Winarno & Allain, 1991; Yasmeen, 2001). Women are involved in most street food vending businesses, drawing on their domestic skills in food preparation and cooking. Women, primarily vendors’ wives and children, often make up the majority of food vendor employment. Large numbers of women vendors are found in African and Southeast Asian countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam (Tinker 2003; Yasmeen, 2001). For example, women are involved in 90 percent of such enterprises in the Philippines and in Thailand, 82 percent of food enterprises are owned and operated by women (Tinker, 2003).

Various reasons account for women’s involvement in street food vending operations. One is the increase in women’s employment in the paid labour force. The growth of women’s full-time employment in the Southeast Asian textile and electronics industries since the 1970s has contributed to the demand for street foods. Thailand in particular has one of the highest rates of female labour force participation in the region (Yasmeen, 1996). Working away from home has meant that women have less time to cook at home which has stimulated the demand for convenient, prepared food for themselves and their families. Women, particularly in Thailand, have responded to the situation through their involvement in commercial activities by selling prepared food on a small scale (Yasmeen, 2001). Street food vendors and “small food shops specializing in noodles, curried dishes or other fare” cater mostly to working women (Yasmeen, 1996:533). Over 80 percent of food vendors and employees in small food shops are women. A common sight in Bangkok are what are known locally as “plastic-bag housewives”, since they stop at food shops in the evenings on their way home from work to pick up dinner for themselves or the family, with food placed in small plastic bags (Yasmeen, 2000:347).
Another reason for women’s involvement in street food vending is the need to provide financial support for their families. Women are the main income providers for their families in many countries. In Thailand, 20 percent of women vendors provided primary support for their families while another 21 percent of unmarried women vendors contribute to their families’ incomes (Tinker, 1999). In Senegal, 59 percent of women vendors were the sole supporters of their families while in Egypt, 55 percent of women vendors provided the main source of income for their families. Such work is often in addition to women’s traditional household and childcare duties.

Asian women have similar objectives in setting up their food vending businesses. A key motivation is “feeding the family” (Tinker, 2003:346). For example, women food vendors in the Philippines use their earnings to feed and educate their children rather than in their enterprises or for their own personal use (Tinker, 2003; Yasmeen, 2001). In Ghana, where malnutrition is common, women’s income from street food vending “generally improves the nutritional status of their children” (Tinker, 2003: 342).

Investment in the expansion of their businesses is not a priority for most food vendors. The more successful the enterprise, the more the family concentrated on vending. However, most street food vendors did not attempt to increase the size of their street vending businesses. Growth of the business was not a future goal of most street food vendors. This worldview, held by both men and women, is based on family co-operation and support rather than expansion and competition. Such a worldview contrasts with more dominant economic development paradigms favouring growth or expansion of business as an essential attribute of entrepreneurship (Tinker, 1999).

Women’s involvement in street food vending is not formally recognized as making a significant economic contribution to their countries. Despite women’s contribution to the family income, their involvement in this informal food trade
has been under-reported in national statistics (Yasmeen, 2001). For example, the Philippines’ statistics indicate that, on average, fewer than 60 per cent of women are “economically active” (ILO, 2000b). However, these figures under-report women’s involvement in *sari-sari* stores (sundries shops), and food vending (Etemati, 1998). In Thailand, street food vendors are not officially recognized by the government, are not covered by Thai labour laws, and do not have insurance or work-related benefits. Under such circumstances, documentation of the numbers of street vendors and of women’s involvement in this industry is difficult (Suselo, 2005). The dominant role of women in street food vending, however, is now changing with more men participating in food retailing businesses. There is some evidence from press reports and the academic literature of a number of eateries set up by men in Thailand and Singapore in the late 1990s, during and after the Asian economic crisis.

Economic changes such as the Asian Economic Crisis have also encouraged the growth of street food vending. The 1997 Asian economic crisis have encouraged many of the unemployed into the informal street hawking sector. This is reflected in the numerous works on micro-entrepreneurs in the urban economies of many Asian and African cities. Some studies have sought to examine the role of food enterprises as a new or “fall back” source of employment in Asian cities in response to the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s (Bhowmik, 2005; Tinker, 2003; Yasmeen, 2001).

Street food vending provided a means of livelihood for many workers who were unemployed prior to the crisis or who lost their jobs during the crisis. Reports show that there was an increase in the number of street food vendors in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines after the Asian crisis of 1998 (Bhowmik, 2005). In Kuala Lumpur there were about 47,000 licensed and unlicensed food vendors in 2000, a 30 percent increase compared with 1990 (Bhowmik, 2005). There was also a rise in the number of food vendors in Singapore after the economic crisis. According to a Singapore press report,
about 500 new franchise operations were opened in 2002, which showed a 17 percent increase compared with 2001 within which food and beverage retailers accounted for 405, or over 80 percent (Li, 2003). The report stated that the increase in the number of food franchise operators was “…due mainly to the large number of mid-rung managers retrenched during the downturn…” while “…the rest were made up of entrepreneurs, including fresh graduates who have been unable to find work in a sluggish job market” (Li, 2003). One press article reported that the economic downturn resulted in the closure of several food establishments, but “…scrambling to fill the emptied shop lots is a new wave of eateries, many opened by first-time restaurateurs” (Teo, 2003a). Another press report commented that growing unemployment caused by the economic downturn “…has put 13,000 graduates out of jobs…” some of whom went into the food business, with many taking up spots in hawker centres in housing estates and food courts in shopping malls, “…offering foreign dishes they had picked up when studying or traveling abroad” (Seah, 2003).

Yasmeen (2001) also argues that the economic crisis spawned new micro-enterprises in Thailand and the Philippines, claiming that the setting up of small and medium food enterprises was a survival strategy for households when the family breadwinners lost their wage employment or became downwardly mobile as a result of the economic crisis. Many industrial and construction workers who were retrenched as well as middle-class families who suffered some downward mobility due to lowered incomes or unemployment, turned to food businesses and opened their own micro-enterprises. The pool of street food vendors further expanded to meet a shift in middle and upper-class consumer demand from the more expensive restaurants to cheap and affordable street food (Bhowmik, 2005; Yasmeen, 2001).

Yasmeen (2001) suggested that the economic crisis led to more Thai men who had been displaced from their urban middle-class jobs taking a greater interest in small-scale food vending. She cited the example of Khun Sirivat, a
stockbroker who sold sandwiches on Bangkok’s streets after he became bankrupt. Yasmeen (2001:97) commented that Sirivat’s “sandwich strategy”, which requires limited equipment and culinary skills might be starting to spawn new food retailing businesses in Bangkok. She further suggested that even prior to the onset of the crisis in the mid-1990s, there was a growth of new micro-enterprises in Bangkok owned and operated by men (Yasmeen, 2001:97). Press reports from Singapore also showed an emergence of male participation in food retail businesses after the economic crisis. One press article reported that “…far from shrinking in fear of the limp economy … new eateries are opening” (Teo, 2003a). Among the male owners of the new food outlets was Ignatius Chan of Les Amis, who offers Italian and Asian fare. Another press report commented:

The recession whiplash has hurt the industry across the board but there are pockets of exception where business is actually booming. … Mr Lee Tong Soon knew he was jumping right into the fire when he opened a chain of new eateries called MK Restaurant last month

Teo, 2002b

Most Southeast Asian street foods consist of local or Chinese specialities rather than Western food items (Yasmeen, 2001). However, in Thailand, the crisis led to new micro-entrepreneurs in Thailand selling “new street food items” such as banana brochettes, fresh fruit shakes, and Western items like sandwiches (Yasmeen, 200:92). Khun Sirivat, the “sandwich man” also shifted his business strategy by selling drinks and snacks after discovering that “…sandwiches do not make much profit” (Yasmeen 2001:99). The evidence presented from Thailand suggests that the face of local street food is changing as a result of various economic and cultural changes in the wider society and in the region. Thus, it is important to examine the impact of the crisis on the changing character of local street food retailing in other countries in the region such as Singapore.
Tourists in search of local or traditional foods have also increased the demand for street foods and encouraged the growth of street food vending. Street food is also a form of tourist attraction which is encouraged by government authorities in some Southeast Asian cities such as Thailand and Singapore (Jayasuriya, 1994).

### 3.3 STREET FOOD AND TOURISM

Despite some evidence of changing consumer tastes, most Asian street foods consist of traditional food and snacks such as noodles, fried snacks, soups, drinks, or rice-based meals. The street foods sold in Thailand are “local or Chinese specialities” (Yasmeen, 2001:92) which include Tom Yum Soup, Pad Thai (noodles) and Kao Pad (fried rice). In India, the most common street food items are pastries, cakes, rice and curry packets. Singapore has a variety of street foods made up mainly of hawker fare ranging from rice dishes such as chicken rice, nasi lemak and nasi goreng to fried Hokkien noodles.

However, while much of the effort of street food vendors has been directed at the sale of nutritious, inexpensive food to the local population, street foods have been adapted to target a wider clientele such as tourists. In an attempt to promote street foods to tourists, Thailand has published handbooks for visitors such as *Thai Hawker Food* (Yasmeen, 2000), where “authentic” street food is the main emphasis. Some hotels hold street food buffets on weekends to promote authentic Thai food. The local newspaper, the *Bangkok Post*, reported that the Martino Coffee Lounge of The Mandarin Hotel advertised its addition of “…authentic Thai coffee prepared from our coffee cart as you watch” (Yasmeen, 2000:349).

In the case of Singapore, attempts have also been made to promote street food or hawker fare to tourists by various initiatives of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). In 1994, the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board introduced the first
Singapore Food Festival, a month-long event showcasing various food promotions. Since then, the renamed Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has been holding the Singapore Food Festival every year with the promotion of many street foods such as chilli crab and chicken rice. The Hainanese Chicken Rice has been promoted at various international events as representative of Singapore’s street food cuisine. Airline agencies have also marketed some of Singapore’s local fare. Singapore International Airlines (SIA) “Book the Cook Service” allows First and Raffles Class passengers to pre-order their main courses, which includes Western meals and popular local dishes, including the renamed Hainanese rice dish as *Singapore Chicken Rice* (Singapore Airlines, 2008). While the Food Festival is targeted mainly at Singaporeans, the STB seeks to attract tourists to make up to 20 per cent of visitors to the Food Festival (Teo, 2005c). Postcards featuring images of local ethnic dishes are also promoted by the STB to tempt the potential visitor (Plate 3.2). For example, the 2005 and 2006 *Uniquely Singapore* postcards feature the colourful *ice kacang* (ice with sweet flavoured syrup and red beans) to symbolize Singapore’s harmonious multiracial society, the aim of which was to encourage visitors to experience the country’s unique blend of cultures including its food (STB, 2006) (Plate 3.3).
Plate 3.2  A STB postcard featuring some of Singapore’s favourite street food

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Plate 3.3  A STB banner STB featuring the colourful ice kacang

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A 72-page food guide entitled *Makan Delights: An Insider’s Guide to Singapore’s Unique Flavours*, containing a list of “must try” local food, is another part of STB’s food drive “Let’s Makan”, to promote the country’s cuisine to tourists (STB, 2004a). The food guide is distributed at Changi Airport, visitor centres, tourist attractions and hotels. The chief executive of *Makansutra*, a television food programme and publisher of local food guides, introduced a list of 15 hawkers in 2005 who were crowned for having served for decades their signature “authentic local dishes” and named them “Hawker Legends” (Lim, 2005). The executive who selected the 15 legendary hawkers hoped that the list would guide Singaporeans and overseas tourists “to sample all 15 stalls in three days” (Teo, 2005a). In 2007 greater recognition was given to top street food cooks in which 12 hawkers were accorded the title of “Street Food Masters” as observed from the *Makansutra* website (Makansutra, 2007, *Street Food Masters 2007*).

In recent years, the STB as well as hotels, restaurants and American coffee-chain, *Starbucks*, are promoting traditional festive snacks such as moon-cakes to tap a wider market, including tourists. To create awareness of the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations, the STB has prepared a range of events just for visitors, which involves “a taste of some moon-cakes and tea” at the Moon-cake Museum Arts House along the banks of the Singapore River (STB, 2004c). Since 2004, *kaya* toast has occupied a unique place in the symbolism of Chinese local snack food as it is being promoted by the STB in its "Uniquely Singapore Shop & Eat Tours" which brings tourists to HDB housing estates and successful food establishments to sample some of the country’s popular food (STB, 2004b).

Speaking more generally, Haukeland & Jacobsen (2001) drawing on Robert & Hall (2001), argue that tasting local food has become an important tourist experience for some tourists and local food and beverages play an important role in attracting visitors to certain cities. For example, in France, gastronomy is
vital to tourist experiences. Consuming the food of countries visited provides tourists with a sense of the place visited as well as aspects of its history and customs. Furthermore, some tourists buy food and beverages as souvenirs.

However, the promotion of local foods in Asian countries has received mixed reactions from tourists. In a study on how local food is perceived by tourists, Cohen & Avieli (2004) showed that Western tourists are generally suspicious of local foods, whose ingredients are unknown or unfamiliar to them. In Nepal, Western backpackers survived on improvised toasts, pizzas, pancakes and apple-pies instead of consuming the local food. Even for culinary tourists where the tasting of local food is part of the tourists’ experiences, often there is interest only in local food which is familiar to them. This phenomenon is evident among certain tourists who travel to particular destinations outside Asia.

In a 1997 survey, it was found that German and Swedish visitors to Norway indicated their preference for specific local food. Fish dishes were the preferred choice followed by local specialities and traditional dishes (Haukeland & Jacobsen, 2001). Similarly, many Western tourists in Thailand tend to order pat Thai (Thai fried noodles) or khao pat (fried rice), with which they are familiar from Thai and Chinese restaurants in their home countries. Even among Chinese tourists traveling to Singapore, most of them “… would rather stick to familiar fare…” although “…some are eager to try local food like satay” (Dramatic rise…, Straits Times, 17 May 1993). Such examples indicate the strong appeal to foreign tourists of food which is both familiar and local. Although most tourists want something different from what is available in their home countries, the food in destination countries must be familiar enough to make them feel comfortable.

Another reason for tourists’ reluctance to accept local food was concern with health problems. Many tourists avoid local food because they fear getting sick (Bhowmik, 2005; Dawson & Canet, 1991; Winarno & Allain, 1991), something
reinforced by documented outbreaks of food poisoning and diseases attributed to the consumption of street foods in certain Asian countries (Dawson & Canet, 1991). These outbreaks have helped shape tourist conceptions of hawker food in general as unhygienic. One study reported that many tourists were reluctant to “…eat local food at hawker’s stalls, though it may look inviting” (Cohen & Avieli, 2004: 762). Yasmeen’s (2000:348) further documented that visitors to Bangkok prefer to enjoy street food from “up-scale hotels and plazas” rather than from food vendors “on the street” as they assume that the food is more hygienic. The following section examines how the retailing of street foods has aroused the government’s attention to their safe preparation and sale.

3.4 RETAILERS AND STREET FOOD

Tourist apprehensions over unfamiliar foods and health problems have led governments and food retailers in some countries to modify local food in an attempt to target both local and tourist tastes. Singapore offers a striking example where local street foods have been transformed and marketed in new ways to make them more attractive to tourists in terms of better hygiene and familiarity.

Some new food entrepreneurs in Singapore have attempted to make unfamiliar local foods more familiar to tourists by using different ingredients or methods of preparation. For example, the unfamiliar taste of traditional snacks such as the *kaya* toast fare prompted the owner of *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* to modify its preparation methods and introduce some new bread items such as French toast. He commented that the “Japanese love it, but Americans find it too sweet” (Garnaut, 2002). He also added that while locals enjoy dipping the toasted bread into soft-boiled eggs, foreigners find the traditional egg dish unfamiliar to their tastes. In order to cater to the tourist market, *Ya Kun*’s owner introduced hard boiled eggs to his menu.
Other retailers of traditional Chinese snack foods have also introduced ingredients which are familiar to tourists from both Asian and Western countries. These modifications are examples of what Cohen & Avieli (2004:767) refer to as the creation of “new dishes” and “new cuisine” which are not fusion or hybridized foods, but include an “innovative or creative element”. In their assessment of the marketing of local cuisine to tourists, Cohen & Avieli (2004) argued that local foods, like local crafts, become popular with most tourists only after they have been transformed in some ways. However, in the process of transforming local dishes to suit foreign tastes, a tourist cuisine frequently emerges, creatively consisting of elements from different origins.

The entry of new retailers of Chinese snack foods into the traditional food retailing scene in Singapore can be seen in part as an attempt to cater to both locals and tourists through modifications to suit the tastes of tourists and a wide demographic of locals by appealing to apparently authentic eating experiences. Such practices are examples of the reinvention of Chinese food and the promotion of so-called authenticity, a quality attributed to a range of foods and cuisines.

The term “invented tradition’ was introduced by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) to refer to a set of practices invented or constructed to establish continuity with a perceived past. Such practices include the adaptation of “old uses” for “new conditions” and by “using old models for new purposes” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983:5). For example, institutions such as churches, law courts and universities operating in a changed context may need to make adaptations from the old models. Certain traditional folksongs are also modified to become new songs in the same idiom but supplemented by a choral repertoire with a patriotic content, even though they may retain elements from religious hymns.

The transformation of Chinese food retailing in Singapore is an example of an invented practice in which “old” cuisines with their roots in traditional cultures
have been changed to meet new demands and desires. Many traditional Chinese cuisines have been modified or transformed by using new or modified ingredients and methods of preparation to adapt to modern standards, and to cater to different customers. The practice of retailing “reinvented” traditional Chinese snacks in Singapore raises an important question about the way in which food is represented and the role played by notions of authenticity in such representation.

The concept of authenticity is defined by Taylor (1991) as that “which is believed or accepted to be genuine or real” (Lu & Fine, 1995:538). Cohen (1988) in discussing the work of MacCannell (1976) noted that the products of tourism such as festivals, food, sites, and objects are considered authentic or inauthentic depending upon whether they were made by local people according to tradition. This implies that “authentic” products are those which use the same ingredients and processes as those in the past. In this sense, the food dishes presented by Singaporean retailers and hawkers would have to be regarded as inauthentic.

