

Koping with Changing Times: The Viability of George Town's Kopitiams for Modern Consumers

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Abstract

This article is an analysis of the traditional coffeehouses, locally known as *kopitiam*, of George Town, Penang, Malaysia. I examine various issues which surround the sustainability of *kopitiams* with respect to the emergence of other types of coffeehouses that have since given customers more options in dining outside of home and of coffee consumption, with arguably more comfortable experiences. I also look at whether these iconic coffee shops are more representative of one ethnic group than others in Malaysia, given that non-halal food is usually sold in *kopitiams*, a culinary feature that hinders the patronage of Muslim customers. This article is primarily guided by Sharon Zukin's notion of authenticity in examining how customers construct and experience authenticity in *kopitiams*. Authenticity in *kopitiam* is linked to preconceived spatial and temporal images that customers draw. I argue theoretically that seeking 'authenticity' leads to their varied coffeehouse experiences.

Key words: coffeehouses, *kopitiam*, Penang, traditional, authenticity, nostalgia

I. Introduction

Imagine sipping *kopi-o-peng* (iced black coffee) in a noisy, greasy, crowded coffee shop ventilated only by old ceiling fans in the sweltering heat of tropical George Town, the heritage enclave of Penang. This intense heat is heightened by eating a steaming hot plate of spicy char *koay teow*¹ laced with pork lard, with sweat rolling down one's face. The loud clatter of cooking sounds from the hawker stalls located along the periphery of the coffee shop is accompanied by orders of drinks shouted across the shop by elderly local Chinese workers and foreign workers wearing stained aprons. The hustle and bustle of customers ordering food from their chosen hawkers is intensified by the constant movements within the coffee shop, with cramped spaces between tables. Occasionally, lottery ticket sellers and peddlers selling municipal car park coupons, packets of tissues, pens, torchlights, and other small gadgets add to the crowd. Sometimes, beggars and individuals claiming to represent destitute people go from table to table asking for donations, although they are usually turned down. Such is the typical scenario in a *kopitiam*, an emblematic Malaysian diner.

Lai Ah Eng (2013) defines *kopitiams* as small-scale economic enterprises selling cheap drinks, snacks, and sometimes meals. *Kopitiams* are usually owned by families whose main income is from selling drinks and collecting rent from individual hawkers who set up their stalls within the coffee shop. Her description is based on *kopitiams* in Singapore, but it is also applicable to the Malaysian context due to the historical, geographical, and cultural similarities of these neighbouring countries. The *kopitiam* has long been a go-to place for socializing over coffee since before independence. The emergence and growth of *kopitiams* in Malaysia have been attributed to the

¹ A noodle dish stir-fried with light and dark soy sauce, chili, prawns, cockles, bean sprouts, Chinese chives, Chinese sausage, fish cake, and crispy croutons of pork lard. It is a popular hawker dish which can be found in most *kopitiams*.

immigration of different ethnic groups to British Malaya during the colonial era, before the country morphed into Malaysia in 1957. The *kopitiam* was where cheap drinks and meals were sold to poor male immigrants (Lai, 2013: 213). These establishments catered to different immigrant ethnic groups as social centres offering respite, company, entertainment, and news about their homelands. Men from the Chinese Hainanese dialect group built up a strong reputation for occupying service-oriented jobs, as they were forced to take up undesirable positions, such as cooks and servants in colonial households. Beginning in the 1920s, changes in economic and political conditions forced them out of these jobs. Hence, the Hainanese began to set up *kopitiams* and made it their niche business identity (Lai, 2013: 214–219).



Figure 1. Typical Scene in a Traditional *Kopitiam*

Source: Author (2017).

II. Methods

I conducted fieldwork for nine months from June 2016 to February 2017. My fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews, participant observation, library and archival research, and keeping abreast of related social media. I adopted a multi-sited ethnographic approach, where I frequented four *kopitiams* located in urban and suburban areas of George Town, Penang, two each in the core heritage zone and buffer heritage zone, respectively.



Figure 2. Map of George Town's UNESCO World Heritage Site

Source: <https://mypenang.gov.my/culture-heritage/heritage-zones/>

Participant observations were done thrice a week for a month in each location. I chose to schedule the observation activities with a mix of weekdays and weekends, and at different hours of the day to track any variations in the consumption patterns during these different times. Throughout my fieldwork, I formally interviewed a total of 38 individuals who were coffeehouse consumers, owners and employees

of coffeehouses. They were a mix of Malaysians (from different ethnic groups) and visitors, self-identifying as belonging to the working class, middle class, and middle upper class, and between the ages of 18 to 90 years old. These in-depth interviews were done in a mix of languages to accommodate the informants' language competency and to capture certain expressions which could only be expressed in a non-English language. The interviews were done in English, Malay, Mandarin, Hokkien, and Cantonese. These interviews were audio recorded (when permitted), translated verbatim, and transcribed. I adopted a grounded theory method. This is an inductive data analysis approach, whereby the empirical data I collected led to the theorizing of the research at hand. I adopted an open coding process by identifying themes through recurring words, phrases, concepts, and ideas from the narratives of the interviews and my fieldwork notes. Examples of 'codes' which emerged were: 'authenticity', 'nostalgia', 'halal', 'OldTown', 'socialize', and 'UNESCO World Heritage Site'. Once these 'codes' were established, I gained a better analytical grasp of my data, which led to the thematic organization of the subsections of the paper.

