SMC 2019

Singapore Model Cabinet

(Heritage: Preservation and Pragmatism)

First Topic

Preserving Hawker Culture

Second Topic

Preserving Little India

Preserving Hawker Culture

Introduction

The issue of preserving hawker culture was put in the spotlight when it was announced in last year's National Day Rally that Singapore's hawker culture will be nominated to be inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Hawker centres have been termed by Prime Minister Lee as the nation's 'community dining room', a cultural institution and a unique part of Singapore's heritage and identity (PMO, 2018). Indeed, hawker centres are known to be eateries which Singaporeans from all walks of life can frequent, with their inexpensive food and relative accessibility. However, in recent years, due to high rentals and the increased prices of utilities, new players have been deterred from entering the market. This severely threatens the future of the hawker scene in Singapore. Representatives should consider ways to preserve hawker centres in a sustainable manner, such that it ensures that all stakeholders (hawkers, customers, government agencies and operators) are reasonably satisfied with the outcome.

Historical Overview

Hawking in Singapore has a rich history, dating to the days after World War II, where hawking on the streets was a thriving business. This could be attributed to the high unemployment rate that prompted many people to take up hawking to provide for their families. Yet, these early hawker stalls developed a reputation for being unsanitary places where rats and other pests were common. Prompted by repeated reports of widespread food-poisoning, the government stepped in and funded purpose-built hawker centres. These became market halls with proper sewage systems and running water. Hawkers were rented stalls at affordable prices. Eventually, almost all of Singapore's street-food sellers moved into hawker centres and they became a city icon (Kong, 2007). In the 1980s, when hawker centres were built to serve new estates, HDB took care of the cleaning, with hawkers paying conservancy fees. The first hawker centres to be built were based on a simple model - hawkers took care of the dishwashing, decided what to sell and how much to charge, while the National Environment Agency (NEA) took care of the cleaning (Tan, 2018).

Timeline of developments

The timeline below highlights the development of hawker centres in Singapore throughout the years.

1930s	Open air complexes, which sold quick and cheap meals to mainly coolies working at docks and warehouses, were established.
1960s	Authorities started to legalise the trade by registering hawkers around the island. This was because demand for cheap and affordable hawker food persisted after independence, so the government began the process of moving roving hawkers out of the streets into hawker centres with proper sanitation and amenities.
1971	The first hawker centres were built.
1985	All street hawkers were resettled into 135 open-air complexes.
1986	Once they were successfully rehoused, construction of hawker centres was halted.
1990s and 2000s	Periodic appeals from Members of Parliament and residents to build new hawker centres.
2001	$420 million was set aside to upgrade existing hawker centres under the Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme, as most of the hawker centres were in poor physical condition due to wear and tear.
2011	The Government pledged to build 10 new hawker centres over 10 years. The Hawker Centres Public Consultation Panel was set up to provide ideas on the new hawker centres.
2012	The report from the Hawker Centres Public Consultation Panel proposed having social enterprises manage hawker centres to ensure that the model of management is sustainable in providing affordable food.
2013	Kampung@Simpang Bedok became Singapore's first hawker centre to be privately-run by a social enterprise, but it closed down about a year later due to poor business and the lack of financial support.
2015	In 2015, the authorities announced that another 10 hawker centres

	would be built over the next 12 years to moderate food prices. They will be located in new estates or existing ones that are relatively underserved, such as Bidadari, Sengkang and Bukit Batok.
2016	Two Singapore hawker stalls were awarded a Michelin star, marking the first time in Michelin history that Asian street stalls have been awarded the star.
2017	The Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee was set up to with the goal of sustaining the hawker trade and supporting new entrants.
2018	It was announced that hawker culture will be nominated to be inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Current situation

NEA model vs SEHCs

Today, there are two models of hawker centres, one being that run by the NEA and the other, the social-enterprise hawker centre (SEHC). To date, 13 out of 114 hawker centres and markets are managed by 5 social enterprises (Tang, 2019), so the majority of hawker centres are still run by NEA.