However, this somewhat rigid view of authenticity has given way to a more creative and culturally transformative notion of authenticity in which “tradition” is repackaged to serve modern ends. Thus, many retailers of traditionally-based snack foods in Singapore maintain that their products are authentic while recognizing they use new ingredients and that they market products which have no direct equivalent in traditional food cuisines. This is similar to the concept of “staged authenticity” introduced by MacCannell (1973) in the work of Cohen (1994), which describes the presentation of contrived sites and sights as if they are authentic, although they have already been transformed in some ways. Examples of such contrived attractions include Disneyland in America and Sentosa Island in Singapore, which are specifically created for tourists (Cohen, 1994). In the opinion of Cohen (1988), contrived attractions may over time be accepted as authentic which illustrates that people’s understandings of what constitutes tradition are not static but are constantly changing.
Although street food hawking was more common in the past, recent efforts by the Singapore government to revive the open-air street food tradition have led to the launching of various “food streets” to recreate the atmosphere of roadside dining in the 1960s. For example, Smith Street in Chinatown was transformed into a Food Street in August 2001 (Plate 3.4). The development was part of the Chinatown Experience Guide Plan by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to revitalize Chinatown with outdoor eating facilities and other night life activities (Tee, 2001b). The attempts by the Singapore government to revive open-air street food hawking by creating Food Streets in Smith Street, Chinatown, can be regarded as part of the STB’s strategy to develop authentic tourist experiences, but in “contrived” environments with ready-made stalls and equipment set up according to public hygiene standards.

Although these reconstructions have “contrived” traits, it does not mean that they are necessarily inauthentic. According to Cohen (1994:137), they are “…correct reproductions of the past, and in this sense may be considered authentic”. He also argues that staged or contrived attractions do not imply that they are without cultural meaning. Tourists are usually less concerned with “authentic” authenticity as long as their visit is an enjoyable one. In order to enjoy the experience, tourists are prepared to accept totally staged or contrived attractions as real, such as historic theme parks. In this sense, Cohen regards the contrived attractions as satisfying the modern “quest for authenticity”, although in MacCannell’s sense, they are staged (Cohen, 1994:140).
Tourists’ acceptance of staged attractions as “authentic” parallels Ferroro’s (2002) observation about Mexican restaurants in Los Angeles, United States who observes that the food sold at the Mexican restaurants is not the same as the food eaten by Mexicans in their home country. Non-Mexican diners are regarded as foreigners or tourists by the Mexican restaurateurs who would not be able to demand authenticity of Mexican food. But the non-Mexican diners are aware that the Mexican restaurants are “staged” places and that the food has been “Americanised” or modified to suit the American tastes. However, to the non-Mexican diners, the authenticity of the dish is not necessarily the main concern to them as long as the food is pleasant to their taste. These Mexican
diners are partaking in a Mexican experience which has some continuity with Mexican culture but is not a simple replication of it.

The inauthentic or artificial can become an “emergent authenticity” of which Singapore as the “New Asia” may be an example. Cohen (1994) uses this concept to describe how a cultural product which is judged as inauthentic or contrived at a certain point in time, may over time become recognized as authentic. He cites examples of contrived, tourist-oriented attractions such as the Inti Raymi festival in Cuzco, and the American Disneyland, both of which over time became widely accepted as authentic manifestations of contemporary local culture because they lose their novelty and becomes part of what everybody knows and what people have become familiar with. The acceptance of such cultural practices suggests that they are just one of the manifestations of the invention of tradition.

According to Cohen (1988), no culture or society is static so new cultural products must emerge and therefore emergent authenticity is a valid process within the context of tourism (Chang, 1997). In rejecting the notion that authenticity is only applicable if the food is prepared using the same ingredients and processes as those in the homeland of the food, Chang (1997) who discussed the work of Hitchcock et al (1993) in Tourism in Southeast Asia, argues that tradition is an ever-evolving set of symbols and meanings rather than a thing passed unchanged from one generation to another. This suggests that heritage food is itself a product of changing economic and cultural circumstances rather than a fixed aspect of an unchanging culture.

Lu & Fine (1995) offer an example of the adaptation of food to suit varying market requirements. The creation of aesthetically pleasing food, while responsive to the tastes of customers, is not based on an allegiance to authentic recipes or fixed styles of preparation. Ultimately, customers’ responses determine what is served. Lu & Fine (1995) further cites the work of Bourdieu
(1984) who offers a similar view, emphasizing that the meanings of food depend on the social location of those who consume it. He further points out that a prized dish in one culture may be rejected in another due to different habits of the diner (Lu & Fine, 1995). Indeed, “traditional” Chinese cuisines are not popular in Singaporean restaurants. For example, many traditional New Year dishes which originated in mainland China are absent from the menus of most restaurants in Singapore. The owner of one restaurant in Singapore replied during a press interview that “traditional festive dishes wouldn’t sell if I put them on the reunion dinner menu” (Ee, 2006). Similarly, some of the New Year dishes like yu sheng were inventions of Singaporean chefs and did not originate from China, while many examples of “Singapore Hawker Food” and snack foods such as kaya toast are modified local variants of earlier Chinese cuisines. These changing forms of food in Singapore constitute evidence of the ways in which tradition and authenticity are produced and reproduced. The reproduction of food dishes includes elements that have changed, been adapted from earlier dishes and even newly invented.

3.5 HEALTH AND SANITATION

Street food vendors often lack knowledge about safe food handling practices and suffer from city officials’ perceptions that street food is of poor quality and transmits food borne diseases. Many government authorities in Latin America, Asia and Africa often consider street food as unsanitary and the vendors as a nuisance because they are considered to cause pollution, traffic obstruction and they do not pay taxes (Tinker, 2003:332). In Singapore, the presence of street hawkers in the 1960s also created many problems for government authorities. Besides impeding traffic and pedestrian flow, the hawkers disposed refuse in the streets and contributed to the spread of pests and insects. They also lack the knowledge about proper handling of utensils and preparation of food. One government response has been to abolish street food vending. This has been tried in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Bangladesh but without success.
Street food vendors are also seen as a “…hindrance to the modernization of the traditional food distribution system because they compete with licensed eating establishments with higher operating costs” (Winarno & Allain, 1991:6).

In an attempt to ensure that local street foods are hygienic, the government of Singapore has formalized the informal street hawking sector by establishing hawker centres in the 1960s to consolidate all street food vendors into legalized food marketing system. There are still street hawkers in Singapore today selling ice-cream but these are licensed street vendors who ply certain housing estates, tourist areas such as Bugis Street and Orchard Road as well as at parks designated by the National Parks Board for street hawking.

In 1970s, the government introduced more stringent rules to maintain higher standards of hygiene. All food vendors were required to obtain a license in 1971 before operating a food stall. A food hygiene course aimed at teaching basic food and personal hygiene to all food vendors was introduced by the Ministry of Environment (ENV) in 1990 (Ministry of Environment, 2000a). All food vendors are required to attend and pass a written or oral test before being allowed to operate. Environmental health officers from the ENV carry out routine food hygiene inspection on hawker stalls, coffee-shop outlets, canteens, food courts and restaurants. Food vendors are graded on their housekeeping and the cleanliness of the floors, walls, sinks, preparation tables, utensils and crockery, their personal hygiene, and how the food is handled (Ho, 1998). Cleanliness and hygiene is classified by a sticker issued by environmental health officers. The hygiene grade stickers, ranging from “A” for excellent to “D” for below average, must be displayed on hawkers’ licences to indicate different standards. “D” grade food stalls are checked more frequently by ENV authorities. Outlets falling below “D” grade have their licences suspended. Those convicted of food hygiene offences face a maximum fine of S$2000 and are given demerit points if they flout health laws such as using bare hands to handle cooked food, selling cooked food with no proper cover and preparing food outside the licensed
premises. Licensees who accumulate 12 points or more within a year have their license suspended for between two and four weeks (Ministry of Environment, 2000b). According to a World Health Organization survey in 1995, the strict hygiene laws and the maintenance of high standards of hygiene by environmental health officers at hawker centres and other food outlets enabled Singapore to achieve a progressive decline in the number of food poisoning cases between 1990 and 1995 (Ranganayaki, 1995).

3.6 ELEVATION OF STREET FOODS

Singapore street food today has assumed a more respectable status with its promotion by government organizations and the food media. Some street foods which started out at lowly roadside stalls have been elevated to fine dining that hotel restaurants have recently started serving buffet-style hawker food and many other types of local fare (Ow, 2005). Customers can now pay high prices for one a-la-carte item of the hawker food or for a sampling of all the varieties of the one-dish meals in a lavish and comfortable setting (Wong A.Y, 2005). Despite the high price of a plate of char kway teow (fried rice noodles) or a bowl of laksa (rice noodles in coconut gravy) which cost S$19 each in such venues, these abundant displays of local hawker food have become popular. Evidence for this popularity is the “bustling business over the past month” by the Straits Kitchen at Grand Hyatt Hotel, Singapore, since its opening in December 2004 (Wong A.Y, 2005).

Hawker food has also been marketed as halal (Muslim way of preparation and cooking) to attract Muslim customers. In recent years many food outlets have applied for halal certification from the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) which verifies that all the food and drinks have been prepared according to the strict precepts of Islam. This means that food dishes are prepared using ingredients and meat from animals that are slaughtered according to Islamic guidelines. Muslims who cannot patronize
non-halal hawker centre stalls may eat at these venues. Another venue where all the stalls serve halal food is to be found at a new chain of food courts named “Banquet”.

The opening of Chinatown Food Street with stalls selling some of the best hawker dishes, offer yet another outdoor eating experience for Singaporeans. However, the Food Street hawkers now operate from pushcart stalls which are specially constructed to comply with the stringent health and sanitary criteria set by the ENV. Much of the food sold at hawker centres was originally street food sold by Chinese immigrants but this has now been upgraded to become popular dishes served in foodcourts and hotels. Not only have peoples’ tastes moved from street stalls to hotel restaurants, the content and presentation of the food has also changed to reflect the elevation of street food.

3.7 FUTURE OF STREET FOOD VENDING

Today, street food vendors face competition from modern food enterprises such as food courts. Anderson (1998) claims that street food stalls selling snack items in China could be at risk in the new, affluent society, a view supported by Yasmeen (2000) who comments that large shopping malls with food floors and food-centres will erode traditional retailing businesses, such as street food vending in Bangkok. She observes that residents of Bangkok and visitors to the city consume street foods in up-scale hotels and plazas, rather than from street vendors for reasons of hygiene and food safety. However, Tinker (1999) argues that street food vending will increase in the twenty-first century, and that vendors will adapt the types of food sold to suit new palates and circumstances. She bases this claim on the high cost of supermarket systems which will make street food more attractive to workers and students who require inexpensive and convenient food close to where they work or study. Tinker (1999) also points to the continued demand for street foods by referring to the recent controversy in New York City over street food vendors, and the recent re-emergence of street
food vending in Hanoi, which was previously suppressed in Communist Vietnam.

The review suggests that modernization of Asian and other economies does not necessarily lead to a decline in traditional foods and forms of food retailing. In Singapore, the growth of Western fast-food chains and local Chinese franchise chains for snack foods has not prevented the rise of new micro-entrepreneurs selling “traditional” food. In addition, western fast food chains in the country are competing with traditional food businesses and offering their versions of “traditional” fare. For example, McDonald’s in Singapore previously experimented with nasi lemak and chicken porridge, and recently with kaya toast in 2005. The current situation seems to indicate a promising market for traditional snack foods in Singapore.

Singapore has seen a rash of culinary fads in recent years such as apple strudel, bubble tea and Portuguese egg tart, each lasting one or two years before fizzling out. The question arises of whether the current growth of traditional snack foods businesses may itself be another food fad which will eventually die out. To answer such a question would require longitudinal research, something which has not been possible within the scope of this study. Rather, this study focuses on the emergence of a group of Singaporean micro-entrepreneurs investing in snack food businesses to market identifiably Chinese foods, as opposed to Western items that featured in previous literature. Many of the snack foods sold have been adapted from those produced in their places of origin and are being sold in new ways. The study examines the reasons why these micro-entrepreneurs entered the business, how they market their food snacks, and the role of authenticity in such marketing.

A related issue concerns the growth of new micro-enterprises during and after the economic crisis period. According to press reports, the economic recession did not appear to have a significant impact on the operations of food businesses
in Singapore. But it was during this period that most new entrants and new patterns in food retailing emerged in Singapore. Yasmeen (2001) suggests that future research should analyze the impact of the post-crisis situation on micro-entrepreneurs in all sectors of the economy. This suggestion raises an interesting question: what led to the tremendous growth of food retailing in Singapore during and after the economic crisis? The current study builds on Yasmeen’s (2001) work in the context of the post-crisis situation in Singapore and explores the activities of one small segment of the economy – new food micro-entrepreneurs - to gain a greater understanding of why they entered the snack food market and how they may be able to survive within it.

3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the literature on the importance of street food vending in several Asian and non-Asian countries. It has explored a number of key themes associated with street food vending such as factors for its growth and popularity and the promotion of street food for tourism. It also examined the changing nature of street food retailing in some Southeast Asia countries with an emphasis on a new group of male entrepreneurs selling new types of street food. In appealing to a wider group of clientele including locals and tourists, issues concerning the reinvention of tradition and authenticity of the food presented were also discussed.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOOD MEDIA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new micro-entrepreneurs is taking place within a cultural and economic environment which promotes Singaporean food and food products in a variety of ways. Central to the dissemination of new ideas on food are their depiction in Singapore’s visual, electronic and print media. This chapter discusses the role of the local media in promoting local Chinese food. The first section discusses some of the forms of food media and considers how food is being promoted by them. The next section examines the promotion of some of the Chinese snack foods by the media and the ways in which retailers promote their own products. The last section examines how the food media affects consumers’ eating habits and discusses whether the media has caused or responded to the growth of new snack food businesses. The information obtained from the various sources of food media provides a link between the academic and historical literatures on the growth and popularity of Chinese snack foods in Singapore.

4.2 ROLE OF FOOD MEDIA

In recent times, various forms of media such as newspapers, television shows, magazines, cookbooks, food guides and the internet have all become popular means of presenting food and food products through food shows, food festivals, food tours, and reviews of new dining places and eateries.

The food media plays an important role in the popularization of foodstuffs in Singapore. The food media features hawkers in newspapers and television shows to inform customers of retailers producing quality food. For instance, *The Straits Times*, the main English language local paper, has a Sunday section
called *Taste*, which reviews new eateries or recommends good food outlets. Local food guides such as *Makansutra Singapore*, (*makan* means “eat” in the Malay language and *sutra* is Sanskrit for “guide”), which published its first edition in 1998 also help to whet Singaporeans’ appetite for popular local street food. The street food guidebook which is produced annually lists selected restaurants and hawker centres which produce good food. Dishes which meet the standards of selected teams of “food police” known as “makanmatas” are recommended in the guide. There is a chopsticks rating system ranging from one pair of chopsticks for “good” to the famous “die-die must try” best grading with three chopsticks. The 2007 edition of the local food guide contributed a section on “*Kaya Toast*” and recommended some stalls selling the snack. The guide book has helped to create awareness of street cuisine (*Makansutra, 2007*).

Government organizations and local tour agencies are also promoting local food. The “Uniquely Singapore Shop and Eat” tours organized by the Singapore Tourism Board help locals and visitors to discover Singapore’s local cuisine in the various ethnic districts and neighbourhoods (*STB, 2004b*). Visitors get a chance to sample local delights besides learning about the success stories of well known retailers and food establishments.

Local television food programmes also play a role in the promotion of food in Singapore. Television food shows such as *Yummy King*, *City Beat* and *Makansutra*, telecast between 2003 and 2004 feature eateries selling good food. The food shows are usually in Mandarin except for *Makansutra*, the only show in English, which also features eateries in its local food guide under the same name (*Teo, 2002a*). These television programmes provide information on good hawker food stalls showing their food ingredients, preparation and presentation, together with details of food prices, operating hours and location.
4.3 COMMERCIAL WEBSITES

The use of commercial websites is one of the means in which retailers advertise their products. Examples are food-related websites such as Singapore Best Food Online Directory (www.sbestfood.com) which provide potential customers with a Food Category Index, showing an alphabetical listing of “Local Food Delights”, which includes popular hawker dishes and snacks. Upon selecting any of the food items in the category, the website lists some of the popular stalls selling the food product.

Another way in which retailers project their image is by designing their own websites to emphasise their reputation and quality and to promote their brand. Well-known curry puff maker, Old Chang Kee and Ya Kun Kaya Toast, have designed their own company websites with illustrative cover stories of their rich tradition and vast experience in the food retail industry. On opening the home page of Ya Kun’s website, the following words are immediately brought to the reader’s attention: “At Ya Kun, we fuse tradition and modernity.” Similarly, Old Chang Kee’s home page uses similar words fused with tradition: “Old Chang Kee – The Origin”.

4.4 PRESS REPORTS AND CHINESE SNACK FOODS

Traditionally, the sale and promotion of traditional Chinese snacks was carried out on a small scale but today such foodstuffs have become a significant element in the media’s representations of food. The changing nature of these traditional Chinese snacks and other favourite local foods give reporters and food writers an opportunity to report on the history and present-day popularisation of particular snack foods.

Recent advertising by the food media on the kaya toast culture illustrates the popularization of traditional Chinese snack foods. The impact of advertising in
the print media indicates that there has been a growth in the Chinese snack food business in Singapore. This is evident in the number of feature articles on *kaya* toast that appear in newspapers in recent years (Table 4.1). Various press articles reported the increasing number of businesses who continue to venture into the toast trade (Wee, 1999; Woon, 2005; Ng, 2005; Teo, 2006).