III. *The Kopitiam Community*

The ethnic make-up among customers and hawkers in kopitiam is significantly disproportionate in comparison to the Malaysian ethno-linguistic demography. As of 2018, the population of Malaysia stands at 32.38 million. Bumiputera ('sons of the soil') citizens (Malays and other indigenous peoples) make up 68.8% of the total Malaysian population, while the ethnic Chinese make up 23.2%. Seven percent of the nation's citizens are ethnic Indians, while the remaining one percent are classified as 'others' (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Islam is the country's official religion and is practiced formally for ceremonial purposes, although the nation remains a secular state (Nagata, 1994: 67). Malays are constitutionally Muslims, as defined by Article 160 of

the Constitution of Malaysia.

Customers of *kopitiam*s are almost always only from the ethnic Chinese group. Owners of *kopitiam*s are majority ethnically Chinese, with some exceptions of Indians selling *apom telur* (egg pancakes), *mee goreng* (fried noodles), or *roti canai* (savoury pancakes). The presence of few non-Chinese stalls in *kopitiam*s indicates that they are mono-ethnic places, with the Chinese dominating the business. Muslims do not usually dine in *kopitiam*s, which sell food with pork and other non-halal ingredients, as well as beer. Johan Fischer (Fischer, 2011) explained that “halal is an Arabic word that literally means ‘permissible’ or ‘lawful’. Conventionally, halal signifies ‘pure food’ with regards to meat in particular by proper Islamic practice such as ritual slaughter and pork avoidance” (Fischer, 2011: 1). Although the Malay Muslims are the largest ethnic population in Malaysia, most *kopitiam*s remain characteristically non-halal despite the possibility of receiving significantly more customers if they became halal eateries. Duruz and Khoo (2015: 39) attribute the keeping of non-halal status of *kopitiam*s as a form of resistance in defending one’s ethnic cuisine by non-Muslims in Malaysia. That said, the majority on Penang Island and particularly George Town are Chinese, and therefore it does not make good business sense to make *kopitiam*s halal.

In this light, Duruz and Khoo cited Robert McKinley (2003) as stating that the Islamic food restriction leads to Malay Muslims being seen as permanent hosts, as they cannot be guests of other ethnic groups (who might serve non-halal food). This mirrors the politically charged notion of Malays as *bumiputera*, while the Chinese and Indians are cast as immigrants instead of having equal rights as citizens despite having settled in the country generations ago. The insistence on retaining some sense of ownership and identity by the non-Muslims is reflected in the claim of authenticity of non-halal food served in *kopitiam*s, as Penang fare is mainly Chinese (non-halal) food. The

mention of pigs or pork is generally avoided in the presence of Muslims. The use of pork and pork lard in the cuisine in Penang thus impedes Malays and other Muslims from dining in *kopitiam*s.

*Kopitiam*s are known for Chinese foods and *kaya* (egg jam) toasts, and it is often the main reason for customers to dine in these coffee shops. Most of these Chinese foods are prepared by Chinese hawkers using non-halal ingredients. There are several Chinese hawker dishes which overlap with Malay hawker fare, but they are essentially cooked differently. For example, while *koay teow goreng* (fried flat noodles in the Malay language) and *char koay teow* (fried flat noodles in Chinese Hokkien dialect) essentially translate to the same method of cooking a specific type of vermicelli, the two dishes taste rather different, with the Malay version being wetter and sweeter. Penang is well known for the latter, which is usually fried with ingredients like Chinese pork sausage and pork lard, rendering it quite difficult for Muslims to find halal *char koay teow*.

However, newspaper and magazine articles often paint a picture of *kopitiam*s as places of multi-ethnic and multi-religious commensality and harmony. This is a romanticized image, as *kopitiam*s which are halal are rare, unless they are owned by Muslims; a feature which is unlikely, as *kopitiam*s are monopolized by descendants of Hainanese and Fuzhou immigrants from China. If families still run *kopitiam*s originally opened by their fathers or grandfathers, they will still be serving food which contains pork or its by-products as part of the ingredients. As the majority of the Chinese population in Penang comprises Hokkien descendants, the mode of communication in these coffee shops is Hokkien and, more lately, also Mandarin.

With the use of Mandarin as the medium of communication, consumers of other ethnic backgrounds and even ethnic Chinese who do not speak Mandarin are further dissuaded from patronizing *kopitiam*s. In some cases, the Malay language is used by Malaysian

Indian customers to place their orders, while foreign tourists resort to English. In addition, the type of food sold in *kopitiams*, which is essentially Malaysian Chinese cuisine, indicates that the main customers of these eateries are Chinese. It is also common to find menus and signboards in *kopitiams* written partially in Chinese characters. All these suggest that the *kopitiam* is predominantly a Chinese space, although tourist brochures promote them as a place for a Malaysian gastronomic experience. In order to benefit from the *kopitiam* experience, Muslims now have the option of dining in a different kind of coffee shop which sells halal food and drinks.

IV. Modern *Kopitiams*

The *kopitiam* concept has been updated and reinterpreted with the opening of *kopitiam*-style cafés and restaurants. The most popular in Malaysia is OldTown White Coffee, which is a chain restaurant and now a common sight in shopping malls and other stand-alone locations throughout Malaysia and other Asian countries. These restaurants sell items which hark back to traditional *kopitiams* like toast with *kaya* and the usual variety of *kopi* (traditional coffee) and *teh* ('tea' in the Malay language and Hokkien dialect). They also serve common hawker-style food like curry mee,² Hokkien prawn mee,³ *nasi lemak*,⁴ and chicken *hor*

² A soup noodle dish with coconut milk, chili paste, cockles, cuttlefish, fried spongy bean curd, and long beans.