Under NEA, about 40% of hawkers pay a monthly rent of a few hundred dollars, possibly less than a tenth of market rates (Tan, 2018). According to then Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in 2015, hawkers enjoy low rents for their stalls in general. He cited statistics to show that more than eight in ten hawkers paid less than $1500 in rent for their stalls each month, and four in ten paid less than

$400 (Feng, 2015). However, such low rents also mean that some hawkers can operate for just a few hours a day, or not at all. Some centres have stalls that close in the evening, with some hawkers citing a shortage of workers. The result is that patrons have fewer options for food after work, which reflects the balance of interests that need to be served by such social amenities (Tan, 2018).

The Government announced in 2011 that 10 more hawker centres will be built by 2021 as a way to provide affordable food for Singaporeans, due to the increase in the cost of living in recent years. There were also plans to conduct an overhaul of the original model of hawker centres. Following the announcement, the Public Consultation Panel on Hawker Centres was formed to provide ideas on how new hawker centres can continue to meet the needs of the people. The panel proposed to have hawker centres "operated on a not-for-profit basis by social enterprises or cooperatives". Their rationale was that hawker centres are supposed to benefit the community and provide employment opportunities for the low-income or underprivileged. Hence, they should not be run like a business (Tang, 2018).

The concept of SEHCs was born out of these recommendations. As its name suggests, these hawker centres are run by not-for-profit social enterprises. These hawker centres are meant to theoretically marry the best of both worlds: keep food affordable for the masses and available, while operating according to free-market competition rules with little government oversight. In 2015, surveys conducted by the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) found that in general, ingredients formed

about 60 percent of a hawker's cost. Manpower made up 17 percent, rent 12 percent, utilities 9 percent and table cleaning and other costs 3 percent. SEHCs were supposed to help hawkers lower costs by buying basic ingredients such as oil, cooking flour and eggs in bulk, among other measures (Feng, 2015).

Yet, the term 'social enterprise' hawker centres has often been termed as a misnomer. They are not run by Voluntary Welfare Organisations, but rather, big companies. Moreover, as part of their social welfare goal, stalls in these hawker centres are required to provide an affordable option for diners. For instance, stalls at Ci Yuan Hawker Centre run by Fei Siong social enterprise need to offer two dishes with a price ceiling of S$2.80. However, in today's context, with rising prices of ingredients, providing food to customers at such low prices may cause profit margins to be thin and hence financially unsustainable for the hawker.

Furthermore, this model has been criticised for imposing unnecessary rules and an extra layer of costs on hawkers, with allegations of poor management practices and auxiliary costs. The extra charges imposed by some social enterprises include rental of cashless payment systems, charges for coin-changing services, payment for concept-marketing and financial penalties for early closure of stalls. When additional charges and miscellaneous fees are included, it has been argued that the hawker effectively pays close to S$4,000 a month in rental and fees. All these have made the cost of running a stall in SEHCs increase, affecting their viability (Lee, Lay, 2018).

Moving forward, representatives should consider what the best model for running hawker centres should be such that it keeps prices reasonable for customers, ensures a sustainable livelihood for the hawker and maximises the benefit to society.

Challenges of Preservation

There have been a number of challenges undermining the survival of hawker centres that representatives should consider during the course of council debate.

The young being uninterested

The median age of hawkers here is 59 years (MEWR, 2017). Young people shun the profession as they are not comfortable working long hours in an excruciating environment. Consequently, it is not seen as a career path for those with higher levels of education. The stigma surrounding hawker culture is another factor inhibiting the industry's growth. Despite growing interest in hawker fare, fewer young people are interested in becoming hawkers because it is still considered unfashionable. Hawker centres are seen as very hot and dirty, hawkers are not dressed well, "and the presentation of food is not as fancy as many would like it to be", said Makansutra founder KF Seetoh, who champions hawker culture. Many younger hawkers also prefer to whip up what they feel is more interesting fare, such as fusion or western cuisine, and few know how to cook authentic dishes, Seetoh added (Fang, 2015). With this current mindset of the younger generation, should we sacrifice the original ambience and flavours of hawker centres to cater to these new tastes? Or are there better ways to conserve hawker centres without compromising on authenticity?