The most recent press headlines “Toast Masters” in *The Straits Times*, 24 Dec, 2006, reported that “at least four bakery chains and cafes” have ventured into the *kaya* toast over the past year since 2005 besides *Ah Mei* and *Wang Jiao*, two of the newer chains established in 2003 (Teo, 2006). The article reported the various types of toast offered by the new food retailers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEADLINE</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spread some love around</td>
<td>Straits Times, December 5, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toast of the town</td>
<td>Business Times, June 24, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaya war spreads</td>
<td>Straits Times, August 17, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now, who’s the toast of the town?</td>
<td>Straits Times, May 22, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toast with the most</td>
<td>The New Paper, June 26, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaya jam anyone?</td>
<td>The Daily Yomiuri, August 6, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A toast to kaya and peanut butter bombs</td>
<td>The New Paper, September 1, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toast Masters</td>
<td>The Sunday Times, December 24, 2006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of newspaper reports on moon-cakes has also been increasing each year. Table 4.2 shows the various press reports on the festive snack during recent years.
TABLE 4.2 PRESS REPORTS ON MOONCAKES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEADLINE</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wasabi and other weird flavours</td>
<td>Straits Times, 28 August, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickling tastebuds with lifestyle mooncakes</td>
<td>Business Times, 18 August, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mooncakes that will melt in your mouth</td>
<td>The New Paper, 15 September, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over the moon with cakes</td>
<td>Straits Times, 14 September, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels, restaurants go over the moon</td>
<td>Business Times, 30 September, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of multi coloured hues and flavours</td>
<td>Business Times, 2 September, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet season</td>
<td>Today, 26 September, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition with a twist</td>
<td>Straits Times, 28 September, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mooncake masquerade</td>
<td>Asiaone, 7 September, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bite-sized treats with bite size fillings</td>
<td>Business Times, 11 August, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mad about mooncakes</td>
<td>Straits Times, 23 September, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a bite of sugarless mooncakes</td>
<td>Straits Times, 2 September, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickled pink by this snowskin</td>
<td>The New Paper, 20 September 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the press articles about moon-cakes inform consumers about the new flavours that are introduced, the availability of the moon-cakes and their prices. The articles often give a brief description of the new flavours of moon-cakes offered by various hotels and restaurants. Such reviews enable customers to make the correct choice before buying the festive snack.

Besides giving consumers better choices, the press articles also report about the sales of various moon-cake retailers. The Business Times reported that one of the biggest makers of premium moon-cakes in Singapore, the Tung Lok Group “sold more than 90,000 boxes of moon-cakes” before the Festival in 2004 (Lin, 2005). Another recent press article in The Straits Times, 23 September, 2007 reported that “more than 200,000 mooncakes have been sold so far - and that’s a figure from only seven retailers” (Tay &Huang, 2007).
Another press article advertising the sale of moon-cakes reported that “…the younger generation are game for new tastes” and “…instead of being affronted by this messing with tradition, consumers here are lapping the new creations up” (Cheong, 1999). It is unclear whether press reviews have indirectly helped to increase the sales of moon-cakes because none of the retailers who were interviewed by the press mentioned that the media has affected their sales. The aggressive marketing using food reviews in newspapers, however, may help to attract potential consumers and increase sales.

Press reports, food guides and local television programs that focus on traditional snack foods not only encourage readers and audiences to search for good food but also help to establish snack foods such as kaya toast as an icon of popular culture in Singapore. Besides this, the media also imparts knowledge about the origin of such foods and creates an awareness of one’s heritage through food promotion.

4.5 MEDIA ADVERTISING AND FOOD QUEUES

In recent years, however, entrepreneurs and businesses are relying more on the media to sell or publicize their food. They make use of the media by aiming for recommendations on television food shows and interviews by food writers. Media recommendation is often seen as a necessary sign of acceptance and quality. This is evident in the newspaper clippings pasted on numerous food stalls in Singapore which have received media awards and recommendations.

Media recommendations do have an effect on increasing consumption. In Singapore, the extensive coverage of food by the media exerts a tremendous influence over consumers’ food choices which, in turn, affects the popularity of certain food retail businesses. Food reviews and ratings often create long queues at food stalls underlining the value of the food media (Plate 4.1).
One owner of a food stall selling *vadai* (Indian deep-fried prawn pancakes) commented:

... the day after the show, the queue here was like McDonald's. We did not know where those people came from. There was no place for them to sit. We had no time to eat or drink.

(Teo, 2002a)

One owner of a food stall selling roasted meat commented that “any coverage in *The Straits Times* always translates to more customers” (Tan G, 2006). Many food stall owners added that their businesses have improved following such publicity. For example, the owner of *Tiong Bahru Ming Jiang Kueh* (Tiong Bahru peanut pancakes), said that his profits rose by 20 per cent after his business was featured in an article in *The Straits Times*. Another owner selling Teochew *kueh* (soft cakes) replied that “we now sell between 700 and 800 *kueh* a day, and have to make more on the spot to meet demand” after the stall was featured in an article in the local newspaper (Tan G, 2006).

The owner of a duck rice stall said that his outlet “attracted long queues” after his business was featured in a newspaper and on television. He commented that after his appearance in a local television food show, customers “…came like a swarm of bees” and that his sales increased up to 10 times, selling about 100 ducks each day (Teo, 2002a). He noted, however, that his profits were as normal after a month and sells only about 10 ducks each day.

The long queues of customers and the increased sales of stall owners are a powerful testimony to the irrefutable power of newspapers and other food media. The comments of most hawkers show that the media tends to give favourable and positive reviews and that these will draw queues of customers. The examples, thus, show that the media has the power to shape tastes and buying practices of customers but it has a transient effect.
Strait Times reviews create queues at stalls

BY GERALDINE TAN

It happened all too often—you read a rave review about a hawker stall or a hot new restaurant in The Straits Times and The Sunday Times. You decide to try it, but when you get there, you find the eatery is already packed to the hilt with other eager foodies who obviously have also read the same review.

"Any coverage in The Straits Times always translates to more customers," said Mr. Sam Toh, managing director of Tiong Bahru Roasted Pig Specialist. His roasted meats stall was among Tiong Bahru Market's eight most famous stars featured in an article by Straits Times Life! food correspondent Teo Pau Lin two Sundays ago.

The other Tiong Bahru stars also reported a similar upturn in business. Mr. Raymond Kua, of Tiong Bahru Mian Jian Kueh, said his takings rose by 20 per cent.

Ms. Alice Law's Tiong Bahru Teochew Kueh (below) did "about one third" more business—thanks to The Sunday Times story.

"We now sell between 700 and 800 kueh a day, and have to make more on the spot to meet demand," she said.

The reviews are often not just a flash in the pan. Stalls given favourable ratings continue to draw queues long after the reviews, underlining the enduring value of newspapers.

They are a powerful testimony to the irrefutable power of SPH newspapers over other media. They reaffirm what my colleagues and I in Marketing have been saying about The Straits Times' reach and influence.

— MR LESLIE FONG, SPH'S MARKETING CHIEF

They are a powerful testimony to the irrefutable power of SPH newspapers over other media. They reaffirm what my colleagues and I in Marketing have been saying about The Straits Times' reach and influence.

The article attracted a lot of customers who wanted to try the food," Dr. Lee said, noting the old customers returned as well.

Mr. Leslie Fong, executive president of Marketing, Sing Press Holdings (SPH), credited the reach and influence of newspapers.

"Having worked as a journalist for many years, I have always known how revisiting products and services, whether films or shows, can make or break producers, distributors or suppliers," he said. "They are a powerful testimony to the irrefutable power of SPH newspapers over other media.

"They reaffirm what my colleagues and I in Marketing have been saying about The Straits Times' reach and influence. Media buyers should revisit The Straits Times' reach and influence. Media buyers should revisit.

"Lunch is on me, if they still have to wake up half an hour earlier than usual, they'll be worth it."

— MR. LESLIE FONG

Plate 4.1 A press article reporting on the creation of queues from food reviews

Source: The Straits Times, 26 June, 2006
4.6 COPYCAT BUSINESSES

The popularity of some of the Chinese snacks has increased due to food media influence. An increasing number of new retailers may have set up similar food ventures following press reports of other successful businesses which have received recommendations and awards. For example, a recent press report highlighted the success of two established kaya toast businesses and how this has spurred the growth of new retailers into the trade:

...Ya Kun and Killiney went into rapid expansion around 2000, and now have 24 and 15 outlets respectively. Their money-spinning formula of serving humble charcoal-grilled kaya toast and half-boiled eggs spawned two major followers over the last two years. The Ah Mei Kaya Toast and Wang Jiao House of Kaya Toast chains have also become successful in their own right, serving similar menus and charcoal-grilled kaya toast. Now, the third New Generation toast-makers have raised the humble toast to new heights, and taste...

(To, 2006)

The increasing number of businesses selling similar food products has caused a local press article (Nation of copycats ..., Today, August, 19, 2005) to make an interesting observation about the increasing number of “copycat” businesses in Singapore:

One piece of strong evidence is the number of business copycats who will start replicating coffee buns, bubble teas, health centres or kaya bread outlets.

The press headlines “Nation of copycats, not entrepreneurs; most are out just to make a quick buck” suggests that such businesses might not be viable and that they could go the way of past food fads like the pork-floss bun, apple strudel, Portuguese egg tart and bubble tea (Nation of copycats... Today, August, 2005). The food media may have indirectly contributed to the various food fads in Singapore. There is a constant desire to create new stories and new desires
among consumers. The media shows its interest in the “latest thing” and publicizes changes in the representation of food in its articles and television programs to the detriment of everything else. By harping on the new, the media can neglect what is already established or popular and thus help to make existing food crazes short-lived. However, comments from newspaper articles also attributed the transient nature of such food fads to other factors. The aggressive competition among retailers has lowered the demand for apple strudel, Portuguese egg tarts, bubble tea and other faddish foods. One newspaper report commented that the bubble tea fad crashed because “no skills or secret recipes” were required to operate the business so it was “copied so extensively” by retailers that more than 5000 bubble tea shops mushroomed in 2001 (Teo, 2004b). The oversaturated market for bubble tea coupled with the poor quality of the drinks failed to maintain customer satisfaction. Similarly the Rotiboy coffee-cream bun food craze faded in 2005 after a year of operation because the bun was replicated widely and could also be found in neighbourhood bakeries.

In following fads, it can be argued that many Singaporeans have what is called a “kiasu mentality” (Hokkien term for fear of losing out) (Bravo-Bassin, 2006). Similarly, when it comes to food, Singaporeans are eager to hunt out the newest food outlet or satisfy their cravings for new food items whenever there is a media recommendation or queue. This helps to explain why Singaporeans queue patiently for hours whenever the food media has recommended a food outlet.

4.7 FOOD MEDIA PROMOTION : FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE?

The media’s role can be seen as one of education and dissemination of information. For example, the media popularizes the snacks as “new” things even though they may be something old and have been eaten for generations. However, the marketing of similar food products by various food retailers gave them the chance to delve into the past for stories to be printed in the
newspapers or in television food shows. This effort serves to remind the Chinese of tradition from previous generations which may have been forgotten with the progress of urbanization or younger consumers who lack the knowledge of the origin of certain traditional foodstuffs.

Food writers or hosts of television shows, however, have to continue with food reviews despite similar reviews in other publications such as magazines, food guides or newspapers. This may lead to instances where the recommended food stall does not produce the quality of the food as it was reported. The distrust about the quality of food served is evident in some of the customers’ comments regarding the media’s recommendation of hawkers. One consumer stated: “How can there be so many good food stalls here?” (Teo, 2002a). Another hawker commented that the system of ranking hawkers by television food shows was “nonsense”. He said that “everyone has different tastes. How can you say one hawker is the very best?” (Teo, 2002a). Such comments suggest that the food recommendations by the food media are subjected to debate by consumers.

From the various examples of press reports about the growth of “copycat” businesses as well as “food fads”, it is evident that the food media both causes and responds to the growth of new snack food businesses. On the one hand, the food media responds to the growth of new snack food establishments with their recommendations in the local newspapers and television shows. On the other hand, their recommendations cause the emergence of new “copycat” businesses selling similar food snacks. However, it is the various means of presenting food by the media which has generated potential entrepreneurs and influenced Singaporean eating habits.
4.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown the role played by the media in promoting Chinese food through its programmes, articles and advertisements. It showed how Chinese traditional snacks such as kaya toast are promoted by the media and how this has an effect on the emergence of new retailers as well as the behaviour of consumers. It also highlighted some of the ways in which retailers make use of media recommendations to promote their own businesses. The strategies emphasized by the media also provide a means of comparison with the strategies for successful marketing used by the participants for this study. The next chapter moves to the main empirical section of the thesis, beginning with a discussion of the methods and procedures for the collection of data.
CHAPTER FIVE

METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this study is to understand the factors influencing the growth of a new group of Singaporean micro-entrepreneurs selling new variants of traditional Chinese snack foods, to identify the new consumption spaces which they occupy, and the strategies which they use to meet competition from established outlets selling similar food items. This chapter describes the research design and the methods and procedures of data collection and analysis.

5.2 FIELD STUDY LOCATION

Singapore was selected as the case study location because it is a modern urban society where food is an important part of its culture. Moreover, the researcher has knowledge and experience of Singapore which would add to the study. To date, although a few press reports have commented on this phenomenon, there have been no academic empirical studies of the new types of small-scale food retailing which have emerged since the Asian economic crisis in Singapore. Fieldwork was undertaken in Singapore during August and September 2005.

5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design was largely qualitative, using a case study methodology which involved analyzing a single situation (Bouma 1995). The case study method was chosen because it allowed the collection of a variety of types of data in order to investigate the relationships and processes within a particular social setting and within a short fieldwork period. More specifically, the research design allowed the researcher to identify the nature of change in the retailing of
traditional Chinese snack foods in Singapore and to identify those factors which influenced the growth of new micro-enterprises selling such foods.

The main participants in the study were small-scale food entrepreneurs selling local snack food types which were also sold by bigger franchise chains. Chinese food was chosen as opposed to food items from other cultural backgrounds because the researcher being a Chinese, is familiar with the types of traditional Chinese snack foods.

Six types of traditional snack foods (curry puffs, desserts, kaya toast, peanut pancakes, soy bean milk and moon-cakes) were selected as opposed to other types of food snacks because they were the most conspicuous traditional snacks occupying the new consumption spaces of Singapore. As it was not possible to include all types of festive and traditional snacks in a single study, moon-cakes were the only festive snack selected. Moon-cakes were selected because the snacks have received wide promotions from the media, hotels and shopping malls in recent years.

Hence, the six types of traditional Chinese snack foods were chosen because of extensive promotions and advertising as well as the growth of many businesses selling similar snacks in recent years. Moreover, the researcher has discovered that these snacks were no longer the same in appearance to the ones that she has eaten as a child and this adds to her curiosity in exploring the changing nature of the snack. Other types of traditional snacks have not been advertised extensively and they do not occupy as many new consumption spaces as compared to the snacks chosen for the study.

The study is exploratory and heuristic in that it seeks to generate new empirical materials and provide conceptual insights into the factors shaping the emergence and growth of these small scale operations. It is hoped that the findings will provide a basis for further research on this topic. The main
techniques of data collection were interviewing, observation, analysis of documentary sources and mapping. Semi-structured interviews with the entrepreneurs were chosen to allow flexibility in their responses and to allow respondents to elaborate on points of interest or to explain their views.

5.4 SAMPLE

5.4.1 Type of sampling

The sample was drawn non-randomly using the technique of purposive sampling which involves the selection of a sample with a particular purpose in mind (Denscombe 1998). After the selection of the sample, a criterion approach was adopted. In criterion sampling, participants are selected when they closely match the required criteria for the study. These were:

- Micro-entrepreneurs of any ethnic background, inclusive of men and women
- Commenced operation of a food retail business from 1995 onwards
- Opened a stall in any location and district of the country except wet market stalls
- Operated a business from morning till night
- Sold selected traditional Chinese snack foods

5.4.2 Sample Selection

From the criteria listed in criterion sampling, a sample for interviewing was obtained from information published in press articles, local food guides and food related websites. These produced a list of 14 retailers selling the selected traditional Chinese snack foods (Appendix 1). During further fieldwork, it was discovered that there were approximately 20 retailers selling one of the particular type of snack food but with outlets in various locations. A total of 10
retailers were selected as the sample from this list of 20 retailers. The other 10 retailers did not consent to be interviewed but their outlets were added to the list of retail spaces and included in the mapping and classification of spatial locations for the five types of snack foods.

Another two retailers for moon-cakes were obtained from fieldwork. A search through various media reports showed only the types of moon-cakes available and the outlets where they were sold or distributed. There was no indication of any new retailers of moon-cakes from such reports. However, during the actual fieldwork in September 2005, two of the owners were contacted for an interview when the researcher enquired from the staff at two of the outlets at a shopping mall. These two moon-cake owners were added to the other 10 snack food retailers. Thus, the total sample included 12 retailers of five types of traditional Chinese snack foods. Owners of kaya toast were excluded from the sample as they declined to be interviewed.

The study excluded the owners of wet market stalls who were selling similar snacks as their operating hours were often in the mornings only. This would not give accurate information on the new type of hawkers who provided such snacks at any time of the day. As the study was to find out the new hawkers of Chinese snacks, retailers who set up businesses before 1995 selling such snacks, as well as the bigger well-established chains were also excluded.

5.5 INSTRUMENTATION

Data were collected using a standardised interview schedule which contained a list of carefully worded questions (Appendix 2). The exact wording and sequence of the questions were determined in advance by piloting the questions with a small group of friends to check for ambiguous and unclear questions. The interview schedule incorporated questions relating to issues of business set-up and operations.
5.6 DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND PROCEDURES

5.6.1 Interviews with Food Vendors
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents over eight weeks in August and September 2005. Prior to the interview phase, informed consent was obtained from all respondents by a formal telephone call and at visits to their outlets. Some of the numbers of the respondents were given by the food correspondent from *The Straits Times* while others were given by the employees of the vendors when the researcher requested to conduct an interview with their owner.