³ There are several variations of the 'Hokkien mee' in Malaysia, but the Penang version is a noodle dish with prawn head and pork ribs as its soup base. It is served with a mixture of yellow noodles and rice vermicelli (although this can be specified according to the customer's taste). It usually contains bean sprouts, strips of pork or chicken, slices of hard boiled eggs, and Chinese watercress. 'Hokkien mee' in Kuala Lumpur is a fried noodle dish coated in dark soy sauce with seafood or chicken and pork.

⁴ A ubiquitous and economical Malaysian breakfast food which is steamed coconut milk rice with chili paste topped with anchovies, peanuts, hard-boiled egg, and cucumber. In place of anchovies, there are other options of tamarind prawns, fried fish, chili squid, or turmeric chicken. These small packets of rice are wrapped in banana leaves to form handy pyramid-shaped packages. Depending on where customers buy them, a regular packet can cost

fun.⁵ However, the environment of these eateries is different from *kopitiams*, as they are air-conditioned, cleaner, have proper printed menus, and their waiters and waitresses wear uniforms. The prices of the food and drinks are at least double those of traditional *kopitiams*. These modern *kopitiams* are advertised as halal and are therefore accessible for customers from all religious backgrounds. In a nutshell, they are restaurants which are *kopitiam* themed.

The way that these restaurant chains market their businesses as *kopitiams* indicates that they are attempting to stage a sense of nostalgia. The tagline for OldTown White Coffee, which is 'aroma of good times', implies a sense of longing for the past, as it is frequently advertised with sepia-toned photographs of people dressed in clothes that were fashionable in the 1970s and riding old motorbikes, as seen on their official website (<http://www.oldtown.com.my>). In addition, the furnishings and decor of all the above-mentioned modern *kopitiams* contain elements of an era in the past. Marble tables,⁶ wooden stools,⁷ and antiques or replicas of antiques are common sights in these eateries. Some of the modern *kopitiams* even dress their waitresses in *samfu*⁸ to reinforce this sense of nostalgia.

only RM1 (approximately USD 0.25) from stalls by the road. Variations of the *nasi lemak* are sold in restaurants and modern *kopitiams* which come in much larger portions in more luxurious presentations.

⁵ A clear soup dish with strips of steamed chicken and flat noodles which is popular in Ipoh, where OldTown White Coffee originated.

⁶ Marble dining tables were popular household fixtures in the 1940s. These round marble tables, which are not exceptionally big (they seat about four people) are symbolic of old *kopitiams*. Reproductions of these tables are commonly used in modern *kopitiams*. Many old *kopitiams* have now replaced them with lighter, foldable Formica-topped tables.

⁷ Matched with the marble tables are bentwood wooden chairs and stools which were also popular in the same era. These *kopitiam* chairs and stools were imported from Czech Republic and Poland in the 1930s (Home & Décor, 2015). Today, the chairs are mostly replaced with water-resistant, stackable and cheaper plastic chairs.

⁸ *Samfu* is a traditional Chinese costume which consists of a short blouse and pants. It was a popular everyday outfit with the Chinese in southern China, Hong Kong, and Singapore until the mid-20th century (Ho, 2013).

In effect, these places are spaces where an ‘imagined nostalgia’ is created. The term ‘imagined nostalgia’ was used by Dai Jinhua (1997: 144) to describe the materiality of memory in contrast to modern progress when analyzing the social discourses of contemporary China. In this article, I use the term to explain the reconstruction of eatery settings which mimic eateries which were popular in the past, namely the recreation of old *kopitiams*, albeit with more comfortable contemporary environments. The idea of evoking the taste and lifestyle of the past suggests that any detail of that life is based on stories and descriptions by people who are old enough to recount details of those times. That said, perceptions of nostalgia for different generations vary based on the specific era which is considered nostalgic. However, it is usually the memory of a time when one was younger, and imagination of how it may have been for generations who came before. Thus, in traditional *kopitiams*, nostalgia for an elderly person would be the memory of when they were younger, while for youths, it could be an imagined time when their parents or grandparents were in their youth. The sense of nostalgia which the modern *kopitiams* attempt to evoke is therefore one which is based on preconceived ideas of what traditional *kopitiams* may mean to their occupants. In addition to these modern *kopitiam* chains, there are also cases where old *kopitiams* are revived by individual entrepreneurs in order to maintain the traditional eateries as historical buildings and places of nostalgia. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in modern *kopitiams*, imagined nostalgia is centered on the mid-20th century, as evident in the furnishings in these shops. In addition, the trope of nostalgia is a popular business strategy to attract customers today.

Old *kopitiams* were originally places for people of lower socio-economic status and the undereducated to frequent, as the price range and environment were not luxurious. They later became a place also for the middle class and professionals to patronize. The social

inclusivity found in the old *kopitiams*, however, is not the same in modern *kopitiam* chains, where the prices of the food and drinks are significantly higher, and they are often located in shopping malls catering to the middle and upper classes. Thus, although modern *kopitiams* attempt to evoke a certain sense of nostalgia, the kinds of commensality which are actually there are different from the traditional *kopitiams*. While it is obvious that this sense of sociality is part of the nostalgic experience which modern *kopitiams* try to recreate, it has nevertheless been rather impossible for them to replicate the ambience of a socio-economically diverse crowd.



