

MANAGING DIVERSITY: THE GOVERNMENT OF A MALAYSIAN HAWKER PLACE

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Abstract

Selling and consuming street food has a long tradition in urban areas of Asia. While the preparation of food, the appropriation of space, and the sale itself follow certain rules, some of them are informal and not always in line with government regulations. However, even though the street vendors (or hawkers) are practicing their trade in a gray area between formality and informality many hawker places function surprisingly well. It is the aim of the paper to analyze the functioning of such a hawker place. As case study serves Changlun, a small town in the Malaysian state of Kedah, where qualitative interviews with hawkers but also officials were conducted. Results indicate that the government of this hawker place is a consequence of an intricate entanglement of practices, which include a tolerant administration but also compliant hawkers and customers liking this place. However, this entanglement is not without conflicts and problems. The hawkers are economically vulnerable and do not have many alternatives to generate income. Consequently the paper ends with recommendations that should enable the functioning of a hawker place as a traditional and well-regarded place to meet and eat and a space for underprivileged people to earn an income.

Introduction

Throughout the world street food is regarded as something special for various reasons: Street vendors sell traditional dishes that their customers would or could not prepare at home anymore (Swislocki, 2009), they create a space for casual meetings (Khuo, 2009) and a sense of place (Shamsuddin & Ujang, 2008); (Wijaya et al., 2013). They provide cheap calories to workers (Etzold, 2013), and with their sometimes almost artistic performances they are also tourist attractions (Henderson et al., 2012); (Steel, 2012). However, they are also regarded as a health problem (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2002); (Kampen et al., 1998), (Burusnukul et al., 2011) (Samapundo et al., 2015), as occupiers of public space (Hackenbroch, 2013), as obstacles to traffic (Burnett & Newman, 2014), or unfair competition to regular restaurants. This list of characteristics can be extended considerably of course. Moreover, hawker practices change from region to region (cf. de Cassia Vieira Cardoso et al., 2014) and from place to place, so

that we cannot speak of a generic hawker place that more or less encompasses all the traits of the practice of street vending. Rather each region and even each place has its own characteristics. One common aspect however is that the hawkers are seeking the close proximity to their customers, which is their way to compete with restaurants and fellow hawkers (cf. Boone & Van Dijk 1998). Hence, they are looking for niches for their stalls at streets, crossroads, overpasses etc.

This case study examines the street hawking situation in Changlun, a small town in the north of the Malay Peninsula in order to analyze the intricacies and subsequently the “management” of hawker places. The geography of a hawker place does not only consist of the street vendors making their appearance and doing business on the streets but also of their customers with their needs and desires, the passers-by in cars or other vehicles, but also government employees that have to regulate public space and with it street vending. The combined and aggregated practices that form a hawker place may also be