All respondents were briefed on the purpose of the interview, why they had been chosen, how the information would be used and the amount of time required for the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by informing respondents of the protection of their identities in the publication of research findings. They were also informed of their right to decline to answer any particular questions during the interview.

An individual face-to-face interview was requested from each respondent except in two cases where the interviews were conducted over the telephone. Interview appointments were arranged by telephone with most of the respondents. An appropriate date, time and location were arranged at the respondents’ convenience. The names of respondents and the addresses of their outlets were noted. A street directory was also used to seek the locations of new food outlets as they were reported in press articles and local food guides.

Interviews were generally conducted at the respondents’ outlets during normal business operating hours (from 10 am to 10 pm). In one or two instances, the interviews were conducted at a café when it was more convenient for the respondents to be interviewed away from their own food outlets. The interviews were conducted according to the sequence of the interview schedule.
All respondents were asked the same questions to increase comparability of the responses. While the interviews generally followed the interview schedule, the precise wording and sequence of the questions were decided during the course of the interview. Some questions were paraphrased while some were adapted to conform to the answers given by specific respondents in the context of the actual interview. However, in cases where the respondents showed spontaneity in giving an elaborate account of their business operations, the interviewer pursued a more conversational style. At times, points were clarified and questions probed as appropriate to the ongoing conversation.

The interviews covered the respondent’s history of engagement in food retailing – when their business was established, their reasons for selling the particular food item, their targeted clientele, their business strategies, and their future goals and aspirations. The interviews were conducted in English except for those with two respondents who preferred to speak Mandarin as the researcher was able to understand and speak the language. The interviews with the selected owners of traditional Chinese food retail businesses took place at various food outlets in hawker centres, *kopi-tiams*, retail shops, and shopping malls in different districts of the city. All but one of the owners interviewed were of Chinese ethnicity.

All responses were documented by note-taking during the interview itself. This was done on a self-designed standardised template which contained all the questions in the interview schedule. This allowed the responses to be recorded quickly and easily as the respondents spoke. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes.

A few problems were encountered during the process of conducting the interviews. Since all the respondents were the owners or managing directors of food businesses, it was sometimes difficult to request immediate interviews and
most interviews were conducted some time after the initial telephone appointment.

5.6.2 Interview with Food Correspondent

An interview was also conducted with *The Straits Times* food correspondent who was selected based on her constant press coverage about food in the major local English paper. A formal letter was sent a month earlier prior to the fieldwork to the address of the newspaper organization which she was employed to request for permission to arrange for an interview. Through the reply of the food correspondent by email, the researcher was able to contact her through her mobile phone to arrange for a suitable time for an interview. The interview which lasted 20 minutes was conducted at the foyer of the Singapore Press Holdings, the organization for publishing local newspapers, including *The Straits Times*. Questions asked ranged from the reasons for the recent press coverage on traditional Chinese snack foods, the new trends in food retailing and how this trend affects future retailing or consumption patterns.

5.6.3 Participant Observation

Participant and informal observation was the second major data collection technique used. Permission was requested from the respondents after the interview to take images of their products and premises as well as to observe the food preparation and the equipment used. Direct observation was adopted to observe the type of workers employed, food packaging as well as the physical setting of the food outlets, such as the decor of the premises, the display of brand images, and the types of customers. Informal observation which included details of the physical settings and the type of food items served, were conducted at two *kaya* toast outlets because of the rejection of interviews by the owners. The findings were recorded in a small field notebook.
5.6.4 Spatial Mapping

From each interview conducted, the researcher gathered the locations and the total number of outlets from the retailer selling the particular snack food. A list was then tabulated to show all the retailers selling the types of snack food (excluding moon-cakes) and their locations in Singapore (Appendix 1). The list also included the locations of vendors which were sourced from food guides, websites, media reports, fieldwork as well as those owners who declined to be interviewed. The data from this list was used to map the spatial locations of five types of snack foods in Singapore.

From the locations of the various outlets listed in Appendix 1, the researcher determined the suburb or district with the help of a Singapore street directory. Using an atlas which contains a map of Singapore with names of the various suburbs and a tourist map showing the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations, the exact location of each type of snack food outlet was then mapped onto an outline map of Singapore. Symbols were used to differentiate the five types of snacks (Figure 6.1).

The data for the spatial distribution of moon-cakes was based on estimation because the snacks do not occupy permanent locations. Moon-cakes are seasonal snacks which are distributed and sold to all hotels, restaurants, shopping malls as well as at many individual retail bakery shops and confectionerries in Singapore during the Mid-Autumn Festival in September. However, an estimate of the total number of consumption spaces for moon-cakes was made based on the number of distribution outlets. With the help of a street directory which contains a list of all hotels and shopping malls in Singapore and websites containing a list of restaurants and bakeries, the approximate number of moon-cake outlets at each type of consumption space was noted (Table 6.1). Hence, the moon-cake data was based on estimation to give an indication of the various types of retail locations in Singapore. The
spatial locations for the retail locations of moon-cakes were not mapped for the purpose of this exercise. The mapping of all these locations would clutter the whole map.

The locations of the food outlets of all the vendors of snack foods (Appendix 1) enabled the researcher to categorise the total number of outlets according to the type of consumption space as shown in Table 6.1 (5 types of snacks) and Table 6.2 (moon-cakes). This data was analysed to form part of the discussion.

5.6.5 Document Analysis

Document analysis refers to the analysis of various forms of text as sources of research data. Newspapers, food magazines, cookbooks and food websites brochures and pamphlets were examined because they provide an important snapshot of an item as they pass through the production and consumption cycle. Table 5.1 shows the types of documents selected for analysis and how they are examined.

Local newspaper articles from The Straits Times, Business Times and The New Paper covering the period from 1995 to 2005 were sourced from Curtin University's electronic databases. The newspaper articles provided the data for the writing of the background information as well as for understanding the changing nature of Chinese snack foods. The press reports which publicized new food outlets also provided useful information for the selection of the interview sample. The addresses of new food outlets reported in the articles also helped in locating these outlets and in contacting some of the owners for interviews. Newspaper reports were selected by using keywords of the types of snacks under study. However, the older businesses established before 1995 were not selected for the sample but their contents were analysed for the writing of the research context. Businesses which were established after 1995 were
used to determine the sample size for the total number of retailers selling these types of snacks.

Food guides such as *Makansutra* (2005) provided information on popular hawker fare outlets. The food guides cover categories such as different types and locations of hawker fare and their eating places. This information assisted in purposive sampling for the study. Local websites such as *Singapore’s First Internet Best Food Online Directory* (www.sbestfood.com) provided information on the best food outlets in all districts according to the type of food category. This information helped to confirm the existence of any new outlets for snack foods which might not otherwise have been noted.

Books and travel guides documenting the history of Chinese and Singaporean cuisine were sourced from various public libraries in Singapore. Photographs and cookbooks on Chinese snacks in Singapore were also used to examine the changing nature of snack foods. Brochures and pamphlets supplied by the respondents and the STB also supplemented the other data sources and examined for contents. Table 5.1 summarizes the types of documents examined.

**TABLE 5.1 TYPES OF DOCUMENTS EXAMINED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Criteria and Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Newspaper Articles</td>
<td>Searched using keywords “pancakes”, “kaya toast”, “dessert”, “curry puff” and “moon-cakes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Food Guides</td>
<td>Produced from 1995 that relates to Singapore food or snacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cookbooks</td>
<td>Singapore cookbooks that include recipes and images of Chinese snacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>Searched using keywords “Singapore” and “Food”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brochures</td>
<td>Produced by the vendors and STB that relates to food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Taken at vendors’ outlets and examined for contents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.7 DATA VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To ensure validity and reliability of the data collected, a number of methods were adopted. Validity refers to the accuracy of the use of interviews for the study while reliability refers to the credibility of the answers given by respondents.

Firstly, triangulation was used to ensure validity of the data. This refers to the use of more than one source of data to confirm the authenticity of each source, or the seeking out of instances of a phenomenon in several different settings (Denzin 1978). Reports from various press articles covering a 10 year period from 1995 onwards were used to substantiate the credibility of the context of the interviews. These were followed up in a non-directive interview with The Straits Times food correspondent on current trends in traditional food retailing.

Secondly, the interview sample was obtained from different locations. Selecting a broad representation of respondents within different food categories located in various settings and in different districts across Singapore, enhanced the reliability of the research findings on a national scale.

Thirdly, the contents of each interview were checked against the other interviews conducted to see if there was some level of consistency. The identification of several recurrent themes that emerged from a number of interviews indicated that similar issues and concerns were shared among the respondents.

Fourthly, direct contact using a face-to-face interview allowed the data to be checked for accuracy as they were collected. Any unclear answers could be probed or clarified when necessary. In cases where respondents gave an elaborate account using a conversational style, they were asked to confirm the accuracy of the data after it was paraphrased for them. To ensure credibility of data, the timing for interviews was taken into consideration. Visits for interviews
were conducted by avoiding the peak business hours between 12pm and 2pm. This helped to minimise distractions, ensure more elaborate responses and maximise the opportunity to ask all the questions in the interview schedule.

5.8 PROBLEMS ANTICIPATED AND ENCOUNTERED

Before the interviews were conducted, it was anticipated that the food entrepreneurs would have problems communicating in English since most hawkers in Singapore use Mandarin as their normal medium of communication. However, this problem did not eventuate to any significant extent because all the respondents spoke fluent English except for two participants who preferred to speak Mandarin. The researcher was able to conduct all the interviews herself through a combination of English and Mandarin.

Problems were also encountered in getting the consent of the owners for interviews. Attempts to contact the eight owners of *kaya toast* for interviews were unsuccessful. None of the owners of this snack food could be contacted for an interview when the researcher went down to the outlets. The telephone numbers of the owners were obtained from the employees of the outlets. Six of the owners declined to be interviewed when contacted while another two vendors said they will contact the researcher by phone at a later date. One of the owners agreed to come down to his outlet at a specific time. However, despite waiting for more than two hours, the owner failed to turn up for the interview and he called his staff to inform the researcher that he does not wish to be interviewed. Another owner called to say that she was very busy and will call at a later date but there was no reply. When the researcher called to her mobile phone several times, there was no response.

Several problems were encountered in obtaining official data from government organizations and other statutory boards in Singapore. First, attempts to obtain evidence on the number of retailers selling specific snack foods in Singapore
were unsuccessful. The Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA), a government agency that oversees the registration of business entities in Singapore replied that “a filer does not need to specify the types of food sold when submitting the application for the registration of a business entity” (S. Lee, personal communication, 12 February, 2008).

Enterprise One, an organization which offers support to people starting a new business, also replied that their organization does not keep records of establishments selling specific types of food. Similarly, the National Environment Agency (NEA), the government agency which issues licenses to hawkers or food operators, replied that “while NEA licenses food retail establishments, we do not keep records of the foods which they retail (S. Lee, personal communication, 13 Feb, 2008).” Hence, it was not possible to obtain evidence from government sources to show that there were 20 businesses in 2005 selling the selected category of snacks. As the study included only selected snack foods sold in the new retail spaces and excluded market stalls, the bigger franchise chains as well as businesses opened before 1995, it was also difficult to obtain official records of the exact number of such businesses because retailers are not categorized according to old and established businesses or new retail operators.

Second, attempts to obtain data on the number of males or females in the food and beverage industry, was futile. The information was needed to verify the data obtained from field study that men dominated the food retail industry in Singapore. Of the several email messages, all the officers from various organizations responded with negative replies. An officer from an organization responded with the following message: “…we are unable to give you the figures of the number of male and female hawkers” (S. Lee, personal communication, 6 May, 2008) while another organization gave a blunt reply and suggested that “a company should be engaged to perform a market research, as there is no specific known organization who collate such information” (S. Lee, personal
communication, 2 May, 2008). E-mail messages to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and personal visits to the Housing and Development Board (HDB) also proved futile as the customer service officers were unable to respond to the queries while some simply replied they were unable to provide such information.

The negative replies from various government and retail business organisations and the rejection of interviews from several kaya toast owners, show that most officers and retailers in Singapore are uncooperative in providing information to people without official status.

5.9 DATA ANALYSIS

The 12 retailers chosen for the study represent about 60 per cent of all retailers selling the selected category of snacks in Singapore. This allows the data analysis to be generalized to other retailers selling the same category of snack foods. The views of the respondents interviewed may also be suggestive of the views of all micro-entrepreneurs who have similar food snack businesses.

Data analysis involved analytic coding, identification of themes and the development of generalizations. The interview transcripts were broken down into units for analysis. This involved identifying specific words, ideas and phrases used in the interviews. Similar recurring words were categorized together as units of analysis. The themes that recurred between these units were identified and general observations made from the themes and relationships identified in the data.

Other data such as photographs, brochures and pamphlets were also examined to uncover meanings, patterns and relationships. Photographs and brochures given by the owners were analysed for content. Media reports and promotion banners on kaya toast snack were examined for contents in order to examine the changes to the snack.
5.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a summary of the research design used for the study, its data collection procedures, and the methods used to ensure validity and to analyse the data. The data collected from the respondents assisted in understanding the patterns of spatial distribution and growth of a new class of food enterprises in Singapore. The main findings of the study will be presented in the following chapter.
Given the confidentiality of Chapter 6 (pages 109-146), it has been removed to protect sensitive information.

I strongly urge that no images in all the chapters are to be copied or scanned in any form without the permission of the author.
CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarizes and discusses some of the main themes that emerge from the findings. The first section examines the changing nature of snacks and discusses the factors which have led to their popularity. The second section discusses the changing nature of hawking and examines the business strategies adopted by the new entrepreneurs by comparing them to hawkers from previous generations.

7.2 THE CHANGING NATURE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE SNACKS

7.2.1 New Flavours and Ingredients

Interview data, participant and informal observation, media, cookbook and photograph analysis, show that the method of preparation, ingredients used and appearance of some of the snacks are not similar to traditional recipes. Table 7.1 lists the differences between the traditional and modern versions of the six types of snack foods.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snack Food</th>
<th>Traditional Version</th>
<th>Modified Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curry Puffs</td>
<td>Pastry, baked flaky crust</td>
<td>Pastry, deep-fried crust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingredients, chicken meat, onions</td>
<td>Ingredients, curried chicken meat,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and curry powder</td>
<td>potatoes, egg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pepper chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sardines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fruit fillings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dessert Soups</td>
<td>Varieties, hot <em>cheng tng</em></td>
<td>Varieties, Hot and cold <em>cheng tng</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>red bean soup</td>
<td>red bean soup with coconut milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>green bean soup</td>
<td>green bean soup with cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sweet potato soup</td>
<td>mango sago pudding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>steamed egg custard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>barley with gingko nuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaya Toasts</td>
<td>Ingredients, kaya (egg jam) with</td>
<td>Ingredients, chocolate, peanut butter,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>margarine</td>
<td>barbecued pork, mushroom sauce, Hawaiian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shapes, thin brown charcoal-grilled</td>
<td>toast, white toast, baguette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pancakes</td>
<td>Texture, crispy and flat crust</td>
<td>Texture, Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingredients, red bean paste</td>
<td>Ingredients, cheese, chocolate, coconut,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chopped peanuts and sugar</td>
<td>tuna, corn, red bean, green bean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shapes, round, sliced</td>
<td>Shapes, round, sliced, flat, roll-ups,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>open-faced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean Custard</td>
<td>Flavour, soybean curd with sugar</td>
<td>Flavour, Soybean curd with palm sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean Milk</td>
<td>Syrup</td>
<td>(<em>gula melaka</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mooncakes</td>
<td>Crust, oven-baked</td>
<td>Crust, Unbaked soft snowskin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour, brown</td>
<td>Colour, pink, green, orange, yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingredients, lotus paste with</td>
<td>Ingredients, green tea, durian, strawberry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>salted duck egg yolk</td>
<td>yoghurt, Bailey’s Irish cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shape, round shapes of about 9cm</td>
<td>Shape, mini round shapes of about 5cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.2.1.1 Curry Puffs

Books on Chinese cuisine such as Liu (2004) and an analysis of Chinese cookbooks do not show that curry puffs originate from China. In a press report in The Sunday Times, the author of a local cookbook, Mary’s Recipes: A Celebration of a Singapore Kitchen (2007), who shared her recipe for a Eurasian-style curry puff, said she was “uncertain about its origin” (Huang, 2008a). Tan’s (2004) Singapore Heritage Food, however, shows that the Hainanese were the first to sell the Chinese snack with a western baked puff pastry. Since then, many versions of the curry puff have evolved from the Hainanese method of preparation.

For instance, what distinguishes the curry puff in 2005 from the Hainanese baked flaky pastry is a deep-fried and shell-like crust. Another distinctive feature of the curry puff is the use of a slice of hard-boiled egg and potatoes, two ingredients which are not found in the recipes of the Hainanese (Plate 7.1). While one of the respondents claim the use of chicken meat, a “traditional ingredient” and the other the use of a “deep-fried Hainanese-style pastry”, both versions are not consistent with the recipe of Polar Puffs and Cakes, the Hainanese confectionery chain, published in Tan’s (2004) Singapore Heritage Food, of a baked crust pastry with “curry powder, chicken meat and onions” (Tan, 2004:37). This implies that new curry puffs sold by the hawker-entrepreneurs are not authentic or “traditional” but include some aspects of the Haninanese preparation style. The Hainanese cooks have already modified the curry puff recipe which they learnt from the British during the colonial days, to suit local palates. The new hawker-entrepreneurs have further substituted chopped onions for potatoes and egg and changed the baked pastry to a deep-fried snack. The findings suggest that the fusion of eastern and western preparation styles of curry puffs have changed further to include certain elements of different culinary traditions of hawkers in Singapore.
7.2.1.2 Dessert Soups

Sweet soups are often taken by the Chinese for health benefits, besides serving as desserts after a meal. The eating of sweet dessert soups continues as a food tradition in Singapore. Traditionally, itinerant hawkers selling dessert soups typically serve the standard varieties which include *cheng tng*, sweet potato soup, red bean soup and green bean soup but recent specialities from Hong Kong such as mango sago pudding, ginger juice milk, steamed egg pudding and cold longan with jelly were served by the new hawker-entrepreneurs in order to cater to other ethnic communities and tourists. The traditional sweet dessert soups are no longer found in the menus of the new hawker-entrepreneurs but such desserts are still available at some food-court stalls and hawker centres.
Contemporary Singapore cookbooks which feature recipes for sweet dessert soups such as green bean soup, red bean soup and *cheng tng* show different versions from the cookbooks featuring recipes by the early street hawkers such as Tan’s (2004) *Singapore Heritage Food* as well as in Chinese cookbooks such as Law & Lee’s (2004) *The Food of China*. The typical green or red bean soup eaten in China consisted of just plain beans or the addition of lotus seeds and dried orange peel to the red bean soup (Law & Lee, 2004). Today’s variations include the addition of sago and coconut milk to both the green bean and red bean soup. The addition of coconut milk or cream suggests the influence of *Nyonya* culinary traditions as the ingredient is a common flavoring of their dishes and the making of cakes and *kueh* (Hutton, 1984). This new substitution of ingredients confirms Chua’s (2001) work which noted that while “Chinese and Malay dishes are present within the menu of *Peranakan* (*Nyonya*) cuisine, hybridity is apparent in many of their dishes” (Chua, 2001:161).