Figure 3. Interior of OldTown White Coffee

Source: <https://insideretail.asia/2018/02/01/oldtown-coffee-takeover-given-green-light/>

Instead, focusing on cuisine is the typical strategy employed by these newer establishments. These modern or restored *kopitiams* have refashioned the eating of nostalgic foods like kaya to suit the middle-class tastes of customers (Duruz & Khoo, 2015: 55). To be sure, nostalgia is a sense of “longing for what is lacking in a changed present...

yearning for what is now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006: 920). Although modern *kopitiams* model their appearance to be reminiscent of the past, it is not to say that their products are not authentic. The reproduction of traditional *kopitiam* tastes in these businesses is as authentic as modern *kopitiams* go. The sentimentalism that is implied in the sense of nostalgia that the *kopitiams* evoke suggests that there is a yearning for authenticity when it comes to local foods and atmosphere. In the next section, I will be discussing how this sense of authenticity is experienced and negotiated by *kopitiam* customers.

V. Authenticity in *Kopitiams*

While newer coffeehouses, particularly modern *kopitiams* (discussed earlier) and modern cafés in George Town attempt to re-enact nostalgia through their settings, the authenticity of the nostalgic experience there compared to the one experienced in traditional *kopitiams* is debatable. The spatio-temporal relation of *kopitiams* is what makes the experience irreplaceable. Allen Weiss (2011: 74) addresses the notion of ‘authenticity’ in the writing of food studies in the following manner:

Gastronomic authenticity is a “soft” concept, usually referring to the appropriateness of linking a specific ingredient, technique or recipe, or a relation between dishes or between a wine and a dish, to a particular time and place... It is evident that authenticity concerns how cultural identity is determined through cuisine, a state of affairs that often has more bearing on town pride than on culinary reality.

Weiss’ argument that culinary authenticity is often linked to ‘town pride’ is manifested in George Town and its ‘authentic’ *kopitiam* experience.

The fame of George Town’s street food and *kopitiams* is constantly highlighted on ‘must-do’ lists based on verbal, social media, and

printed media recommendations. Tourists visiting *kopitiams* often explain that the dining experience in these places is part of the attraction of their visit. Tourists often describe their experience in *kopitiams* as one where time seems to have been trapped in the past. This indicates that being in traditional *kopitiams* in George Town is part of the novelty for tourists, who consider *kopitiams* to be 'authentic' places of consumption. In understanding what 'authenticity' means to consumers and proprietors of the different kinds of coffeehouses in George Town, there are several interpretations of the term, depending on socio-cultural backgrounds and the image that 'authenticity' brings to mind. 'Authenticity' in the context of coffeehouses is closely related to nostalgia, as it is tied to the tastes of food, the ambience of the shop spaces, the memories of activities which took place in the past, and the knowledge of what is assumed to be the way of life in 'the olden days'. A retired secretary, Lee, a Malaysian Chinese explained that:

*Kopitiams remind me of my childhood in the 1950s. As a young child in that era, going to a kopitiam was a treat. My parents would pour some of their drinks into a saucer for me so that the hot liquid would cool faster and I could get to taste just a little of their kopi. It was those times when I drank from the saucer as a child while the adults talked among themselves which formed my impression of kopitiams.*⁹

Lee's description of her memories dining in *kopitiams* as a child indicates that nostalgia is the main element of her impression of *kopitiams*. These elements are not necessarily only found in the traditional *kopitiams*, as modern cafés located in heritage buildings can also evoke such sentimentality

More generally, being authentic is usually synonymous with being genuine, unadulterated, and of undisputed origin. Graves-Brown (2013: 219) outlines three assumptions of authenticity. They are (i)

⁹ Interview, September 1, 2016.

pragmatic—what things do; (ii) natural—what things are; and (iii) historical—where or from whom things originate from. These elements may be applied to both human and non-human subjects.

Authenticity can refer to places which are yet to be influenced by contemporary ideas of space. The *kopitiam* space is regularly described as authentic due to its unchanging décor and ways of doing things. Examples of elements commonly found which make *kopitiams* authentic are walls that have not undergone painting, broken fixtures that are not mended, old original electrical wiring and sockets, dusty ceiling fans, old advertisements dating back to the 1970s, and old furniture. In order to capitalize on the appeal of ‘authenticity’, several *kopitiam* businesses in George Town have been marketing their products in a way that is accessible to tourists and new customers but still retains the old-school ways of doing things. For example, *kopitiams* have now put up advertisements to promote their egg and toast sets so that tourists and the younger generation of Malaysians get to know of this item on the menu. In the past, it used to be unspoken common knowledge that all *kopitiams* serve this simple breakfast. These advertisements are functional and do not necessarily need to be attractive, as it is commonly known to locals that toast and soft-boiled eggs are available in every *kopitiam* for breakfast. In this manner, a veneer of ‘authenticity’ is thus retained in *kopitiams*.

The notion of authenticity in food assumes that there is an original presentation and distinguishing taste for an array of specific foods. Questions of authenticity in food are usually raised when there is a modification of the food to suit the palate of a changing crowd. In his article in *Penang Monthly*, historian Ooi Kee Beng (2018) deliberated on the issue of the longevity of Penang cuisine, and in particular, street and *kopitiam* food over time. He raised the issue of inevitable changes in recipes and ideas about cuisines over time, as they are usually passed down through word of mouth and may change in light of new

circumstances. The author noted that accounts of Penang's history which were written by its British colonizers lacked any description of food, especially of the street food which the average Penangite ate in the past. This situation could mean that the authenticity in the taste of *kopitiam* food and drinks is arguable.

