

A Qualitative Study of Kopitiam in Post-Independent Singapore: Spaces for Negotiating Collective Identity and Heritage

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Kopitiam, traditional coffeeshops ubiquitous in Singapore's landscape, emerged from humble beginnings catering to immigrant workers' needs, to later serving a wider community within a post-independence urban development framework. As the state intervened in the urban development of the nation, through public housing and other initiatives, it has wielded influence over notions of national identity, reshaping the kopitiam to align with political agendas and cultural narratives.

This project explored how kopitiam serve as spaces where individuals negotiate their identities in response to state interventions, societal dynamics, and economic challenges. Focusing on the neighbourhood of Tiong Bahru, an auto-ethnographic approach and interviews across family generations allowed me to explore the intersection of history, politics, nostalgia, and heritage in local kopitiam. My dissertation findings indicated that despite changing lifestyles, kopitiam continue to hold political significance, acting as space of multiculturalism and inclusivity that facilitates complex social interactions. Amidst the backdrop of globalization, kopitiam emerge as dynamic spaces where individuals navigate their economic realities and hardships, and where collective memory and identity are formed. This research, therefore, challenges dominant narratives of heritage and development imposed by the state, reflecting the resilient nature of Singaporean society.



Comment from Gabi Froden, the Illustrator:

The idea that "food spaces" can hold such cultural significance is so fascinating and entirely understandable. How people relate to these spaces differently depending on their age and background made me think that words like *nostalgia*, *change* and *heritage* are something you could consume. The stars and the moon are a nod to the Singaporean flag.