Another sweet dessert soup, *cheng tng*, has also undergone some variations. A press article reported that the hot dessert was “served with more than 20 types of ingredients including dried persimmon, gingko nuts, black longan, lotus seed, barley, brown seaweed, white fungus and jelly strips” when peddled by itinerant hawkers (Tee, 2001), while Tan’s (2004) *Singapore Heritage Food* cookbook states that it contained five basic ingredients (barley, longans, dried persimmons, gingko nuts and lotus seeds) when sold by the early street hawkers. An observation of a bowl of *cheng teng* served at a food-court does not show the basic ingredients listed by Tan (2204). For instance, ingredients such as dried persimmons, gingko nuts and lotus seeds have been omitted (Plate 7.2). This suggests that the ingredients for *cheng tng* have changed probably as a result of the expensive cost of some of the ingredients. A press article by Tee (2001) reported that only one out of the five best *cheng tng* stalls in Singapore, found and reviewed by a group of food critics, uses 21 types of ingredients. Unlike the traditional *cheng tng* which is regarded as a “cooling” dessert taken to relieve heatiness in the body, today’s version is simply a sweet snack with cheap ingredients. The hot dessert soup is also available as a cold
dessert served with crushed ice. This suggests that present-day *cheng tng* is no longer a “healthy snack”, a belief claimed by the older generations of Chinese as reported in a press article by Tee (2001).

![Plate 7.2](http://images.google.com) Cheap substitutes have replaced the basic ingredients in *cheng tng*

7.2.1.3 Kaya Toast

Toasted bread has never been a breakfast item in China as analysed from media reports and cookbooks. *Kaya* toast is a Singaporean invention and became a popular breakfast fare after its introduction by traditional Hainanese coffee-shops. *Kaya* or egg jam, made with coconut milk, eggs and sugar and flavoured with pandan leaves, probably has its influence from the *Nyonyas*, who love coconut milk and pandan leaves in their cooking. Unlike the plain toast
spread with smooth, green-coloured kaya offered by traditional coffee-shops, the new hawker-entrepreneurs’ version includes more elaborate concoctions with chocolate, durian, peanut butter and new local ingredients such as pork floss, hae bee hiam (spicy minced dried shrimps) and barbequed sweet pork slices. Other ingredients from Western influences include pasta and creamy mushroom sauce and Hawaiian pizza toppings. Instead of the usual thin, crustless white bread, new specialities include thick toast, brown bread and French baguette. Kaya toast has gained such popularity in Singapore that the snack offered by new competitors is now completely different from the brown signature toast first offered by Ya Kun Kaya Toast in the 1940s. The new variations suggest that the once “humble” and “lowly breakfast fare” of charcoal-grilled toast for the early immigrants as reported in a press article by Teo (2003b), has now evolved into a “Uniquely Singapore(an)” appetizing snack in keeping with the tagline as promoted by STB since 2004 (STB, 2004b).

7.2.1.4 Peanut Pancakes

*Ming Jiang Kueh* (peanut pancake) was not mentioned by Liu (2004) as a Chinese breakfast snack. Plain or savoury pancakes filled with onions and vegetables rather than peanuts were the preferred choice of ingredients in China (Liu, 2004). An analysis of Rosemary’s (2003) cookbook on *Southeast Asian Food* and Law & Lee’s (2004) *The Food of China*, do not show any recipe for the snack. A press article, however, reported that peanut pancakes were “widely known to have originated from China’s Guangdong province” and was “brought by Chinese immigrants to places like Singapore, Sabah, Penang and Jakarta from the turn of the 20th century” (Teo, 2005b). The report mentioned a “crispy” pancake crust filled with “sugar and finely ground peanuts” offered by a wet market stall in Singapore which has been selling the snack for 40 years (Teo, 2005b). One of the distinguishing features of *ming jiang kueh* sold in 2005 by the new hawker-entrepreneurs is a soft skin texture, unlike the traditional flat, crispy version sold by wet market stalls. The thick peanut paste, made by
factories, is also different from the traditional freshly chopped roasted peanut and sugar fillings (Plate 7.3). The traditional pancake has also evolved beyond simple peanuts and red bean versions to coconut, cheese, chocolate, tuna, pork floss and corn in different shapes and sizes.

7.2.1.5 Soybean Curd and Milk

A typical breakfast fare in China includes steamed buns or deep-fried dough sticks with a glass of soybean milk and soybean curd. The eating of soybean milk and curd continues as both a breakfast and lifestyle snack in Singapore. The typical white douhua or the silky, smooth soybean curd custard has always been served with plain sugar syrup but in 2005, gula melaka (palm sugar syrup) and the addition of ingredients such as gingko nuts and red beans are offered by
the new hawker-entrepreneurs (Plate 7.4). A variety of flavours such as ginger, almond, grass jelly, green tea and wheatgrass are added to the white colour of soybean milk. The recent creation of *chendol* flavoured soybean milk suggests a local ethnic influence. *Chendol* which consists of shaved ice with coconut milk, red beans and grass jelly stripes was a popular gastronomic delight of the *Nyonyas* who often use coconut milk in their recipes. Hence, the creation of new flavours has changed the traditional white beverage into a localized Singaporean drink. Recipes for soybean milk and soybean custard, however, are not found in cookbooks probably because such snacks require elaborate preparation and equipment.

Plate 7.4 Soybean custard with gingko nuts

7.2.1.6 Moon-cakes

The Chinese tradition of celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival and the eating of moon-cakes continues in Singapore. The overall physical shape of moon-cakes, however, has not changed much. Moon-cakes are still basically round to symbolise the shape of the moon. Moon-cakes, however, are now designed to appeal to the eye as much as the palate. The usual round shapes is also available in miniature sizes now. Apart from the brown hues of oven-baked moon-cakes, soft snow-skinned varieties in pastel shades such as pink, light green, orange and white are available. Moon-cakes are now made from both Asian and Western ingredients to create a new fusion of flavours. New “melt-in-the-mouth” unbaked snowskin moon-cakes with an assortment of flavours ranging from strawberry yoghurt and durian to Bailey’s Irish cream have replaced traditional baked moon-cakes with lotus seed paste and salted egg yolk fillings. Compared with the original baked moon-cakes which can be left at room temperature for at least two weeks, the snow-skinned varieties need to be refrigerated. While the traditional version has a hard crust, the melt-in-the-mouth unbaked snow-skin is extremely thin as it is made from glutinous rice flour and sugar.

The Ministry of Health’s current efforts to encourage hawkers to prepare healthier fare by using less salt and high-cholesterol gravies, and to promote healthy food choices among consumers, has drawn retailers to create “sugarless moon-cakes” made with artificial sweeteners as well as moon-cakes filled with low-fat yoghurt. These moon-cakes contain lower calories compared to the traditional baked moon-cakes so health-conscious people can now enjoy the festive snack without the worry of added calories. It is now possible for vegetarians as well as people of various ethnic races who have a penchant for traditional Chinese food to enjoy vegetarian and halal-certified moon-cakes. Moon-cakes, with the once delightful combination of lotus seed paste and egg yolks, offered as sacrifices to the moon, have now become gifts and
gastronomical delights with its dazzling colours and varieties to tempt the consuming passions of Chinese and other ethnic consumers.

Although a number of variations of the traditional Chinese snacks prevail now, traditional ones with original ingredients are still retailed by some of the new hawker-entrepreneurs as well as at some retail shophouse units or hawker stalls at wet markets. In general, the recipes promoted in cookbooks and the new group of hawker-entrepreneurs showed evidence of the substitution of local ingredients, new appearance and preparation styles which reflect a “re-invention” of traditional Chinese food. The modified recipes, thus, reflect changes in Singapore’s foodways.

7.2.2 Attractive Packaging

The Chinese snacks have been given new packaging much to the satisfaction of consumers. Unlike hawkers at market stalls who often serve soybean milk in glass cups and pour the liquid soybean milk into plastic bags and tie them with a rubber band for take-away purchase, the modern packaged soybean custard and soy milk comes in transparent plastic containers and cups. This has made consumption of soybean milk and curd more convenient and allows the snack to be eaten on-the-go. The packaging of soybean milk with brand names of the retailers suggests a repositioning of the traditional breakfast beverage as a contemporary soft drink similar to that of Western fast food chains, such as McDonald’s big “M” on its plastic cups.

From personal experience and observation, the packaging of moon-cakes has changed in style and presentation during the past two decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, moon-cakes were placed in big, square cardboard boxes which were cumbersome to carry and often discarded after use. The modern retailing trend is to encourage consumers to buy the product through the creation of beautiful packaging. Today, simple cardboard boxes have been
replaced by attractive lacquered tins and boxes bearing the name of the hotel or restaurant which made the moon-cakes. For instance, Sheraton Towers Hotel packages moon-cakes in an attractive tin box with a drawing of the Tang Dynasty Chinese poet Li Bai (701-762), in which their restaurant also bears the same name (Plate 7.5). The trendy moon-cake boxes also make beautiful gifts for friends and relatives.

Traditionally, a box contains four big round moon-cakes but new packaging gives customers the choice of buying the festive snack in mini bite sizes, ranging from six to eight pieces. Consumers who are unable to finish a big moon-cake at one helping do not have the worry about the paste becoming dry after consuming a few slices. The mini moon-cakes give customers the satisfaction of consuming the quantity according to their preference.

Plate 7.5 An attractive moon-cake box from Sheraton Towers Hotel Singapore

Source: [http://thebakerwhocooks.blogspot.com](http://thebakerwhocooks.blogspot.com)  <accessed 5 August 2006>
7.2.3 Increased Accessibility

The Chinese snacks have been made more accessible for consumers today. Figure 6.1 provides a comprehensive mapping of the new snack food businesses but excluded the old established chains, market stalls and businesses established before 1995. The spatial mapping shows that shopping malls are the dominant retail locations which are relatively evenly distributed throughout Singapore. The southern areas around Orchard and Chinatown, however, show a higher density of outlets (Figure 6.1). This is because these areas are part of the Central Business District (CBD), which comprises areas and neighbourhoods with many shopping malls and other retail spaces (Figure 7.1). The only exception is for moon-cakes, which do not have permanent retail locations as they are seasonal snacks sold only in August and September during the annual Mid-Autumn Festival.

![Map of Singapore showing high density of snack food outlets in the CBD](http://en.wikipedia.org)  
Accessed 2 May 2008
As the various government organizations contacted replied that they were unable to provide statistics to show the number of different categories of snack food businesses, it was difficult to confirm if there were, indeed, 20 owners of the selected types of snacks in Singapore. The data obtained from fieldwork and those reported in the local print media, however, demonstrates a similarity. For example, a local newspaper reported that “…there are more than 70 outlets…” selling the traditional peanut pancake, of which “…more than half of them popped up less than five years ago…” (Teo, 2005b). This number corresponds close to the total number of 77 outlets obtained from fieldwork (Table 6.1). Another press article reported that “in 2004 those in the industry said that there were about five such shops…” offering Hong Kong-style desserts (Lin, K. 2006). This number shows an exact similarity to the five outlets obtained from fieldwork (Table 6.1). An extensive search through various press reports for the number of retailers of other types of snacks proved to be unsuccessful.

The distribution for the six types of Chinese snack foods would be different when compared to sellers of other snack foods in Singapore. Other types of snack food businesses in Singapore include retailers of contemporary snacks and dim sum (Chapter 2). Contemporary snacks are retailed mostly in shopping malls and not at hawker centres or food-courts while dim sum snacks are served mostly at Chinese restaurants.

As reported by Kong (2007) and Teo (2003c) in a press report titled Going Going, on 2 October, 2003, many sellers of traditional snacks such as pastries and kueh are gradually disappearing while the few existing pastry shops in Singapore are found in a few shophouse units and wet market stalls. The number of stalls selling contemporary snacks is increasing and may gradually exceed the number of traditional Chinese snack outlets but their spatial distribution may not be similar to the six types of snack foods in the study. Contemporary snacks currently occupy a dominant retail space in the basement
food halls of shopping malls (Huang, 2008b). Hence, the spatial distribution of other categories of snacks such as dim sum or contemporary snacks will not show a relatively even distribution in all the types of consumption spaces in all the districts or suburbs across the country.

Traditional breakfast snacks which were once sold mostly at coffee-shops and wet market stalls, are becoming popular items in Singapore’s foodscape as more food consumption spaces are built. With the gradual disappearance of old shophouses and the decline in the number of hawkers selling such snacks at wet market stalls because of the lack of continuation of family trade by the younger generations, Singaporeans are now able to buy the snacks at many convenient locations in neighbourhood shopping malls.

The Singapore government has indirectly influenced the nature of the snack food retailing landscape. The creation of new consumption spaces such as food streets, food-courts, shopping malls, airport transit lounges, cinema complexes, and the redevelopment of Mass Rapid Transit stations for retail businesses, has enabled the snacks to move into these food retail locations. In July 1996, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has relaxed its guidelines for setting up outdoor kiosks along pedestrian malls in the city so as to improve vibrant streetscape. Since then, many food kiosks have sprung up not only along Orchard Road but also outside shopping malls façade (URA, 1997).

This gives consumers easy access to the snacks. The creation of new consumption spaces has transformed the urban foodscape. This new “narrative” of foodscape implies a greater interest in “traditional” ethnic food retailing since businesses that see themselves, or are seen by their consumers, as traditional and ethnic have moved from wet markets and old coffee-shops to the new consumption spaces. The modern food consumption spaces are a contrast to traditional food stalls which were generally seen as old-fashioned and dirty. The creation of new consumption spaces by the government has
enabled retailers to preserve, or at least to modify, particular versions of Chinese culture through the sale of new variants of “traditional” snack foods as well as facilitating their consumption as part of contemporary lifestyle trends. The distribution of “traditional” food locations has also given rise to a spatial configuration that provides a wide selection of outlets which gives consumers increased accessibility and convenience.

7.2.4 All Day Retailing

The concept of giving convenience to consumers has taken the form of all day retailing by the new hawker-entrepreneurs. The snacks meet customers’ needs for meals at any time of the day as compared to the past when such snacks were prepared in the mornings by hawkers at wet market stalls only for breakfast consumption. The retailing of most of the snacks at shopping malls and their late closing hours at 10 pm gives consumers the convenience of purchasing the snacks at any time. The role of traditional Chinese snack foods as convenient “Chinese fast-food” is manifested in the “grab and go” concept adopted by the new hawker-entrepreneurs of Chinese snack food businesses. This concept also accounts for the lack of structured eating facilities, such as tables or chairs, at most of the snack food outlets except for sweet dessert soup and kaya toast stalls as such snacks are served in bowls, cups and saucers.

7.2.5 Affordability

The Chinese snacks thrive because of competitive pricing and relative cheapness mainly because the ingredients used are also either cheap or inexpensive. The snacks are still relatively cheap in 2005 as the price range from S$1 to S$2 for a curry puff, pancake or a soybean milk beverage compared to a one-dish meal at a hawker centre or food-court which costs between S$4 and S$5 (Plate 7.6). In contrast with the other five types of snack foods which are cheap and are priced between S$1 and $3, a box of moon-cake range from
S$45 to as high as S$888. The high prices of moon-cakes, however, have not affected the sales of moon-cakes. Instead, many retailers reported increase in profits from the sales of moon-cakes in 2007 (Mooncake sales expected to hit a high this year, Channel NewsAsia, 30 August, 2007). This may be because Singaporeans are willing to pay for good quality food, especially when the festive snack is eaten only once a year. However, with the increasing number of outlets selling the similar types of snacks, most retailers will keep their prices low in order to remain competitive. Usually the most expensive cost item is the labour and amount of time needed to prepare the food. Very few families, however, are prepared to go through all the tedious work to fix these snacks at home so the affordable prices will continue to attract customers.