Issues with lack of training and availability of stalls

Even if some aspiring hawkers do manage to learn some techniques, nobody teaches them how to market their food or which events to participate in, locally or regionally, to get more exposure (Fang, 2015). Another problem, said industry players, is the lack of sufficient spots for aspiring hawkers to set up a stall. This was cast in the spotlight after Mr Douglas Ng who is in his 20s, who runs a fishball noodle stall at Golden Mile Food Centre, complained about the selection process of upcoming hawker centre at Bukit Panjang. Ng said the shortlisting method adopted by NTUC Foodfare, which operates the hawker centre, was unfair and lacked transparency (Lim, 2015). During the tender briefings, NTUC Foodfare had said it would evaluate bids on a scorecard with 40 percent weightage for the tendered rent, and 60 percent for factors including the quality, variety and selling price of food, the intended opening hours, a bidder's experience, as well as concept. Ng indicated that it would have been fairer if bidders had a chance to showcase their culinary skills.

Cost and profit

Then there are the financial risks of setting up a hawker stall. While the risks may be less compared to setting up a restaurant or cafe, it can still be considerable. Many face the problem of not having enough seed money. Starting a stall at an old public hawker centre — including equipment, utilities and ingredients — could set a hawker back by some S$18,000 to S$20,000, said Seetoh. At private food courts, that could go up to S$50,000. The challenge could be in having enough money to set up a stall, as well as

to sustain business for at least three months, as one's customer base would not likely be established before that (Fang, 2015).

Beyond this financial reality, the reasons people become hawkers also pose additional challenges for hawker centres in the long term. Based on Elizabeth Bennett's survey for the Straits Times, an overwhelming majority of hawkers entered the trade because of family. Only 6 percent quoted a passion for cooking as their motivation**.** Hence, there is not much stopping young hawkers from quitting the trade if they are unable to sustain their business in the long term. Part of the problem is that hawker food is too cheap. While there has been dismay over price increases, in reality they have not increased significantly in recent years. It has been noted that overall, the price of chicken rice has increased a mere 50 cents since 1993 (Bennett, 2014). Hence, is it time that the public accepts a more significant increase in the prices of hawker food?

Increasing popularity of international food

As Singapore continues to develop, the hawker trade is also falling into the shadow of international cuisine. "Armed as Singaporeans are with more disposable income, [they also have] more expensive tastes," said doctor and popular food blogger Leslie Tay. "Nowadays youngsters are presented with a rich buffet of food choices from all over the world... and they seem to prefer going out for a meal at a modern, air-conditioned restaurant than heading to their neighborhood food centre," he added (Modak, 2017).

It is thus imperative that representatives consider the issues of getting the young to be involved, making the tender process easier, providing more subsidies to help aspiring

hawkers get started and methods of countering the threat posed by international cuisine.

Existing Solutions

In order to overcome the manpower crunch, more companies have introduced new technology to make things easier for themselves and patrons. As part of a nationwide e-payment drive, customers can enjoy a discount for their cashless payments at more than 1,000 hawker stalls every Wednesday in a promotion by payment services group Nets (Tham, 2018). All these act as strong incentives for the usage of cashless modes of payment in hawker centres, which in turn reduces the need for cashiers.

Food-court decor has become more sophisticated over the years, to meet rising customers' expectations on what a food court should look and feel like. Dining options in food courts are also increasingly taking on a more sophisticated identity. The gap has widened in recent years as many food courts have raised the standard of their technology, decor and offerings by several notches. For instance, Food Republic's Bras Basah outlet has a snazzy interior, and NTUC Foodfare and Kopitiam feature similar designer fittings and bright colours (Abu Baker, 2017). Nonetheless, this begs the following questions: will such a modification undermine the original atmosphere of hawker centres, hence compromising our hawker heritage? Will the new technology imposed and the enhanced ambience entail higher maintenance costs?