The marketing of 'authenticity' of *kopitiams* is thus a problematic one, as authenticity is re-negotiated all the time. Popular *kopitiams* in George Town have been gaining throngs of tourists due to the marketing of its 'authentic' coffee and *kaya* toast. The original sense of 'authenticity' of these eateries thus becomes questionable. The long wait for a table may hinder its original regular customers from going back, and need to churn the food and drinks out in larger quantities in a shorter time frame may have led to compromises in the quality of its food and drinks. Moreover, claims of authenticity in the taste of food require that a comparison be made between the food actually served and the food as preconceived. For Logeishwary,¹⁰ a Malaysian Indian journalist in her late twenties who grew up in Penang, it was the taste of coffee that evoked feelings of authenticity when she expressed her preference for the kopi found in *kopitiams* over other kinds of beverages in cafés. A sense of timelessness was also evident when she opined that "*kopitiams* have remained unchanged since I was a young child, [and] the kopi found there tastes better because that is the taste that we Malaysians have been accustomed to all along". While regular customers may have the knack to distinguish what is authentic or otherwise, customers who are new to the place will have to accept what is offered as authentic unless they have a preconceived benchmark of how the ambience and tastes in traditional *kopitiams* should be.

When 'authenticity' is used as a marketing aspect, 'nostalgia' is also involved in the picture, as what is authentic is what is originally conceived in the past. The past is what people think of when notions of

¹⁰ Interview, August 28, 2016.

nostalgia are negotiated. Duruz and Khoo (2015: 34) argue that “common ideas about the *kopitiam* (its significance, appearance, social habits, menu, and ambience) have become consolidated through the years and provide a detailed store for nostalgia and cultural preservation”. The interaction between space, people, and food (and drinks) produces an experience of a consumed space. Experiences surrounding food imply that food is a mediator in creating social relations on individual and collective levels (Low, 2016: 61). Other aspects of the *kopitiam* such as its furniture also contribute to the sense of authenticity of the space.

Many *kopitiams* in George Town are still decorated in the Streamline Moderne style, which emerged during the post-war years in the 1940s and 1950s. Formica-lined tables and counter tops are common in *kopitiams*, arguably because of their easy-to-clean nature and the fact that many surviving traditional *kopitiams* in George Town were established in the mid-20th century. Coincidentally, the Streamline Moderne style was also the main influence in the architecture of McDonald’s original hamburger stand in 1953, which featured the fast-food company’s golden arches and their trademark red and white tile stripes (Hess, 1986: 60). I suspect that the whimsically coloured yet simple forms of this style in the 1950s appealed to the customers of that era after World War II, as it imprints an imagery of life after war, of a happier and simpler life and the move towards industrialized modernity. I associate this ethos with the way *kopitiams* are conceptualized; a form of fast-food lifestyle which embodies convenience and camaraderie.



Figure 4. Formica-lined Tables in a Traditional *Kopitiam*

Source: Author (2017).

In some way, dining in old *kopitiams* still feels like being in the past, when dining out still had a gender differential to it. Although it is largely a mixed crowd during lunch hour for *kopitiams* located in central George Town as office workers have lunch together, customers who patronize the *kopitiams* after lunch hour are almost always elderly men. These daily ‘rendezvous’ usually last until just before the *kopitiams* close for the day, as these men enjoy each other’s company. It is also quite common to see men dining alone in *kopitiams* but not as common to see women doing the same, unless the *kopitiam* is located near a wet market, as the women have their breakfast before or after their shopping. However, this difference in gender representation in traditional *kopitiam* customers is not one which is particularly problematic, as women of all ages would not be stereotyped or frowned upon if they

were to dine in *kopitiams* alone. It is merely a habitual fact that men are more regularly spotted in *kopitiams* compared to women. This is also reflected in old *kopitiams* in other towns like Ipoh (located to the south of Penang on Peninsular Malaysia), where they were popularly patronized by tin miners in the 1950s during the peak of the tin mining industry. In more recent times, the customers are still the same tin mine workers, who are now retired but return to the *kopitiams* that they frequented in their younger days (Foong, 2017). Nevertheless, I would like to stress that although traditional *kopitiams* may have more male customers during the off-peak hours, it also depends on the location of the *kopitiam*, and that it is a mixed crowd during other times of the day. By comparison, crowds are gender-neutral throughout the day at modern *kopitiams*.

In the May 2016 issue of *Penang Monthly*, the *kopitiam* was described as a place where ‘coffee shop talk’ bonds the old and the young as they share friendly group discussions (Ramli & Ismawi, 2016). Topics of conversation are mostly about office politics, other places to eat, gossip, and any other local happenings. Discussions about politicians and their political parties are particularly intense during general election season. Many times, conversations end abruptly as people who want to have a say have to leave for their respective chores and work after their quick meals at the *kopitiam*. However, the brusque manner in the conversations is usually not meant to insult or offend, and thus people rarely take offense, even if the exchange sounds rough or rude. The social interactions which take place in *kopitiams* contribute to the sense of authenticity through the mix of languages and how they are spoken. The variety of people who dine in *kopitiams* is vast. Food and travel magazines may romanticize *kopitiams* as places where nostalgic old men laze around and talk about the good old days. The reality is that they are only one of the many types of customers *kopitiams* cater to everyday. Customers dine among other people coming from

different social classes, showing diverse mannerisms, and embodying varied physical appearances. This spectrum enriches the dining experience.