Plate 7.6 Prices of pancakes at most vendors’ outlets cost between S$1 and S$2

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7.3 THE CHANGING NATURE OF HAWKING

In Singapore, the growth of traditional Chinese snack food retailing is an example of a new trend in consumption patterns. The hawking of Chinese food and snacks, however, has changed considerably today. Table 7.2 lists the differences between past and present-day hawking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Past Hawkers</th>
<th>Present Hawkers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Little or no formal education</td>
<td>Some university graduate hawkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speak dialects</td>
<td>Speak English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>In the streets and hawker centres</td>
<td>In shopping malls, food-courts, kopitiams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment</td>
<td>Family-run business</td>
<td>Self-owned business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continue family business</td>
<td>Numerous self-owned outlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>Operate mostly in the mornings</td>
<td>Operate the whole day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stall run by the stall owner</td>
<td>Outlets run by managers and supervisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help given by wife and children</td>
<td>Employ salaried staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food &amp; culinary skills</td>
<td>Cater to the poor and hungry</td>
<td>Cater to new changing tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sell one type of food</td>
<td>Sell a variety of food products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learnt cooking skills from parents</td>
<td>Acquire secret recipes as a stepping stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Use hand labour</td>
<td>Use new technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big and bulky cooking utensils</td>
<td>Small and compact cooking equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Continue family business</td>
<td>Copy successful business concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Use of voices and sounds</td>
<td>Big signboards with company’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small signboard</td>
<td>Use of media advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Create websites and brochures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduce refund policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clientele</td>
<td>Target older consumers</td>
<td>Target young adults and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>Remain as small business</td>
<td>Franchising the business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tap local market</td>
<td>Tap Asian market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diversify food products</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.3.1 Profile of New Hawkers

Unlike Bangkok’s foodscapes, where the significance of traditional food is gradually declining (Yasmeen 2000), some of Singapore’s traditional street food types which are slowly disappearing from the markets have been preserved, albeit in a modified form, by an emergent group of new hawkers.

The interview findings indicate that the majority of the new hawkers are males and their age ranges from 23 to 35 years. Unlike most hawkers of previous generations who “had little or no formal education” (Kong, 2007:134), the majority of the new retailers are more “educated” as they have passed secondary four education while four of them tertiary qualifications. The older generation hawkers often use dialects in their conversations with customers but all of the respondents could speak English during the interview session. Eleven of the respondents do not consider themselves as “hawkers” because they felt that the term describes someone who sells food at a market stall or hawker centre. When asked, most of them said they see themselves as “businessmen” because they are “in-charge” of their businesses. The staff who was observed preparing the food addressed four of the respondents as “lao-ban” (Mandarin term for boss) when they arrived for the researcher’s interview session. This suggests that the term “hawker-entrepreneurs” may be more appropriately used in this study to describe the new retailers who possessed enterprising qualities.

Based on the data obtained from fieldwork, it was apparent that males are taking an interest in food retailing in Singapore. This is also happening in some other Asian cities such as Bangkok where many new eateries have been owned and operated by men since the late 1990s (Yasmeen, 2001). Male dominance in the food hawking businesses in Singapore contrasts with the pattern in Iloilo, Philippines, where 79 per cent of the street-food establishments are operated by women and only 21 per cent by men (Tinker, 1997). The domination by men of at least this sector of food retailing in Singapore challenges an earlier view that
women are more likely to become entrepreneurs in the food industry in Southeast Asia (Tinker, 2003).

7.3.2 Stall Locations and Establishment

Traditionally, all hawking activities were carried out in the streets before hawkers were relocated to permanent hawker centres in the 1960s. Food hawking, however, has occupied new retail spaces such as air-conditioned food-courts and shopping malls. Eight of the hawker-entrepreneurs have located their outlets mostly in shopping malls. The tradition of inheriting the family business was common in the past and many hawkers operated businesses which were handed to them from previous generations. Established hawkers were likely to continue in their trade, as they faced difficulty in finding other work with their limited educational qualifications (Kong, 2007).

7.3.3 Business Venture

As people become more educated since the 1980s, hawking did not appeal to the younger generation who prefer to seek other professions which offer better economic opportunities. The hawking trade today, however, seems to appeal to those who have the capital to start a business by employing staff to operate their stall. This may account for only one out of the 12 respondents in continuing the family business of selling curry puffs (Table 6.5). The majority of the respondents, however, ventured into hawking on their own and do not have any experience in the food retail business. Some of the foreigners who have settled in Singapore, either as citizens or permanent residents, have also ventured into the Chinese snack food business as a profession, as in the case of the Dutch who sold curry puffs and the pancake retailer whose hometown was from Sabah.
The study findings also showed that the Asian crisis in 1997/1998 was not an important reason for these hawker-entrepreneurs to set up privately-owned, small-scale food enterprises. All the entrepreneurs interviewed maintained that they did not turn to food retailing for survival during the economic recession from 1997 onwards. Rather, they were motivated by a passion for food, coupled with their desire to run their own businesses. The findings revealed that the majority of new hawker-entrepreneurs in Singapore characteristically ventured into “traditional” food retailing on their own and not by continuing the family trade. The responses did not vary between the two subgroups of entrepreneurs who set up businesses before and after the crisis, indicating that the crisis did not play a significant part in their decision to set up food business ventures.

The recession led to the closure of certain food businesses but some of the hawker-entrepreneurs have already opened food outlets during the crisis period. Five of the entrepreneurs said that they had already set up their first food outlet before the crisis or during the economic downturn between 1995 -1999 (Table 6.3). Some 85 per cent of the sample establishments were opened either, before or after the crisis rather than during the period. This suggests that the crisis was not a significant factor in the entrepreneurs’ decisions to move into the food vending businesses.

This finding appears to contradict contemporary press reports indicating that during the recession “many eateries turned off their ovens and shut their doors for good, changed hands or are facing serious problems” (Lum, 1998). However, Teo (2003a) reported that, because of these business closures landlords were more willing to negotiate prices with new tenants. This in turn led to lower rents which encouraged a:

new wave of eateries, many opened by first-time restaurateurs banking on lower costs. Many people have also decided to start their own food businesses as they were facing slim opportunities in the job market or were retrenched from their jobs

(Teo, 2003a).
The decision of the hawker-entrepreneurs to enter the food retailing business was not due to retrenchment or dismissal from their previous jobs. Two of the entrepreneurs were dissatisfied with their previous jobs in the information technology industry and have decided to carve their niche in the food retailing industry. The majority of the respondents have entered the food retailing business because of their passion for food. While the hawker-entrepreneurs did not state that the economic recession affected their decision to venture into food retailing, it may be that the economic crisis created a new economic space which made it more attractive for them to enter the market by taking advantage of the lower rents and a drop in competition.

7.3.4 Stall Operations

Traditionally, most Chinese hawkers operated a single stall and had family members to help them prepare food or tend the outlet (Kong, 2007). Despite the hard work involved, the hawking trade was basically a family business. This situation was similar to that in most Asian countries where street food vending was a family enterprise (Tinker 1999, 2003).

The majority of the new hawker-entrepreneurs in Singapore, however, does not operate the stalls themselves but engage salaried employees to prepare and sell the snacks. Fieldwork observations show that female workers are usually employed to prepare the food at all the snack outlets (Plate 7.7). The food is not prepared by people with professional culinary skills except for the making of moon-cakes. A more experienced staff will train a new employee who acquires on the job training. Unlike women in the Philippines or in Africa who are directly involved in food preparation and tending the stalls, the male hawker-entrepreneurs in Singapore leave the task to operations managers, supervisors and workers to run their businesses. The fact that 11 of the 12 respondents had to be contacted for interviews suggests that their role was that of an
executive chairman who merely oversees the company’s management at their main office.

The fact that the owners’ families in Singapore do not have a role in these food micro-enterprises may represent a new business trend in the region, although the evidence for this is limited. What most studies show is that the most common practice in small-scale food enterprises in other Southeast Asian cities is that of employing family labour (Tinker 1999, 2003). The data presented suggests that there is a shift away from employing family members to help run the business. Traditionally, it was family members who provided the labour in the food vending businesses in many Asian countries. However, these predominantly male Singapore hawker-entrepreneurs employ non-family labour in their food outlets.
7.3.5 Culinary Skills

In the 1960s and 1970s, the subsidized rents given by the government enabled hawkers in public housing estates to provide food at affordable prices. Many hawkers cater their food to the masses with their specialty dish. Many hawkers acquired their cooking skills from their parents (Kong, 2007).

Today's hawkers, however, did not learn any culinary skills from their parents. Eight of the 12 hawker-entrepreneurs said that they have a "secret recipe" which they obtained from relatives or bought from "professional" food vendors for the sale of their food items. Only two of the entrepreneurs selling curry puffs replied that they learnt their culinary skills from their parents. These two respondents were the only retailers who were directly involved in the cooking and preparation of the food at their stalls. The other ten hawker-entrepreneurs were not directly involved in the cooking process but relied on salaried staff to prepare the food items.

7.3.6 Diversification and Modifications

Traditionally, hawkers catered to hungry people especially working adults with their specialty dish. Today's hawker-entrepreneurs, however, produced a diversification of food products for new groups of consumers such as young adults, children and tourists. The diversification of products includes Western food items such as muffins and quiche sold by the pancake retailer and other types of local snacks besides the specialty snack food sold.

The snacks currently marketed, however, are different from those in the past through modifications of traditional versions. Although the original form of traditional food is still marketed, most of the snacks available now are variations of traditional Chinese snack foods. The new variations such as bite-sized pancakes and mini moon-cakes represent attempts by the owners to inject
novelty and invoke the idea of gastronomical fun, which is a particularly modern concept targeted at the younger market. The modified traditional Chinese snack foods are different from the traditional snacks in the use of ingredients and method of preparation. Many different versions of traditional snack foods incorporating both local and traditional ingredients have emerged to cater to the different tastes of consumers such as children and young adults. For example, the use of new ingredients such as chocolate truffle, macadamia white lotus in moon-cakes and creamy mushroom sauce in toasts, suggest that traditional foods are no longer confined to Chinese influence but also a mixture of other ethnic and Western influences. The taste and ingredients used may vary from one retailer to another but are standardized if sold by a retailer who owns franchise stalls or other outlets in other locations. The new hawker-entrepreneurs have repackaged the traditional food and created unique Singaporean snacks, which combines traditional and Western flavours and ingredients. The creation of new variations indicates abandonment of Chinese culinary traditions.

Despite modifications, the consumption of Chinese snacks remains an important part of the food culture of Singapore. The practice of eating festive foods such as moon-cakes and breakfast snacks such as pancakes and kaya toast are continued today which reflects a continuity of culinary tradition. This continuity occurs probably because people need to achieve a sense of satisfaction from eating familiar foods.

Familiar traditional foods which a person has eaten during childhood may help to evoke feelings of nostalgia which is a “sentimental yearning for a period of the past or a thing which evokes a former era” (Chung & Ong, 2006: 9). According to Duruz (1999), consuming traditional foods helps one to have a feeling of nostalgia and reconstruct a cultural identification with the past. The commercialization of the snacks encourages older generation consumers to
remember not only the source of their food but also their Chinese roots through the discovery of food.

Foods play an evocative part in memory and a person’s childhood can be triggered by the taste of a familiar food. It reinforces Sutton’s (2001) and Kittler & Sucher’s (2008) notion of food and memory in which traditional foodways help to recapture nostalgia and satisfy the psychological need for food familiarity. As for the younger generation of consumers who have been introduced to traditional foods during their childhood, the consumption of “food from the past” may help them to construct an imagined experience of the good memories or “good old days” which Appadurai characterizes as “armchair” nostalgia (Holtzman, 2006:367). Appadurai’s (1996) concept of “armchair nostalgia” illustrates how tradition is often invented as reflected in the re-invention of Singapore-Chinese snack foods, using notions of heritage to convey uniqueness to the products. Hence, the new entrepreneurs have played upon people’s nostalgia for tradition by reviving an interest in traditional food among the young and satisfy the older generation’s demand for old-style snacks. Traditional foods convey a sense of nostalgia and authenticity which consumers buy in order to experience a link with an imagined past (Holtzman, 2006). In order to satisfy consumers’ desire for both the “old” and the “new”, food retailers in Singapore have re-invented food traditions.

The modification of authentic recipes in cookbooks and the re-creation of new flavours and ingredients by the hawker-entrepreneurs show a re-invention of traditional Chinese food. Traditional Chinese snacks and beverages such as moon-cakes, pancakes, curry puffs, kaya toast and soybean curd and milk have been re-invented from old traditions as new heritage foods for sale. This re-invention of cuisines is a business strategy of the new-hawker entrepreneurs to cater to changing consumer tastes. This re-invention of cuisine shows a similarity in Hobsbawn and Ranger’s (1983) *The Invention of Tradition* in which it is suggested that “invented traditions” might take the form of simulating local and
traditions or inventing new ones to provide continuity and stability in a modern world of change and innovation. The “new” Chinese snacks are becoming popular with locals because they blend modernity and an element of ethnic authenticity, an indication of a successful re-invention of tradition.

The recipes of all the 12 food owners were inauthentic. Although two respondents claimed the use of authenticity in their products by using “traditional” ingredients and food preparation, they were actually modified traditional snacks. Authenticity was perceived by most respondents as being maintained through the selling of traditional food items that has been consumed for generations rather than items prepared by the use of original recipes.

The new snacks, however, cannot be described as authentic Chinese snacks. The snacks selected in the study serve as good examples of Singapore’s rejection of traditional or “authentic” Chinese food in favour of its own unique creation. The re-invention and commercialization of the “traditional” Chinese snack foods, however, raises the issue of authenticity. A claim for authenticity is inferred in many cookbooks which classified some of the Chinese snacks as “traditional” local delights when in reality a substitution of ingredients is published in the recipe. Maintaining authenticity in food recipes was not a key element in the entrepreneurs’ marketing strategies. Most hawker-entrepreneurs perceive their snacks as “authentic” although the majority is modified and made with the traditions of local food preparation and ingredients. This is similar to Cohen’s discussion of MacCannell (1973) concept of “staged authenticity” which describes the presentation of contrived sites and sights as if they are authentic, although they have already been transformed in some ways (Cohen, 1988:372). To most entrepreneurs, the term “authentic” referred to identifiable food items that had been consumed for generations rather than those which retail the original recipes. Even when the food items were modified with a blend of Asian and Western ingredients, most entrepreneurs considered their food items to be “authentic” because they retained elements of traditional Chinese food. This
suggests that cultural perceptions often shape the opinions of people regarding the authenticity of a food item. In the case of the Chinese snack foods, the degree of adaptation of traditional food or authenticity is determined by the new hawker-entrepreneurs.

The claiming of authenticity by Singapore hawker-entrepreneurs mirrors Lu and Fine’s (1995) study where the food sold by the Chinese restaurants in America was adapted, yet still presented as authentic. This practice was also observed in other American ethnic restaurants with signs proclaiming “authentic Italian food” or “authentic Mexican food” despite adaptations having been made to suit American tastes (Belasco & Scranton, 2002). According to Lu and Fine (1985) authenticity was regarded as being that which was believed or accepted to be genuine or real, true to itself.

More generally, to most food retailers in Singapore, it does not matter whether the food served is “truly” authentic. Taste satisfaction is what appeals to consumers and authenticity was seen as a secondary concern. Similarly, many traditional dishes currently served in Singaporean restaurants are repackaged versions of the original dishes in China. As one restaurant managers said: “what is really traditional would never find its way on to dinner tables here”. Another restaurant manager said that “traditional festive dishes wouldn’t sell” if she puts them on the reunion dinner table because “customers prefer pricier ingredients” today (Ee, 2006). These examples suggest that very few Singaporeans would eat “authentic” traditional festival food as it was served in China two or three generations ago. Traditional cuisines, thus, have changed to accommodate changes in tastes and trends.

Similarly, many customers, too, are not concerned that businesses have redefined what is meant by food authenticity. For example, pizza from Italy has evolved to have different toppings but consumers still consider pizza as an authentic Italian dish. This is not to deny that some consumers also refer to
“real” pizza by which they mean one which approximates most closely their notions of a traditional Italian pizza.

The modification strategies adopted by the new hawker-entrepreneurs in Singapore to accommodate local consumer tastes are similar to chefs in the USA where the success of the Chinese restaurant entrepreneurs is attributed to their ability to accommodate American tastes by substituting food ingredients and modifying their cooking techniques (Lu & Fine, 1995). The Chinese restaurants studied used American vegetables which were more acceptable to American diners instead of authentic Chinese vegetables. The cooking processes for certain food items were also altered, as in the preparation of *chow mein* (stir-fry noodles). Instead of stir-frying the noodles, they are dry-fried until crispy with marinated sauce poured over them.

Just as the Chinese food sold in America has been “Americanized” so a variety of supplemental dishes has been included on McDonald’s menu in order to accommodate various local cultures. For example, McDonald’s food is adapted to suit local tastes by the introduction of “vegetable McNuggets” in New Delhi and “kosher Big Macs” (without the cheese) in Jerusalem (Watson, 2000:122). Similarly, McDonald’s in Singapore has gone “Singaporean” with the introduction in 1986 of “Singapore-flavour promotional fast-foods” such as *Kampung Burger* and *McRibs*, a burger with barbecued parts of pork rib (Sapawi, 1994). In April 2002, McDonald’s in Bangkok launched the Sticky Rice Roast Pork Burger (*Fast food- rice-based burger*..., *Bangkok Post*, 5 April, 2002). These examples illustrate Abaza’s argument of Robertson and Khondker’s (1998) theory that globalization affects consumer culture through the “promotion or invention of difference and variety” in consumer products or consumption spaces (Abaza, 2001:114).

The demand for novelty is an inherent feature of modern consumerism. However, while individuals seek novelty, this is often tempered by a desire for
familiar local heritage and traditions, including those associated with food. This is what Abaza (2001) refers to as the “recycling” of consumer goods to adapt them to local tastes or attempts to accommodate standardised food products to the tastes and preferences of the local market (Abaza, 2001:114)). Similarly, the blending of Chinese and Western ingredients by the hawker-entrepreneurs in this study is an attempt to accommodate the tastes of the local market by creating something new yet familiar.

While the ingredients of most of the snack foods have been modified, the new hawker-entrepreneurs have retained certain characteristics of their food items, thus making them identifiable. For instance, the curry puffs, peanut pancakes and moon-cakes retain their original shapes. These handmade snacks are similar to other craft items which exhibit a handmade appearance and are sold as such to differentiate them from “inauthentic” products made by machine (Cohen, 1988). According to Warde (1997), the blend of the strange and the familiar creates objects of desire. It is the combination of new, yet familiar food products which accounts for the survival of these Chinese snack foods in Singapore. Such strategy is also an indication of the adaptability of new hawker-entrepreneurs to local foodways.