Very significantly, Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Amy Khor said that her ministry would focus on how to improve SEHC model

implemented at seven new hawker centres. It hopes to give better support to the stallholders to manage costs, have greater oversight by the NEA to safeguard hawkers' well-being, and set up structured channels by the SEHC operators for hawkers to give feedback. In Parliament, Dr. Khor said that it was difficult to get the SEHC model right from the start and assured the Members of Parliament that the relevant ministries were working on solving the problems which have surfaced. She also noted that operating costs at SEHC centres are comparable to those run by NEA. These include service and conservancy charges and table-cleaning charges (Teh, 2018).

Some solutions that have been implemented include the following:

- SEHC operators are not allowed to raise rents or operating costs during the tenancy period.
- Hawkers are allowed to operate five days a week from 1 Jan 2019 and can terminate their tenancies with no more than two months' notice to the operators.
- Security deposits held by the operators will be no more than two months' rent and they will bear all the legal fees related to the tenancy.

Moreover, aspiring hawkers can now get a taste of the hawker trade before setting up their own stalls, with an "incubation stall" programme launched by the National Environment Agency (NEA) on February 23rd 2017. Pre-fitted with basic equipment such as a freezers and sinks, the incubation stalls serve to reduce the capital investment required to start a hawker stall. Successful applicants will be offered the stalls at 50 per cent of the assessed market rent for a six-month period (Lim, 2018).

The Hawker Centre 3.0 committee was formed in 2015 to propose ways to improve hawker centres and promote the trade. Some of these recommendations include:

- The development of “Hawker Fare” culinary classes from May. This is in line with the committee’s key recommendation for the Government to provide training opportunities and pathways for aspiring hawkers.
- The setting up of a one-stop information and service centre to provide useful information to existing and aspiring hawkers. This will include how to tender for a stall, where to go for courses on food hygiene and the hawker trade, and information on the range of kitchen-automation equipment available.
- The development of a short course in ITE to teach aspiring hawkers relevant business-management skills. This includes topics like basic profit-and-loss analysis and how to tender for a stall, in order to help aspiring hawkers set up and manage a hawker business (MEWR, 2015). Currently, there are a handful of culinary certification courses in the market, but these courses are largely not tailored to the hawker trade.

It was also announced that about S$90 million will be set aside for funding support to facilitate the adoption of productivity initiative in hawker centres. This will help lighten the load of hawkers and address manpower constraints. This will include some funding to increase the adoption of centre-level productivity initiatives, like centralised dishwashing and stall-level productivity initiatives like the purchase of kitchen automation equipment. These productivity measures will help hawkers reduce their workload and address the manpower challenges that hawkers are facing (Chia, 2017).

Conclusion

Hawker culture gained more prominence as it was announced in 2018's National Day Rally that Singapore's hawker culture will be nominated to be inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (PMO, 2018). A UNESCO Nomination would raise the profile of hawker food in Singapore. It provides an avenue for hawker culture to increase its visibility and raise awareness about its importance among Singaporeans so it can be safeguarded. A UNESCO inscription will also let the rest of the world know about our local food and multicultural heritage, boosting gastro-tourism in Singapore. This is part of a long-term plan by the Singapore Government to make Singaporean hawker food one of the key attractions of our city-state (Carole, 2015). Representatives will have to consider how best to help hawker culture thrive in order to achieve these goals.

Questions for Discussion

1. What tweaks need to be made to the current model of SEHCs?
2. Should rental be subsidised heavily by the government considering also the social value of hawker centres?
3. How should hawker centre operators decide which bidder gets a chance to rent the stall? Is the highest bidder the best method?
4. What is the best way to equip aspiring hawkers with the necessary expertise in order to ensure the smooth running of their stall in the future?
5. Are there ways to preserve hawker culture without compromising on authenticity?
6. How can we encourage the young to patronise hawker centres?
7. In the long term, how can we exploit a potential successful UNESCO nomination in order to preserve hawker culture?