The ease of ordering food in *kopitiams*, even for foreigners who do not speak the local language, shows that they are places which cater to everyone as long as people choose to dine there. For some, *kopitiams* in George Town serve as places for convenience, social cohesion, and familiarity. For others, they are where cheap and delicious local hawker food is available. The camaraderie of the older generation is often present when casual conversations with strangers are also sparked. Most importantly, *kopitiams* serve as places where people dine among people of different classes with unpredictable characters. Nevertheless, an aura of familiarity is derived precisely from this eccentricity.

In addition, media write-ups in blogs and lifestyle magazines have been advertising *kopitiams* as places which are the epitome of authenticity and encouraging readers to experience it. This is amidst the popularity of turning heritage buildings into modern spaces, particularly into chic eateries. This brings me to consider the discourse of spatial identities when it comes to living in a city where development and preservation are equally critical. The repurposing of prewar shophouses in Penang into modern cafés is a symptom of consumer culture that has emerged in tandem with contemporary modern globalist lifestyles. Just like everyday culture, consumers' tastes and interests as well as definitions of authenticity are constantly evolving. These discourses present a synthesis between old and new consumption spaces which have materialized in the form of modern cafés in prewar buildings in George Town.

According to Pitcher (2014), 'authenticity' is constructed through a dynamic and situational process, and is related to the identity of the individuals who are defining it. In this article, the notion of 'authenticity' is understood via two perspectives, i.e. as a social

construct, and as a matter of personal experience. Hence, I suggest that 'authenticity' can be thought of as a part of the production of cultural meanings (like notions of originality) and is dependent on the situation where that experience is generated.

Writing about the changing landscape of cities, Sharon Zukin (2010: 220) defines authenticity as "the *look* and *feel* of a place as well as the social connectedness that place inspires". This definition interconnects spatial concepts with notions of shared memory. The social construction of a space like the *kopitiam* functions as a place for social interactions between people of various backgrounds who, in a shared moment, experience the same environment before going about their respective lives after they leave. Zukin explains that our "yearning for authenticity reflects the separation between our experience of space and our sense of self that is much part of modern mentalities" (Zukin, 2010: 220). The authenticity of culture in relation to tradition is debatable in the contemporary world, as we are constantly seeking authenticity in the present, where mass production and development occur. Authenticity is one of the primary drivers of our 'experience economy' that is pursued in a world that is almost entirely 'fake' (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). This is due to the rapid industrialization and mass production which urbanites continuously experience. Therefore, it is necessary to improvise and redefine the authenticity of *kopitiams* and, to a larger extent, of George Town, which is now rapidly undergoing gentrification and changes in the interpretation of traditions by locals and visitors.

Lately, the question of the sustainability of *kopitiams* has emerged due to the closing of old *kopitiams* to give way to development of the location of their premises and the unwillingness of the younger generation to run *kopitiam* businesses. While some old *kopitiams* close due to redevelopment of their premises, other *kopitiams* end their businesses once the proprietors are too old to run the coffee shops. Not

many old *kopitiam* businesses are passed on to the younger generation of the family, as running a *kopitiam* takes a lot of hard work. The working conditions are also not pleasant, as one toils in the heat without air-conditioning. As modern cafés proliferate in Penang and the rest of the world, it becomes more attractive for the younger generation of food-and-beverage entrepreneurs to open cafés. Working in a *kopitiam* is also seen as a blue-collar job, as it is less glamorous than a regular office job. Although the profit earned in *kopitiams* is debatably on par or even higher than some cafés, particularly if the *kopitiam* is a popular one, the impression of working in *kopitiams* remains unfavourable. As a result, many traditional *kopitiams* are handled by their retirement-aged proprietors, while their children work elsewhere with no plans of continuing their family businesses (Foong, 2017).

In addition, international coffee chains and independently opened modern cafés pose some competition to *kopitiams*, as they offer alternative places for socializing over coffee in cleaner and more comfortable environments. In 2018, several eateries in Penang including *kopitiams* were ordered to close for two weeks to ‘clean up their act’ due to the unacceptable levels of unhygienic conditions in the eateries (Yeoh & Harunarashid, 2018). In addition, a local coffee factory in Penang has recently been ordered by authorities to cease operations for two weeks to clean up, as rat droppings were found at its premises (Ram, 2019). The cleanliness levels of traditional *kopitiams* and *kopi* factories are questionable, as the premises, particularly those located in prewar shophouses which have never been refurbished, generally have a greasy and unkempt outlook. This ‘look’ contributes to the authentic ‘raw’ character of the *kopitiam*. However, cleanliness needs to be maintained, as consumers now have options to dine in cleaner coffeehouses. The sustainability of *kopitiams* also lies in the variety of food offered. When there is more than just Chinese food being offered in *kopitiams*, customers of other ethnic groups are more likely to dine in

the coffee shop, and hence business can remain good (Lim, 2014). It is debatable as to whether making *kopitiam*s halal would encourage their sustainability. Although it would open doors to Muslims to eat there, the typical pork-eating Chinese crowd may find the *kopitiam* less appealing with the change. In addition, the switching of *kopitiam*s to halal eateries would diminish their sense of authenticity.