7.3.7 Food Preparation

In the past, the work of a hawker was a laborious one which usually begins early in the morning with the preparation of ingredients for the food item. Today, traditional cooking techniques and cooking equipment which involved tedious and time-consuming preparation have been abandoned in favour of modern preparation aids.

Traditionally, hawkers from market stalls used to prepare snacks and beverages such as soybean curd and milk manually for the morning breakfast crowd (Kong, 2007). The washing and grinding of the soybeans took several hours but today,
special machines are used to make the soybean milk and curd which enables retailers to prepare them in half an hour. Formerly, it was difficult to find fresh soybean milk in the afternoon or at night since it spoils easily in the hot, local climate. However, the use of present-day technology by the hawker-entrepreneurs allows fresh soybean milk and curd to be prepared at different times throughout the day. The use of machines has enabled the owner selling soybean milk to put up a sign “Freshness Guaranteed” to emphasize the quality of his products. The unsold soybean milk was also discarded to maintain freshness and hygiene. The elaborate task of preparing soybean milk at home explains why recipes for soybean milk were not observed in cookbooks. Although the beverage is made with soybeans which are cheap, very few Singaporeans will bother to make the beverage at home as it can be bought from hawker stalls in wet markets or kiosks in shopping malls.

The equipment used for preparing pancakes is also different. Pancakes are now made with small electric pans compared to the big and heavy iron pans used by wet market stalls (Plate 7.8). All the hawker-entrepreneurs selling peanut pancakes obtained their peanut fillings from suppliers which suggest that the laborious task of grinding the chopped peanuts by hand has replaced factory-made peanut paste.
Informal observations at two kaya toast outlets show that the preparation of kaya toast too has been replaced by simpler appliances. Traditionally, two slices of white bread were toasted on a charcoal grill but many shops now use electric grills to toast the bread. Unlike the past where traditional hawkers bake their own bread, the new kaya toast stalls order their supplies from factories, except for the kaya, which most stalls interviewed by the press media, claimed to have their own traditional recipe, including the well-known Ya Kun Kaya Toast with their signature “genuine kaya” (Wee, 1999; Leong, 2006).

Unlike the other five types of snack foods which are inexpensive and are prepared by staff employed by the entrepreneurs, moon-cakes have never been a common hawker food. They are prepared by people with professional culinary
skills. Most moon-cakes in Singapore are hand-made by chefs from leading hotels and Chinese restaurants (Yeong, 2007). As skill and patience are required to produce good, exquisite moon-cakes, the festive snack has become more expensive. Some of the new ingredients used such as bird’s nest, champagne and truffle are usually quite costly and the moulds and equipment needed are beyond the affordability of most hawkers who are more likely to be using woks, pots and simple utensils.

The use of modern technology and the employment of employees to prepare food suggest that the work of the hawker-entrepreneurs is different from the tough life of a typical hawker in the past.

7.3.8 Copying Business Concepts

Copying popular businesses concepts appear to be the trend among the new generation of hawkers today. Unlike the past, where hawkers continued the business passed down from their ancestors, today’s hawkers ventured into food retailing by copying the concepts of successful retailers. This has resulted in many businesses selling identical snacks.

It has been suggested that these new entrepreneurs do little more than imitate other retailers selling snacks rather than introducing any innovations of their own. For example, according to the opinions of the Straits Times food correspondent in an interview conducted with her in August 2005, the new entrepreneurs “model themselves” after the well-established and bigger Chinese snack foods businesses which “are doing very well”. These responses suggest that the new entrepreneurs are “copycats” of other successful business ventures. The comments of the food correspondent is further illustrated by a newspaper report in which the owner of the institution of good kaya toast, Ya Kun, commented in the press that some copycats “…do everything we do, sell everything we sell” (Leong, 2006). Another press article reported that many
Singaporeans are “business copycats” and not “real entrepreneurs” who copy the products of successful coffee buns, bubble tea and kaya bread outlets. The report commented that those who turned into “entrepreneurs” have “nothing original, just improvisation on somebody’s else ideas” as “most are out just to make a quick buck” (*Nation of copycats*..., *Today*, 19 August, 2005). These opinions suggest that Singaporean entrepreneurs lack originality but improvise their retailing or marketing strategies on other successful business concepts.

However, this study has shown that new hawker-entrepreneurs did not believe that they were simply copying other businesses or that they had been greatly influenced by media reports of other’s successes. Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs were shown to use the media as part of their retailing strategies. In summary, while the new hawker-entrepreneurs have drawn on the business success of the old-time stalls and the bigger franchise chains of local traditional snack foods, they have also developed their own creative survival strategies.

7.3.9 Marketing

Traditionally, most hawkers do not adopt any marketing strategy except for a small hand-written signboard at the front of their stall showing the prices of their food items. The new hawker-entrepreneurs, however, make use of big, plastic signboards with their company’s brand name as a form of advertising. Participant observation revealed the use of various types of sign boards to show the types and prices of food products. Besides the use of big signboards, smaller billboards and banners are also used as advertising. For instance, the billboard of one kaya toast outlet depicts images of new kaya flavoured toasts with the phrase “Reinventing Kaya” (Wang Jiao, 2005) (Plate 7.9).

The new variations of other snacks are depicted in various ephemera. The promotion of moon-cakes is observed in brochures and pamphlets designed by hotels and retail companies. An analysis of a 2006 brochure designed by a well-
known hotel unveils the use of written emotive language to tempt customers’ palates:

If you are already a fan our signature best seller D24 Durian Paste in Snow Skin then you will also love our Cempedak Paste in Snow Skin and an all NEW creation, Yam Paste with Red Dates in Snow Skin that will make the ideal gift for family and clients because it signifies a bestowing of good health (red dates) and well wishes for a plentiful harvest (yam).

*(Goodwood Park Hotel, 2006, Delicious Mooncakes…)*

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Plate 7.9 A billboard advertising the new types of toast spread

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Some of the new hawker-entrepreneurs have also adopted refund policies as part of their marketing strategy. For example, one of the twelve hawker-entrepreneurs has a “Money Back Guarantee” policy giving customers a full refund if they are not satisfied with his food product. More generally, the refund policy has been adopted by some Singaporean hawkers in recent years. For example, an Indian hawker selling vadai (Indian pawn fritters) has put up a sign proclaiming “if you’re not completely satisfied, we will give you a full refund” while another Chinese hawker has displayed a banner outside his coffee-shop with the words “No Good, Don’t Pay” (Teo, 2004a).

Verbal promotion, which was used by hawkers in the past, is absent today (Chan, 2003). New hawker-entrepreneurs have used the food media to advertise their products in brochures and websites or promote their businesses by displaying magazines, press reports and photographs of television artistes at their stalls. The long queues at food stalls after receiving media promotion often prompts other retailers to aim for “free advertising” in order to elevate their business status. The aggressive marketing using food reviews and television shows has been used by some of the new hawker-entrepreneurs to raise their business status. For instance, the numerous media reports of the pancake retailer who diversified into Australian fish and chips were used as testimony to the quality of his products in his websites and company brochures (Plate 7.10).
What The Media say About Us...

“Think of Peanut Pancake - PANCAKE KING is always ranked No. 1”
Translated from NTUC Lifestyle Magazine (Chinese version), Sept 99

“In fact, the pancakes are so hot that business is expanding rapidly.”
The Straits Times - Sunday Plus, April 99

“Having tried the food, I dare say no refunds are necessary”
WEEKEND FOOD, Oct 99, published by Focus Publishing Ltd, a subsidiary of S’pore Press Holdings

“Always top the list when it is mentioned”
Connection Village Newsletter, Dec 99.

“Pancake King......the King of Kings...... is conquering new territories.”
City Food, Oct 99, published by Focus Publishing, a subsidiary of S’pore Press Holdings

“You can’t deny that few people in food business dare to offer Money Back Guarantee as an assurance for its product superiority.”
Translated from Lianhe Zaobao, July 99

Plate 7.10 A brochure showing the scores of media recommendation

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The government is also responsible for the marketing of some types of traditional Chinese food today. For instance, the promotion of kaya toast is now observed in food events organized by the STB in its *Ethnic Food Trails*, a series of food tours to various food and beverage establishments, one of which includes a visit to the popular *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* outlet (STB, 2004b). Similarly, moon-cakes are also given extensive promotion by the government. The annual season of praying to the moon and playing of lanterns by children has now turned into a community affair where activities such as Mid-Autumn dinner celebrations or moon-cake tea gatherings are organised by the GRC (Group Representation Constituency) for residents of various neighbourhood estates. Street light-up which features brightly coloured lanterns are officially launched at Chinatown during the Festival together with different activities such as lantern-making workshops and festive bazaars (STB, 2004c). Such celebrations can be seen as attempts by the government to create awareness of the Mid-Autumn Festival to both locals and tourists while promoting greater social interaction and cultural exchanges among the people.

The traditional custom of eating moon-cakes with family members has also turned into a popular retail event which entices early buyers with special discounts while giving food gourmets a chance to sample different types of moon-cakes from stalls promoting their snacks. People who are satisfied with their purchases may introduce them to friends, colleagues or relatives. Hence, moon-cake bazaars held at various shopping malls also help in the marketing of the festive snack through verbal promotion by customers.

7.3.10 Business Expansion

In the past, most hawkers were contented to remain as small businesses. Not all hawkers share the aspiration to expand their business. They were “happy to work just for themselves” and were unwilling to share family recipes through franchising, a marketing concept which allows businessmen to operate branches
using similar trade names and operations (Kong, 2007:145). Today, however, the new group of snack food hawker-entrepreneurs is expanding their number of stalls they manage or by franchising their businesses.

Most of the hawker-entrepreneurs interviewed have expanded to more than five outlets in various retail spaces after being spurred on by the success of their first outlets. Most of the owners have plans to expand sales further either by widening their range of products or by setting up more branches. They, however, were keen to expand their businesses in the Asia Pacific region rather than in Western countries. This raises an interesting observation which suggests that the respondents are selling their concept to suit local and Asian tastes. Their comments further illustrate the point as to why their products are made with Chinese cooking ingredients and Asian flavours such as red bean, lotus bean, pork floss, green tea and coconut.

The unwillingness of the entrepreneurs to expand their business into the Western market may be attributed to their belief that snack foods are cheap, ordinary fast food and is unlikely to attract Western tourists’ consumption. Chinese snack foods are classified as “xiao chi” (small foods) in Chinese food culture. These foods are not considered a main category of Chinese cuisine, which commonly refers to fine dining at restaurants and other dishes that emphasize the use of more expensive ingredients and require more elaborate cooking. This may explain why snack foods are not promoted by the Singapore Tourism Board as an aspect of Singapore’s cuisine. A local food drive, Makan Delights, organized by the Singapore Tourism Board in 2003, shows the promotion of “must try” local food such as Chilli Crab, Hainanese Chicken Rice, Fish Head Curry, Laksa, rather than snack foods (STB, 2004a). It was only in 2004, that the kaya toast snack was promoted by the STB as part of a tourist’s gastronomy in its newly launched “Uniquely Singapore Shop and Eat Tours”, which introduces visitors to the traditional snack and a stop at one of the Ya Kun Kaya Toast outlets (STB, 2004b).
The unwillingness of entrepreneurs to target their food at tourists from Western countries may help explain why tourists are unfamiliar with traditional Chinese snack foods. It may also be an example of Cohen and Avieli’s (2004:759) assertion that tourists need a “…degree of familiarity to enjoy their experience…” and that they are “…generally reluctant to taste or eat strange foods whose ingredients are unknown or unfamiliar to them…” Although most tourists want a taste different from what they consume at home, the food in destination countries must be familiar enough to make them feel comfortable. While a Chinese restaurant may be a familiar entity for many tourists, Chinese snack foods are likely to be perceived as more exotic. Another reason as to why tourists are not tapped by the respondents may be due to the location of their businesses. All the respondents’ outlets are located in suburban retail spaces in shopping malls and housing estates unlike the bigger and well-established businesses of *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* which has outlets in the Central Business District.

The practice of business expansion reflects a more profit and growth-oriented approach to business compared with many traditional food vendors in Singapore and in other Asian countries where greater emphasis is placed on cooperation and “feeding the family” rather than on business expansion and competition (Tinker, 1999, 2003; Yasmeen, 2001). This observation challenges the applicability to Singapore of many prevailing assumptions about the motivations and practices of food micro-entrepreneurs elsewhere in Asia who work to survive and to invest in their families.

### 7.4 THE FUTURE OF CHINESE SNACK FOOD RETAILING

"Traditional" snack food outlets are thriving despite competition from hawker centres selling different ethnic cuisines, multi-ethnic food courts in shopping malls and Western fast-food outlets. It has been suggested that nearly 90 per cent of Singaporeans eat at Western fast food restaurants (*Fast food*
epidemic..., Straits Times, 15 November, 2007) as revealed in a survey conducted by the National institute of Education. This survey goes to prove that Western fast food did not affect the growth of traditional Chinese snack foods. In contrast to the claims of Yasmeen (2000) that the rise of new consumption spaces, such as food-centres and food-floors in shopping malls might be expected to erode the market share of traditional food retailing businesses, Singapore provides an example where the number of food outlets selling variants of traditional Chinese food has increased.

The presence of Western fast-food restaurants, established franchise chains and other retailers selling similar types of snacks has neither displaced street foods in Singapore nor prevented the growth of new micro-entrepreneurs in Singapore. For example, while Western fast-food chains such as McDonalds began selling their own breakfast combos of coffee and Kaya Roti in July 2005, this did not curb the expansion of the “traditional” snack food establishments included in this study. Instead, the success and expansion of these new Chinese snack food establishments in various shopping malls reflects the growing popularity of local “Chinese fast-food” in Singapore.

However, these findings present a contrast to the situation in China. Following the success of the Western fast-food chains such as McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, many Chinese fast-food outlets were set up but were unable to compete with Western fast-food businesses. Many Chinese outlets and restaurants marketed the use of traditional medicinal ingredients and ethnic flavours to stress the “Chineseness” of their fast-foods but were only able to attract a minority and failed to appeal to a wide segment of the population (Jing, 2000). While China’s experience supports Anderson’s (1988) claim that local fast-food businesses may not survive in the face of globalization, this is not currently the case in cosmopolitan, globalised Singapore.
Chinese culinary tradition continues in Singapore but in the context of a continuous and now globalizing process of change and modification. Traditional Chinese snack foods in Singapore have changed or “globalised” with regard to the type of ingredients used, method of preparation, use of cooking equipment and the time in which they are consumed. The traditional paradigm that the Chinese snack foods are meant for breakfast or festivals has dissipated with globalization. For instance, rice dumplings are examples of another festive snack which have become detached from its festival origins and become a general food sold throughout the year while breakfast staples such as kaya toast, curry puffs and soybean milk have evolved into common snacks enjoyed at any time of the day.

As cultures and traditions are constantly changing, no food products or industry will remain static to the forces of globalization. The hybridization of street food in Singapore and the use of hybridized ingredients by the new hawker-entrepreneurs provide good examples of the fusion of different ethnic culinary traditions as a result of globalization. There is a continuity of Chinese culinary traditions in Singapore as the consumption of traditional and festive snacks plays an important part in the local food culture although modifications to the snacks have been made. These continuities and changes can be summed up as a process of globalization, brought about by changing consumer taste and strong competition from other food retailers.

Singapore’s snack food retailing trends provide support for Tinker’s (1999) assertion that street food vending will increase in the next century and that vendors will continue to adapt the types of food being sold. The re-invention of cuisines and the re-creation of Chinese style snacks by the new entrepreneurs in Singapore suggest that they can continue to compete effectively with Western fast food chains and other Chinese snack food retailers in the new foodscape of Singapore. The creation of new flavours and ingredients, attractive packaging, modern equipment and technology, extensive marketing and media promotion,
diverse product range, all day retailing, cheap prices and numerous retail outlets have helped the new hawker-entrepreneurs to stay competitive in the growing snack food market in Singapore.

7.5 FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR THE HAWKER-ENTREPRENEURS

The traditional Chinese snack food industry has changed. Younger, educated and innovative hawker-entrepreneurs have ventured into the trade on their own initiative compared to older generation of hawkers who inherited the business from their families.

Despite the large number of business selling similar snacks, the new hawker-entrepreneurs are not deterred by the stiff competition. Instead, the globalization of western fast food and strong competitive pressures from other established snack food businesses motivated the new entrepreneurs to devise their own production and marketing strategies to compete with other similar food establishments. Table 6.6 (Chapter 6) contains a list of strategies used by these new hawker-entrepreneurs of “traditional” Chinese food. While these strategies are rather general and vary from business to business, they provide indicators of how “traditional” food retailers have succeeded and suggest possible strategies for future entrants into the market.

While there will always be new entrepreneurs entering the snack foods retail industry, there will also be some who will cease operations as they encounter failures in their business ventures. The closure of old kopi-tiams and the emergence of modern coffee-shops illustrate such an example. The opinion of the food correspondent that the future retailing trend for kaya toast “won’t sustain long” (sic) seems to imply a limit to the entry of new kaya toast competitors but this has not been the case. A press article in 2006, however, reported another “four new bakery chains” within a year selling the snack (Teo, 2006). The numerous outlets or stalls owned by each chain, further add to the
numbers of *kaya* toast businesses, together with the well-established chains. New variants of *kaya* toast have also been developed by *Ya Kun Kaya Toast* in overseas branches such as Japan. A newspaper report which features how the modification of the jam spread in *kaya* toast has won the acceptance of the Japanese, further illustrates that with the process of globalization, the reinvention of food within a tradition will be a common practice again (Kwan, 2004).

The future of the new hawker-entrepreneurs, thus, depends on their ability to retain existing customers and attract new ones. This implies that future entrants to the Chinese snack food industry must keep transforming their products to survive under the threat of fierce business competition from upmarket Western fast-food chains and established traditional snack food establishments. Hence, traditional Chinese snack food retailers in Singapore may prosper if they constantly devise strategies to attract customers and exploit the consuming passions of Singaporeans.