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Preserving Little India

Introduction

Historic areas in Singapore, such as Chinatown or Little India, are a representation of not just a particular race's heritage, but also the history of Singapore as a whole. Though these areas date back only to the colonial period, Singapore's heritage extends far beyond colonial times. From the moment different civilisations and cultures first established their presence on the island, Singapore became a point where distinct cultures met. In this study guide, we will be focusing on the conservation of Little India, which can be understood today not only as a historic area of the colonial period, but also as a symbol of the long-standing history of Indian cultural influence on the island, which has had nearly two millennia of presence in the region.

However, some ask if it is possible to preserve Little India's cultural heritage, especially with the current demands of Singapore's economy, its problems with a shortage of land area, and the fact that certain governmental policies have affected Little India's local businesses (Hussain, 2013). The question is therefore how to balance potential economic benefits with the conservation of cultural heritage in Little India. To answer this, we will be analysing conservation efforts in another historic area: Chinatown. Through a thorough analysis of conservation efforts in Chinatown, representatives should discuss and decide on the best course of action with regard to the question of preserving Little India's heritage and retaining its cultural authenticity.

Little India

Historical Overview of Events

To understand the history of the Indian migration to Singapore, the context of Indian influence on the island and the region of Southeast Asia must first be analysed, and this long precedes the British colonisation of the island in 1819.

Greco-Roman geographer Ptolemy wrote of a region named the “Golden Chersonese”, corresponding to modern-day Southeast Asia. His map identified an area known as *Sabana* (Wheatly, 1955), currently thought to include the island of Singapore, and indicated that *Sabana* was part of a chain of trading centres connected to India (Wheatly, 1955). This is presumably the earliest record of interaction between India and Singapore. Southeast Asia underwent the process of Indianisation during the early Middle Ages (Smith, 1999). Disparate theories about how exactly Indian culture spread in the region have arisen, but it is clear that Indian maritime trade facilitated such interaction between local Southeast Asian and Indian cultures (Smith, 1999).

During the 11th Century, the South Indian Chola Empire even directly controlled Singapore for several decades. The *Pax Mongolica* of the 13th & 14th Centuries saw the reformation of the global maritime trade system by the Mongolian Yuan dynasty at its zenith, when its influence stretched all the way into Southeast Asia (Shagdar, 2000). The island of Singapore flourished as a trading hub connected by lucrative maritime trade routes from Indian ports (Banyan, 2013).

In the early 19th century, as the British Empire aimed to supersede the Dutch as the dominant naval and merchant power in the Malay Archipelago, primarily owing to Dutch taxation of the lucrative Opium trade between British India and China (Country Studies, n.d.), Sir Stamford Raffles persuaded Lord Hastings, the Governor-General of British India and Raffles' superior at the British East India Company, to facilitate an expedition aimed at seeking out a suitable colony in the Malay Archipelago (Country Studies, n.d.). The colonisation of Singapore established India's economic interests in modern Singapore, and many Indian immigrants henceforth flocked to the island from British India, establishing permanent settlements on the island (Turnbull, 1989). By the 1860s, Indians accounted for 16.0% of the island's population (Turnbull, 1989), and Little India (then Serangoon) flourished during this period as commercial centre for Indian immigrants, especially due to its thriving cattle trade. It was during the colonial period that prominent religious centres, such as the Sri Veeramakaliamman temple (built in 1855), the Sri Srinivasa Perumal temple (built in 1855) and the Angullia Mosque (built in 1890) were constructed in Little India.

With the advent of the 20th century, however, urbanisation drained Little India of its thriving cattle trade, paving the way for the construction of urban buildings, one of which was the original Tekka Market (built 1915), which has since become a landmark of Little India (Ong, n.d.). During the Japanese Occupation, many local Indians took over small businesses in Little India after their former Indian bosses had evacuated the country (Ong, n.d.). This enabled Indian commerce to thrive once again after the Japanese Occupation elapsed.