Zukin's (2010) work on the gentrification of cities showed that educated urbanites have come to treasure what they deem to be 'authentic', i.e. aging buildings, eccentric eateries, and art galleries. However, with the pervasive demand for such kinds of authenticity, it is often the case that the various communities who form the social fabric of inner cities are being driven out. In the case of George Town, they are usually the working class, traditional traders and craftsmen, small business owners, immigrants, and artists. The desire to consume authentic experiences comes from the changes that we see around us in urban cities. As Zukin (2010: 176) puts it:

Though we think authenticity refers to a neighborhood's innate qualities, it really expresses our own anxieties about how places change. The idea of authenticity is important because it connects our individual yearning to root ourselves in a singular time and place to a cosmic grasp of larger social forces that remake our world from many small and often invisible actions. To speak of authenticity means that we are aware of a changing technology of power that erodes one landscape of meaning and feeling and replaces it with another.

To seek authenticity is thus an acknowledgement of change. This change occurs against preconceived images of places, things, and how things are done. In the case of *kopitiam*s, the search for the 'authentic' *kopitiam* experience means that the space is evolving.

In George Town, a different kind of sociability is being created by newcomer cafés and businesses. Urbanites, especially millennials, seek more ‘authentic’ spaces to be in. This includes visiting cafés located in heritage buildings, admiring old temples, retracing traditional crafts, and hunting for traditional local delicacies. In addition, mini-museums of various sorts showcasing Penang’s food and culture have sprung up around George Town to take advantage of the large influx of tourists. Activities like these have caused the displacement of many original occupants from the shophouses. New coffeehouses capitalize on their locations and a visible sense of history embodied in these old shophouses that they now occupy. Cafés try to retain the ‘authentic’ heritage look to draw in local and foreign customers. Justin, a proprietor of a modern café located in a heritage shophouse in George Town, explained his decision in retaining original decorations in his café:

This shophouse used to be a Chinese medical hall; you know, they were famous for selling honey. That is why I still retain some of the old honey advertisements around as you can see. I didn't want to do any major renovations, just leave it as original as possible. Some customers prefer it this way. I even retained the original honey advertisements to give a hint of what this place used to be.¹¹

Many other businesses which capitalize on George Town’s heritage status become mainly tourist attractions.

Allen Weiss (2011: 75) explains that “authenticity is formulated retrospectively on the basis of current premises”. Therefore, what is considered authentic is also shaped by experiences of the present. People who seek authenticity want an experience which is not mainstream and current. For instance, consumers of modern coffeehouses find authenticity in *kopitiams* because these are

¹¹ Interview, September 12, 2016.

retrospective spaces compared to the modern cafés that have been mushrooming in the city. A similar kind of exchange has occurred in the 'machiya boom' in Kyoto, Japan. Christoph Brumann (2009) looked at the popularity of repurposing traditional townhouses for current commercial use. These townhouses were once regarded as an economic liability when urban land prices soared, but were then revitalized as cafés, restaurants, and shops. These trends were propelled by local government agencies, architectural firms, citizen groups, small business owners, university departments interested in these places, and residents (Brumann, 2009: 281). The situation in George Town is similar to Kyoto, with different stakeholders interested in the repurposing of the pre-war shophouses, mostly for economic gain. Nevertheless, there is a trend of keeping heritage architecture viable and relevant to modern consumers.

Likewise, traditional *kopitiam*s within the heritage zone of George Town remain popular among customers. Indeed, there is an increased tourist attention to these coffeehouses and the kinds of 'traditional' food purveyed in them. The contrasting environments between George Town's 'authentic' *kopitiam*s and the authenticity simulated in artisanal cafés in heritage shophouses produce different spatial experiences for coffee consumption. While seeking authenticity, coffeehouse-goers have the opportunity to consume various kinds of environments. As mentioned above, authenticity is pursued when people realize that present circumstances are changing how things used to look or used to be done. In this case, urban dwellers are aware of the rapid development of their surroundings, and they choose to be in both the spaces which have managed to resist that change as well as spaces which represent that change.



Figure 5. *Kopi-o-peng* (Iced Black Boffee), *Kaya* Toasts and *Teh-c* (Milk Tea) are Typical *Kopitiam* Food

Source: Author (2017).

While dining in *kopitiams* and other types of coffeehouses in George Town lets consumers acknowledge the changes in the city landscape, it also means that they experience the change in authenticity of the food they ingest in the different spaces. Tan Chee-Beng (2011: 11) has argued that the sense of authenticity in food is based on individual personal experiences. Thus, the culinary authenticity of food sold in *kopitiams* is subjective. With the intercultural influences in George Town through the years, local tastes have been adopted in the Chinese

food found in *kopitiams*. Hawker fare such as *char koay teow* and *Hokkien mee* are interpreted differently even within the country. Their putative Chinese roots are questionable, and furthermore the adoption of Malay and Indian tastes and cooking styles incorporated in most and perhaps even all *kopitiam* food makes it even more difficult to determine the culinary authenticity of George Town's hawker fare. In addition, the essence of *kopitiam* food such as *kopi* and 'kaya butter toast' served with soft-boiled eggs is itself a 'Western' invention incorporated into an Asian society.

Duruz and Khoo (2015: 46–49) have untangled the colonial influences in the creation of *kaya* and *kopi*, both of which are key products of *kopitiams*. Both the food and place have mixtures of European junctures with local interpretations. If *kopitiams* are essentially Chinese eateries, then it is debatable as to why coffee is the key beverage in the enterprise, when East Asians are traditionally tea drinkers. A 2012 blog post by food and travel writer Robyn Eckhardt on Malaysian Hainanese cuisine as found in signature *kopitiam* foods highlights the involvement of the Hainanese as cooks in British military camps and households. The reason for their employment is their late arrival to British Malaya as compared to other Chinese dialect groups which had already settled and taken up most employment opportunities, leaving them no choice but to work in the colonial masters' kitchens. This then resulted in the unique influence of European tastes in Malaysian Hainanese cuisine like the Hainanese chicken chop and *kopi*. Notions of authenticity in food and place in *kopitiams* then become unclear, as the conceptualization of *kopitiams* itself is a result of the mixing of more than one culture.