### 7.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that changing nature of traditional Chinese snacks and hawking by discussing the differences between the past and present-day. It discusses the business strategies which are adopted by the new hawker-entrepreneurs in Singapore and compares them with the motivations of food retailers in other Asian countries. It also discusses the future challenges of the snack food entrepreneurs in order to maintain their snacks into the 21st century.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarizes the results of the study, its contribution to the literature on street food vending and concludes with suggestions for future research. This study examines the changing nature of traditional Chinese snack foods and the changing nature of hawking in Singapore.

8.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Traditional snack foods still hold an important place in Singaporean cuisine today. Traditional Chinese snacks were brought over from mainland China by Chinese immigrants. Tasty, cheap and easy to prepare, they were highly popular in Singapore in the past. Most snacks were made from available ingredients and prepared by street vendors. Urban re-development and the lack of continuation of businesses have resulted in the disappearance of many shops selling traditional Chinese snacks. Despite such constraints, in the last decade, some Chinese snack foods have become popular products and achieved a successful niche market. The growth and popularity of the snacks was made possible by a new group of food entrepreneurs who emerged in the food retailing scene in the late 1990s.

8.2.1 Field Study

In order to explore the emergence of a new group of food entrepreneurs in traditional Chinese food retailing over the decade 1995-2005, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 retailers in Singapore between August and September 2005. Retailers selling six types of traditional Chinese snack foods
were selected for the study. The study addressed the reasons why these micro-entrepreneurs entered the food retailing sector, how they have transformed the snacks and the strategies that they used to overcome competition from other well-established food businesses.

8.2.2 Enterprising Hawker-Entrepreneurs

The young, educated and enterprising hawkers were more aptly described as “hawker-entrepreneurs” because of their desire to manage their own businesses. The economic recession during and after the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s was not a factor in affecting the decisions of these entrepreneurs to move into the self-employed food businesses. The majority of the hawker-entrepreneurs ventured into food retailing because of their strong passion for food. Male owners dominated the Chinese snack food businesses and they employed managers, supervisors and female workers to operate their stalls.

8.2.3 New Snack Foodscapes

The hawker-entrepreneurs retailed six types of modified traditional Chinese snacks – curry puffs, desserts, kaya toast, mooncakes, pancakes and soya bean milk in more than 400 consumption spaces in various retail locations. Their outlets were shown to be widely distributed across the island with shopping malls being the dominant food retail spaces for these types of snacks.

8.2.4 Novelty Snacks

Traditional Chinese snack foods in Singapore have thrived in today’s globalised environment. The traditional snacks have evolved over the years because of ethnic influences, changing food habits, substitution of new ingredients, and technological changes. The traditional snack foods have evolved from the
original Chinese recipes into unique snacks with different shapes and sizes, and
taste to customize the Singaporean palate. What distinguishes Singapore-
Chinese snack foods from mainstream Chinese cuisine is the use of Asian and
Western ingredients. Although the snacks are modified, they retain some
aspects of familiarity such as the availability of traditional versions or the original
shapes as in moon-cakes and curry puffs. The modified snacks satisfy
consumers’ need for accessibility, convenience and affordability which accounts
for their popularity. The Chinese snack foods which were once considered as
breakfast staples are now considered as “snacks” eaten for fun and pleasure.

8.2.5 Business Adaptation

The main strategies for business success adopted by the new hawker-
entrepreneurs included adding new variations to traditional food items;
emphasizing food quality; diversification of food products and the use of media
promotion. Their most common business goals were to expand locally in a bid
to stay viable in an increasingly competitive food retailing industry. The study
showed that the strategies adopted by the enterprising hawker-entrepreneurs in
the current study were similar to those of the Chinese and Mexican restaurant
entrepreneurs in the USA. By altering the ingredients of dishes and cooking
methods, they appealed to the changing tastes of the inhabitants of modern,
cosmopolitan cities (Lu and Fine, 1995). Despite adaptations to the ethnic food
sold in American restaurants, an essential measure of the original culinary
pattern was maintained. Similarly, there has nevertheless also been an element
of continuity in Chinese culinary traditions in Singapore although there has
always been change. The abandonment of authentic recipes for new cooking
styles indicates disintegration of culinary traditions. However, it is also a sign of
adaptability of new hawker-entrepreneurs to a changing, globalized environment
to suit local food customs.
8.2.6 Reinvention of Chinese Cuisines

Authentic Chinese cuisines have been re-invented and re-created as Singapore Chinese-style snack foods. The changing food consumption scene in Singapore presents an alternative to Hobsbawn and Ranger’s (1983:3) notion of the “reinvention of tradition” where cultures and traditions are constantly changing or reinvented. This changing mechanism was partly responsible for the creation of Singapore’s modern food “traditions” as evidenced by the food entrepreneurs’ continuity of culinary traditions but the re-invention and popularisation of old foods as new products - Singapore-Chinese snacks. The Singapore-style Chinese snacks are the manufacture and consumption of Singapore culture and identity. Traditional Chinese snacks are re-made and consumed in Singapore. Hence, the popularization and acceptance of “traditional” Chinese snacks in Singapore is a result of the invention of a new national cuisine as a hybrid of all cuisines found in the country.

8.2.7 Evoking Feelings of Nostalgia

The hawker-entrepreneurs have used traditional foods which have been eaten for generations to create a sense of nostalgia by creating new, yet familiar products by retaining certain characteristics of the food items. The food media also conjures nostalgia by revealing portions of Singapore’s history through traditional foods. This reminds the Chinese of tradition belonging to their past culture which may have been forgotten with the progress of modernization.

8.2.8 Changing Ideas of Authenticity

In seeking out a market niche for themselves, these entrepreneurs did not emphasize the original taste of the food or its authenticity but adopted modifications of traditional food items to suit contemporary local palates and preferences. The entrepreneurs maintain that their products were authentic
although they use new ingredients and market products which have no direct equivalent in traditional food cuisines.

8.2.9 Traditional Chinese Snacks

Through the re-invention of cuisine, the Singapore traditional Chinese snacks serve as familiar foods to the older generation or those who have taken them since childhood, which otherwise might have been forgotten and fade into obscurity. The younger generation of Singaporeans may be unaware that the “traditional” snacks that are retailed are actually localized Singaporean Chinese snacks. The term “traditional” Chinese snack foods, as used by the new hawker-entrepreneurs, now, has a somewhat different meaning in Singapore. Singapore’s “traditional” Chinese snacks are distinct from those that originated in China and it could be argued that consuming such snacks is synonymous with eating a hamburger, unrestricted by boundaries of time and custom.

However, the study argues that the popularity of these Singapore-taste snacks also represents a distinctly local “Chinese fast-food”, something distinctly Singaporean while at he same time universal in appeal. Thus the success of the new hawker-entrepreneurs shows the continuity of a tradition and the continuous process of change with some similarity in culinary preparations while modifying ingredients to promote acceptance. It is the re-invention of cuisines through culinary hybridization, increased accessibility, all day retailing, cheap prices, attractive packaging, modern technology, marketing strategies, extensive advertising and business expansion by the hawker-entrepreneurs that has led to the survival of some types of traditional Chinese snack foods in Singapore today.
8.3 SIGNIFICANCE

This case study has contributed to the existing academic literature on food retailing by showing that the continuity of an ethnic food tradition requires a combination of tradition, adaptation and innovation. The process of change and competition faced by small-scale retailers provides an important case study for understanding the coping mechanisms through which these entrepreneurs have adopted in a rapidly globalizing city like Singapore. The findings of the study also indicate the introduction of new marketing strategies in a traditional food retailing context. This finding can be of value to policy makers and business operators wishing to develop new marketing strategies and eating experiences in the food retailing sector.

8.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is based on a small sample of retailers of certain Chinese snack foods. This places limitations on the extent to which one can generalize its findings to the wider food retailing sector in Singapore and elsewhere. A study based on a more diverse sample of food retailing types would be a good way to extend this study’s findings and to explore the business practices of other groups of Singaporean food retailers.

While in this study, modification, diversification and emphasis on food quality were the predominant strategies adopted by the Chinese hawker-entrepreneurs, this may well vary for other food retailers of similar and differing ethnic backgrounds. Future research should therefore compare the business strategies adopted by food retailers of other ethnicities in Singapore to establish how widely the findings of this study may be applicable.

The market for snack foods is an uncertain and changing one, as indicated by the number of Singaporean businesses that attempted to profit from what
subsequently turned out to be short lived food fads, for example, as in the case of Portuguese egg tarts, apple strudel and bubble tea ended (Ng, 2005). This study's findings raises the question of whether this new trend in traditional Chinese snack food retailing proves to be a long-term shift in local consumption and retailing patterns or simply a short-lived food fad. An answer to this question requires a longitudinal study to assess longer term trends in the “traditional” Chinese snack food industry and to determine how current entrepreneurs and future entrants to the industry deal with changing economic and social circumstances.

8.5 CONCLUSION

This study has shown that a combination of both tradition and modernity appeared to offer a successful business concept for a sub-group of entrepreneurs retailing “traditional” Chinese food. The adaptation and modification of traditional food is a creative development of a particular culinary heritage and food tradition in the face of changing market situations. The strategies used by the entrepreneurs in this study can be summed up as an innovative process in which traditional foods are refashioned, repackaged and reinvented to meet changing modern conditions. In doing so, enterprising hawker-entrepreneurs have appealed to the contemporary discerning consumer who prefers convenient Chinese fast food but at the same time unwilling to relinquish nostalgic taste and “authenticity.”
## APPENDIX 1

List of Snack Food Owners and Locations in Singapore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Retailers</th>
<th>Sourced From</th>
<th>Outlets’ Location</th>
<th>Suburb / District</th>
<th>Interviews Conducted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Curry Puff A</td>
<td>Websites &amp; food guides</td>
<td>20 Murray St 17 Cuppage Rd B2 Taka Food Hall BLK 5 Changi Village Jurong West Bedok North BLK 1A Eunos Cres Ghim Moh</td>
<td>Tanjong Pagar Orchard Changi Jurong West Bedok North Eunos Ghim Moh</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Curry Puff B</td>
<td>Media report</td>
<td>240 Geylang Rd</td>
<td>Geylang</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Curry Puff C</td>
<td>Websites</td>
<td>Hong Lim Mkt Jackson Centre</td>
<td>Chinatown Macpherson</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Curry Puff D</td>
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APPENDIX 2

BUSINESS SET- UP

- What is your age group? (20-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, above 40)
- What is your highest education level? (GCE O or A, Poly diploma, degree)
- What were you doing before venturing into the food business?
- What is your reason for going into the food retail business?
- Did the economic crisis affect your decision to go into the food business?
- When did you first set up your business?
- How was your business set up?
- What is your reason for selling this particular type of snack food?
- Do you have any other outlets in Singapore? If yes, where?

FOOD

- What are the ways in which your food is different from the traditional version?
- What is your reason for introducing changes to the food?
- Do you consider your food sold as traditional Chinese food?

CUSTOMERS

- Which category of consumers (adults, teenagers, children, tourists) are you targeting at?
- Have you ever thought of targeting your food at tourists?
- What do you think of tourists eating such food?

STRATEGIES

- As there are many other businesses selling the same type of food, what strategies do you use to ensure that your business will survive?

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

- What are your motivations for the future of your business?
GLOSSARY

The terms in the glossary have been condensed and compiled from local food guides, food websites and the researcher’s own coinage.

Bao or Baozi
White, fluffy steamed buns stuffed with sweet barbecued pork (char siu bao), chicken, vegetables or red bean

Bak Kwa
A sweet and salty barbequed pork meat made in the form of flat, squares

Bird’s Nest Soup
A double-boiled soup using the nest of swallow to extract its gelatinous substance

Char Siew
Barbequed pork with a red outer colouring

Char Siew Bao
Steamed fluffy white buns with sweet barbecued pork fillings

Cheng Tng
A sweet Chinese dessert served hot or cold containing different dried fruits and seeds such as dried persimmon, gingko nuts, black longan, lotus seeds, barley, brown seaweed, white fungus and jelly strips

Chempedak
A Malay term for jackfruit, a local tropical fruit with a thick rind comprising of many fleshy, yellow fruits encased in a big seed in the centre
Congee
A thick, gluey rice soup with a variety of savoury ingredients such as peanuts, mushrooms, fish or other meats

Curry Puff
A deep-fried pastry snack. Chunks of potato, chicken and hard-boiled egg are cooked with curry powder then wrapped inside the pastry dough and deep-fried

Dim Sum
A assortment of dumplings, buns and pastries served at restaurants (formerly teahouses), eaten for breakfast or lunch and accompanied by tea

Douhua
made from soya beans, it resembles custard and is served with a sweet sugar syrup on top

Gula Melaka
A Malay name of the brown palm sugar tapped from the coconut tree. The sugar is boiled into thick syrup used for flavourings in cakes, drinks and desserts

Glutinous Rice
A type of rice which is steamed until sticky and cooked with Chinese mushrooms, dried shrimps and sausages. The rice is sometimes used to make steamed rice dumplings consisting of sweet or savoury fillings and wrapped in banana leaves.

Hae Bee Hiam
A Hokkien term for spicy minced dried shrimps usually used for making small, deep-fried popiah fillings
**Hainanese Chicken Rice**
Chicken flavored rice cooked with chicken broth stock and served with steamed sliced chicken pieces, cucumber and chilli sauce

**Herbal Jelly**
A black sweetened jelly made from Chinese herbs. Also known as *Gui Lin Gao* in Mandarin

**Hokkien mee**
Fresh Chinese yellow noodles with prawns and pork slices served in prawn stock

**Ikan Bilis**
Anchovies

**Kaya**
Kaya is a local jam made with eggs, sugar, coconut milk and pandan leaf, which gives it a fragrant taste. These ingredients are combined to produce a thick, green, fragrant jam when cooked slowly over a fire stove

**Kaya Toast**
A traditional breakfast fare consisting of kaya and butter spread on charcoal-grilled bread and served together with a cup of black coffee with soft-boiled eggs seasoned with pepper and dark soya sauce

**Kueh**
A Malay/ Hokkien term for various kinds of sweet or savoury, bite-sized food items which usually includes steamed varieties of Indonesian, Malay and Nyonya cakes and puddings
**Laksa**
Rice noodles in a spicy coconut gravy made from spices, diced shrimp and chilli and served with slices of fishcakes, prawns and cockles

**Longan**
A small round tropical fruit with a translucent flesh enveloped in a single black round seed

**Matcha Red Bean**
Japanese green tea powder with red beans

**Mee Soto**
A Malay noodle dish comprising of shredded chicken and gravy with onions

**Mooncake**
Mooncakes are traditional Chinese cakes consisting of a baked pastry shell with sweet red bean or lotus seed paste filling, and a salted egg yolk symbolising the roundness of the moon. They are made specially for the Mid-Autumn Festival on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month

**Nasi Lemak**
Coconut rice served with toppings like chicken wings, omelette, *ikan bilis* (fried anchovies), peanuts, *otak-otak* (barbequed fish paste), cucumber and sambal chilli.

**Nian Gao**
A sweet sticky cake made of brown sugar and glutinous rice flour during the Lunar New Year as an offering to the Kitchen God. After all the ingredients have been mixed together, they are placed in a steamer, the consistency varying depending on the amount of water added. They are cooled before they can be cut into pieces
**Noodles**
Made from wheat flour and eggs and can be round or flat. They should be soaked for 5 minutes before use.

**Otak-Otak**
Spicy fish paste grilled in a banana leaf wrapping.

**Pandan**
A green flavouring obtained from the pandan leaf.

**Pandan Leaf**
A fragrant tropical leaf whose juice is extracted to give flavouring to cakes and desserts.

**Peanut Pancake**
It is made mainly from flour & cooked in a huge open pan. They are spread with peanut and sugar before flipping the pancake over into half, which is cut into many slices. It has a combination of crispy, soft and crunchy textures.

**Popiah**
Cooked turnips, bean sprouts, prawns, eggs and peanuts wrapped in a thin skin made from rice flour.

**Pork Floss**
Fluffy, dry shredded pork.

**Porridge**
A watery rice soup, either eaten plain or with small side dishes such as peanuts, preserved vegetables and braised meat items.
Prata
Pancake made of dough composed of fat, egg, four and water

Rice Dumplings
Glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves containing minced pork, mushrooms and dried shrimps and spices, and tied together with a raffia before being boiled

Rojak
The Chinese version is a fruit and vegetable salad mixed with prawn paste while Indian rojak comprises a mixture of fried beancurd, hard-boiled eggs, squid, fishballs and other ingredients

Satay
Small pieces of chicken, mutton or pork are marinated in a spicy mixture, skewered on bamboo sticks and grilled over charcoal fire. It is served hot with a sweet and spicy peanut sauce for dipping, and cucumber, raw onions and ketupat (compressed rice cake) on the side of the plate

Siew Mai
They are steamed, open-top minced pork dumplings wrapped with wanton skin made with wheat flour, and pressed into pretty pleats. They are sold together with other types of bao

Soy Bean Curd
A silky, smooth dessert made from the coagulation of soybean milk and served with sugar syrup

Soy Bean Curd
A milky liquid obtained from boiling soybeans
Tahu Goreng
A Malay dish comprising fried bean curd cubes with beansprouts served with a spicy and sweet peanut sauce

Tau Sar Piah
A pastry with a sweet or salty bean paste filling covered with an outer skin made of flour

Tofu
Also known as bean curd, made from pureed yellow soya beans and is sold in cakes about 7.5 cm (3 inches) square

Vadai
Indian prawn pancakes made of deep-fried dough with a few prawns on top

Wasabi
A Japanese term for green horseradish used in sushi

Xiao Long Bao
A small meat filled steamed dumpling containing soup stock.

Yam
A tuber with a rough skin. It is usually used for sweet dessert soup and is steamed or boiled or made into a smooth paste.

Yu Sheng
A raw fish salad comprising sliced raw fish and shredded vegetables like carrots, turnip, ginger, jellyfish, picked onions, picked radish, crushed peanuts, sesame seeds and plum sauce.
Zong zi
Mandarin term for rice dumplings
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