As Singapore began its public housing campaigns, Indians began to leave the outdated residential areas in Little India behind for new housing estates constructed elsewhere (Urban Redevelopment Authority, n.d.), diminishing Little India's Indian community and thereby leaving Little India as a largely commercial district (Ong, n.d.). Despite having built several public housing estates in Little India, the Government designated Little India as a conservation area (Urban Redevelopment Authority, n.d.), and apart from minor preservation and cleaning works, Little India has been left largely intact since the 1980s (Urban Redevelopment Authority, n.d.).

Little India Today

Little India is the heart of the Indian community in Singapore, for both local Indians and migrant workers from the subcontinent. The district remains the centre of Indian commerce and a primary gathering place for many, from Indian migrant workers congregating in Indian eateries and open spaces, to Hindus gathering in temples such as the Sri Veeramakaliamman and Sri Srinivasa Perumal temples in the district, to patrons who merely seek to experience the buzz of this Indian cultural enclave in Singapore, who visit commercial hubs like the Mustafa Centre and the Little India Arcade. For tourists, the Indian Heritage Centre offers an insight to the life of the Indian community in Singapore and the history of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia since the 1st century AD.

Yet Little India has its own distinct characteristics, and one of its most discernible qualities is its multicultural nature. While Little India is an Indian cultural enclave populated predominantly by Indians, the district is home to symbols of other cultures present in Singapore, most notably the Angullia Mosque, the House of Tan Teng Niah and the Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple. Visitors to the district need not necessarily be Indians: the district receives many locals of other ethnicities who come either to experience Indian culture or simply to shop for goods which can be found in the plethora of retail stores in the district. It is thus fair to say that Little India is an economically and culturally vibrant district teeming with life.

Challenges Faced

However, the area has faced significant challenges in recent years. Since the Little India riots of 2013, Indian migrant workers have been increasingly absent from Little India (Spykerman, 2015), causing small Indian businesses to lose their primary clientele and thus their primary source of revenue (Hussain, 2013) (Spykerman, 2015). According to Debbie Fordyce, an executive of the Transient Workers Count Too organisation, fewer and fewer Indian migrant workers congregate in Little India ever since the alcohol ban and the increasing restrictions on migrant workers' freedom of movement (Fordyce, 2016), hurting Indian businesses severely (Hussain, 2013). Moreover, the availability of relatively lower rental in Little India has paved the way for the rapid establishment of trendy businesses, from tapas bars to craft breweries, further undermining traditional Indian businesses in the area (Makhijani, 2015). Some question if there is enough left of Little India's heritage to be meaningfully preserved.

While the situation for what persists of Little India's heritage seems rather unfavourable, however, not all is lost. Indeed, the Singaporean Government still upholds Little India's status as a conservation area, and according to the Urban Redevelopment Authority, "to maintain the ambience and physical character of these historic districts, strict conservation guidelines have been put in place", indicating the extent to which the Singaporean Government treasures the cultural significance of this district. Locals, especially those with fond memories of Little India in the past, still wish to see the conservation of the rich cultural heritage of this historic area (The Straits Times, 2016). The area retains its importance as the primary commercial and social hub for local Indians and migrant workers, even amidst the current threats to its cultural heritage (The Straits Times, 2016).

Yet the process of conservation itself can also be a point of contention: should we preserve these historic areas merely for the sake of their cultural heritage? Or should we gear conservation of these areas towards promoting tourism and a deeper understanding of these historic areas amongst visitors, which may potentially compromise the cultural authenticity of these areas (Nathaniel, 2015)? The Singapore Government, in designating Little India as a conservation area, has not initiated any major schemes to transform the area for the purpose of tourism (Samdin, 2017), and this could prove to be an untapped potential of the historic district (Chang, 2000). As of August 2018, plans to construct Tekka Place, a brand new 10-storey shopping mall in Little India, have been unveiled to the public, which aims to increase the number of visitors to the area (The Straits Times, 2018). Its developers have been actively

engaging the Singapore Tourism Board, suggesting that tourism is one of the key areas of focus for the developers. Ultimately, how would conservation efforts be effected such that the authenticity of culture is retained, rather than transforming the historical area into an artificial construct catered primarily to tourists instead of locals?