VI. Conclusion

Kopitiams are constantly associated with a constructed image of the past, in other words, an authentic space. In George Town, the question of

who defines what is authentic within a city which is undergoing rapid gentrification is debatable. Sharon Zukin (2010: 244) explains the contestations which occur when gentrification in cities prompts the search for authenticity:

Because authenticity begins as an aesthetic category, it appeals to cultural consumers, especially young people today. But it also has a lot to do with economics and power. To claim that a neighbourhood is authentic suggests that the group that makes the claim knows what to do with, how best to represent, its 'authentic' character. Whether members of this group are rappers or gentrifiers, their ability to represent the streets gives them a right to claim power over them. This right, though, is often limited to preserving the look and the experience of authenticity rather than preserving the community that lives there.

This suggests that the people who truly contribute to the sense of authenticity of a place are seldom heard. Instead, consumers (middle-class urban dwellers) decide what authenticity means, and this is often measured through appearances. *Kopitiams* embody notions of authenticity, and urban life changes what constitutes it. Urban dwellers seek authenticity because development changes places. For coffeehouse consumers in George Town, authenticity can come in different forms—preconceived ideas of *kopi* and *kopitiam*, or the experience of dining in a coffeehouse in a heritage building. This allows consumers to consume different spaces while looking for authenticity. By looking at how urbanites undertake the search for an intangible value—authenticity—they eventually consume something tangible—space. Furthermore, the spaces that they consume represent varied tastes, as authenticity is subject to personal experiences. Nevertheless, the marketing of authenticity has allowed *kopitiams* to sustain an image of their own despite the burgeoning variety of coffeehouses.

The sense of nostalgia of old *kopitiams* has been reproduced to a certain degree by modern *kopitiam* chains via food and a romanticized image of *kopitiams*. This leads to questions of authenticity of the modern *kopitiams*. However, the authenticity of old *kopitiams* is also questionable, as they are updated to cope with the changing times. Traditional *kopitiams* will have to cope with the changing times by capitalizing on the nostalgic element that they have, as well as providing affordable food in order to attract modern consumers. For Pitcher (2014), food consumption can become “a mode of engagement with cultural difference [as well as] a site of the circulation of ideas about authenticity” (Pitcher, 2014: 86–87). While Pitcher was discussing ‘race’ and how inevitably deeply rooted it is in everyday life, his idea builds an understanding of the relationship between consuming authenticity and identity expression. As discussed earlier, producers and consumers of *kopitiams* conceptualize their identities based on their perception of knowing what is unchanged about the space (ambience and architecture), tastes in food and drinks, and experience as a whole in the coffee shops. Their ‘knowledge’ and pride in claiming to have insights of what is ‘authentic’ about the *kopitiam* experience become part of their expressed identities, even if just temporarily.

With the appearance of international coffee chains like Starbucks Coffee, and Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf in Malaysia in the 1990s, consumers began to have other options for having their daily coffee. However, due to the significantly higher price range and different kinds of food offered in the new coffee chains, *kopitiams* are not heavily affected by these cafés. When independently owned modern cafés started emerging in Penang in the late 2000s, *kopitiams* still did not face competition in catering to the locals, because they were still eateries in the lowest price range. Business for *kopitiams* showed no signs of slowing down, as locals and tourists, particularly after George Town was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, continued to

patronize them. Even though business in *kopitiam*s is not deteriorating, the existence of modern caf  s provides an attractive alternative as a dining option in the hot and humid weather of Penang. With young food and beverage entrepreneurs choosing to open caf  s instead of *kopitiam*s, the threat to the old coffee shops' existence lies more in the difficulty of running the business instead of the demand for it.

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馬來西亞當代咖啡消費文化的轉變： 時代變遷下的檳城喬治市傳統咖啡店

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摘要

本文以馬來西亞檳城喬治市的傳統咖啡廳——當地所稱的「咖啡店」(kopitiam)及其消費文化作為分析對象。本文探討馬來西亞傳統咖啡廳是否因為其他類型咖啡店的出現，例如更為摩登的咖啡店，透過提供顧客更多外出用餐與咖啡消費選項以及更為舒適的消費體驗，而影響到「咖啡店」的存續性。由於「咖啡店」通常販售非清真認證商品，此一特質某種程度上排除了具有穆斯林信仰的顧客，因此，本文亦關注「咖啡店」是否代表了馬來西亞特定族裔消費者。理論取徑方面，本文主要受到雪倫·朱津(Sharon Zukin)的本真性(authenticity)概念之啟發，藉此探討消費者如何於「咖啡店」體驗馬來西亞咖啡文化。本文發現「咖啡店」本真性之建構與消費者在特定時空下於咖啡店的消費體驗息息相關。最後，本文亦闡述如何透過「本真性」概念開啟咖啡店相關研究的多元視角。

關鍵詞：咖啡店、傳統咖啡廳、檳城、傳統的、本真性、鄉愁

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Asia-Pacific Research Forum, No. 68, pp. 43-74

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