Also, Singapore faces the critical issue of land shortage, a problem that has pervaded our urban planning for decades (Huang, 2001). As Singapore's population skyrockets, is it worth preserving historic districts such as Little India in their entirety? Or will it be more logical to redevelop major portions of these historic districts into residential and commercial hubs, whilst preserving only parts of these areas' cultural heritage? To gain further insight into the various courses of action the Government can take with regard to the issue of preserving Little India, we shall be examining another historic area in Singapore: Chinatown.

Case Study: Chinatown

Chinatown provides us with an excellent example of the clash between conservation and redevelopment, primarily because it has advanced the furthest of any historic areas in Singapore in terms of conservation efforts (Kong & Yeoh, 1994). Lessons can be learnt from Chinatown's redevelopment and conservation efforts, applying them thereafter to Little India.

Historical Overview

Just as Little India today can be considered the manifestation of India's historic influence on the island and the region, Chinatown can also be viewed as such, and not merely as a representation of the Chinese community from the colonial period. While Chinatown itself may have only come into existence around the time Sir Stamford Raffles and Lieutenant Philip Jackson enacted the Raffles Town Plan of 1822 (National Library Board, n.d.), Chinese influence and settlement on the island precede Raffles' arrival on Singapore by many centuries. In 1330, the Chinese traveller Wang Duyuan visited the island and noted that there was a Chinese community residing there, indicating the prevalence of Chinese trade passing through Singapore in that period (Soon, 2002). Singapore witnessed an influx of Chinese immigrants during the colonial period, who flocked to Singapore for its attractive economic prospects, mainly a result of being an important trade hub which required a large labour force.

In 1843, significant development took place, with more land leases and grants for homes and trade awarded. In the next one hundred years or so, the great influx of

Chinese immigrants resulted in overcrowding. Due to the limited housing available, people lived in sub-divided rooms called cubicles that created more living space, but were crammed, unhealthy and unsafe. This led to the creation of slums (Cornelius-Takahama, n.d.). After World War 2, Chinatown entered its' golden age' in the 50s. People went there to celebrate festivals, make purchases and meet friends. There was a huge variety of trades seen: storytelling, streetside Chinese opera, fortune-telling, hawkers and peddlers, to name a few. The district was highly popular with both tourists and locals (Chinatown, n.d.)

However, in the 1970s, Singapore as a whole underwent a period of modernisation. Chinatown was no exception. People moved out of cramped shophouses into new, high-rise flats. One of the most attractive draws of Chinatown, the night market, was closed down, as the street stalls were relocated to Chinatown Complex. Many felt that this killed the spirit of Chinatown. Ironically, in 2001, Smith Street was converted into a food street and in 2003 stalls offering souvenirs were reintroduced (Chinatownology, n.d.). Some feel that the move to first demolish the night market by the authorities may have been too hasty, on hindsight.

Timeline of Conservation and Redevelopment Efforts in Chinatown

In the 1980s, the Government embarked on an extensive plan to conserve and redevelop Singapore.

1980	The Singapore Government thought it unwise to preserve the structurally unsound buildings in Chinatown, stating that preservation would be unable to fully achieve the prospects for profits from the area as opposed to redevelopment (Heng & Quah, 2000).
Mid-1980s	The Government began its plans for the redevelopment and conservation of Chinatown, realising that the deteriorating condition of its historic environment would be irreversible if suitable measures for conservation were not enacted in time (Kong & Yeoh, 1994).
Mid-1990s	The Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) reaffirmed their efforts towards the preservation of Chinatown with the newly-conceived “Guide to the Historic District of Chinatown”, working in tandem with the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) as part of its “Tourism 21” initiative in 1996 (Li, 2003).
1998	The STB announced a $97.5 million scheme with the aim of transforming Chinatown into a tourist district, popularising its status as an “ethnic quarter” in a multi-ethnic nation. The release of the plan, however, gave rise to major discontentment from the public (Heng & Quah, 2000). The segmentation of Chinatown into three core districts (Historic District, Greater Town and Hilltown) as part of the plan was perceived by the public as a deliberate attempt to redraw Chinatown’s boundaries, in a bid to facilitate marketing to tourists (Heng & Quah, 2000).
Late 1990s	As part of official redevelopment projects including Tourism 21, hawkers in the area were shifted to permanent hawker centres, while several old shops were demolished to accommodate the construction of blocks of new flats (Li,

	2003). These endeavours received praise from the tourism industry for enhancing Chinatown's attraction as a tourist destination, but on the other hand, these projects were criticised by academics and the public for undermining the Chinatown's authenticity (Li, 2003).
2000s	The URA continues its redevelopment projects in Chinatown, primarily by restoring old buildings in the area (Urban Redevelopment Authority, n.d.).

Current Situation

Chinatown is still a cultural enclave of the Chinese community in Singapore. There are many businesses in Chinatown and it receives visitors of all types throughout the year, both local or foreign. Traditional shops such as the Tong Heng Confectionery and Lim Chee Guan Bak Kwa remain popular with locals, while the diversity of religious centres, most notably the Thian Hock Keng Temple, the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Sri Mariamman Temple and the Jamae Mosque, attests to the district's multi-religious, multicultural nature. Chinatown also houses the Chinatown heritage centre, which portrays the history of Chinese influence and settlement on the island through the exhibition of artefacts, much like the Indian Heritage Centre in Little India.

However, Chinatown has faced a fair share of challenges in the wake of the Government's redevelopment and conservation efforts. Academics and the Singaporean public are increasingly concerned (and have been since the 1990s) that the Government's redevelopment projects are resulting in the loss of cultural authenticity (Heng & Quah, 2000) (Li, 2003). Indeed, less than 10% of locals would

recommend the eateries in Chinatown (Zaccheus, 2018), and that percentage drops to less than 5% when asked whether they would recommend Chinatown's architecture (Zaccheus, 2018). There are those who feel that Chinatown in Singapore is now too touristy and sanitised, and has lost much of its original allure (Chinatownology, n.d.). This suggests that deliberate conservation may lead to the creation of a cultural site that smacks of artifice. It may then no longer resonate with the local community, the very people it is supposed to serve.

Conclusion: Balancing Conservation and Redevelopment

In view of the controversies in the redevelopment and protection of Chinatown's cultural heritage, the question of what ought to be done with Little India becomes a highly contentious one. Little India is a symbol of many centuries of Indian influence in the region of Southeast Asia and Singapore itself, but merely preserving its authenticity and cultural heritage may likely come at the cost of potential profits from lucrative businesses which may not be entirely keeping with the traditions of Little India. As can be seen from the government's schemes to revitalise Chinatown as a tourist hotspot, developing these historic areas to cater to tourism can realise the economic potential of the cultural heritage in these areas, and yet it comes at the possible cost of negative local sentiments, be it from the public or the academia. The most drastic option would be to completely overhaul these areas, preserving only certain aspects of its cultural heritage. This option also entails many problems, primarily the destruction of cultural heritage which has been integral to Singaporean society for many years. Bearing this

knowledge in mind, representatives must come to a consensus on the most viable plans for Little India's future.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the primary purpose of cultural heritage conservation of Chinatown and Little India? Is it fixed, or does it assume different purposes as time passes?
2. What is the true value of conserving these areas? Is it significant enough to be placed as a priority?
3. Does the agenda set out for cultural conservation of these two sites concur with the needs of Singapore today? Which will take precedence over the other if a conflict of interest arises? How do you evaluate this decision?
4. Are cultural conservation and redevelopment binaries?
5. How can cultural authenticity be retained with the redevelopment of these areas?
6. How will the decisions made affect how different stakeholders (Singaporeans, businesses, tourists, etc) perceive Singapore?
7. How does one determine the success of cultural heritage conservation? Has it been achieved? Is it achievable?

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