


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Jostling for right of way’: Hawker discourse, legitimation, and politics in post-independence Malay(si)a, 1957–1969

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## Abstract

This article investigates the developments of hawker discourse and movements across the Malay(si)an peninsula in the first decade of independence. Looking at news coverage and municipal records, it examines the contingent, gendered, and egalitarian qualities of hawking as labour which led to its adoption by people experiencing hardship, and influenced the ways in which municipal authorities and the public discussed hawkers. In effect, hawkers, long significant to the historical and cultural systems of Malayan trade, were recharacterized as vulnerable subjects at the urban margins. The article then explores how local administrations understood and regulated hawkers through categories of location, race, and food, shaping the politics and governance of hawkers in public spaces. To engage with such governance, hawkers formed associations that protested against injustice and established dialogue with municipal and town councils, impelling authorities to consider a more significant inclusion of hawking in street planning. Throughout the period, the potential and limits of hawker inclusion in post-colonial public spaces became subject to significant debate between municipal authorities, political representatives, and hawkers. As local administrations eventually deepened their commitment to support hawkers, they also expanded their regulation, signifying a cautious imperative to legitimate hawkers and influencing the logic of post-independence planned spaces.

**Keywords:** Food labour; post-colonial discourse; urban governance; Malaysia; hawker

## Introduction

In 1963, *Berita Harian* writer Kak Timah interviewed Che Hasnah, who had recently moved with her children to Kampung Pandan, Kuala Lumpur, along with other Malay families, many of whom were evicted from Kampung Bukit Mati.<sup>1</sup> The kampung was a planned settlement, one of several schemes by the Malaysian government to

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<sup>1</sup>‘Che’ Hasnah menjejak daerah tenang’, *Berita Harian*, 27 October 1963; ‘New Low-cost Housing’, *The Straits Times*, 22 July 1963.

provide home ownership opportunities to families and squatters at an affordable cost.<sup>2</sup> Hasnah, feeding her youngest child with rice by the spoonful, expressed: 'This quiet place only adds to the sorrow of my heart.'<sup>3</sup> Hasnah was a widow responsible for raising her four children. She now had to find the means to feed her family and keep the house. The anticipation of moving to a new home turned into anxiety over keeping her family afloat. But despite the grief of losing her husband, the struggle of being a single mother, and the worries of moving, Che Hasnah was already devising a way for her family to subsist. She had planned to sell kueh and *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk), although with the younger children to take care of and the older ones at school and without help, the plan had fallen through.

That food hawking—selling food wares in public spaces, such as on streets and in a *pasar* (market)—was work she considered to earn money recalled the practices of women traders since the sixteenth century across Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> Alongside migrant vendors, Malay women played a significant role in systems of commerce that supplied food and goods to communities and early colonial towns in Malaya.<sup>5</sup> Hasnah's decision to do business also problematized the direction and assumptions of the role of Malay women in post-colonial Malaysia. The ideologies of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Malay thinkers in the early twentieth century espoused domestic responsibilities for women, while national public education taught home economics to complement women's perceived roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers of their families.<sup>6</sup> Hasnah's consideration of hawking in the period after independence also illustrated the more immediate concerns of the time. Labour systems and the economies of food were shaken up in the interwar period by organized labour resistance and counter-insurgent state repression.<sup>7</sup> And despite government endeavours to control petty trading in towns, more people experiencing economic hardship turned to hawking to earn money, occupying the streets to run businesses and forming markets that communities depended on for food.<sup>8</sup> Hawking spelled out the opportunistic and contingent modes through which different people across the divides of class, race, and gender in the peninsula participated in labour and trade.

Scholarship by historians and anthropologists of twentieth-century colonial Malaya and Singapore has focused on hawker subjects in urban and rural

<sup>2</sup>Pesuruhjaya Kuala Lumpur (PKL), *Annual Report*, 1962, BK/PKL/1/11, Arkib Negara Malaysia (ANM hereafter).

<sup>3</sup>'Che' Hasnah menjejak'.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony Reid, 'Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1988, pp. 629–645, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00009720>; Barbara Watson Andaya, 'Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Pre-modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1995, pp. 165–190.

<sup>5</sup>Lynn Hollen Lees, 'Discipline and Delegation: Colonial Governance in Malayan Towns, 1880–1930', *Urban History*, vol. 38, no. 1, May 2011, pp. 48–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0963926811000034>; John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia: c. 1800–1990: The Transition to Modern Economic Growth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 160–163; T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 195–218.

<sup>6</sup>For a twentieth-century history of the development of women's education and discussions about gender roles in Malay families, see Lenore Manderson, 'The Development and Direction of Female Education in Peninsular Malaysia', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1978, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup>Harper, *The End of Empire*, Chapters 3–4.

<sup>8</sup>PKL, *Annual Report*, 1961–1967, BK/PKL/1/11–BK/PKL/1/19, ANM.

economies—they formed the backbone of bazaar commerce that was increasingly affected by the development of colonial rule and changes in trade governance.<sup>9</sup> Historians have also elucidated a politics of governance over Malayan colonial towns that, in practices of enclosure and confinement, realized hawkers (in state language) as subjects that needed to be managed to restrain political mobilization and improve public sanitation, traffic, and health.<sup>10</sup> While we know that colonial town administrations perceived hawking as an activity that frustrated their logic of markets and planned spaces, less attention is paid to changes in understandings of hawking labour and identity after independence by the new government and, with the rise of print culture, the Malaysian public.<sup>11</sup> In this period, the change of hands from former colonial administrators to the new Malayan government also meant new potentialities in urban governance and shifts in the ways in which hawker subjects, now new citizens, could participate in Malaysian society. In envisioning post-colonial planned spaces and overcoming stark conditions of food and economic insecurity, local officials now had to consider more profoundly the inclusion and limits of hawker labour, markets, and politics in towns and kampungs across the peninsula. At a time of uncertain post-colonial reconstruction, widening the acceptance of hawking could provide crucial work and cheap meals. Such a stance differed from previous colonial imperatives of restricting hawker businesses and suppressing labour politics to maintain social and economic order. As the government contemplated change, however, the structures of colonial spatial management remained intact: the open streets and five-foot ways were still subject to surveillance, policing, and negotiations as more people became hawkers.<sup>12</sup> While hawking was accessible and contingent work that tapped into familiar systems of trade, hawkers continued to have to deal with municipal controls, face restrictions, and experience abuse. But renewed Malayan labour and trade unionism also meant opportunities to organize politically and change the rules of governance in favour of hawker work and welfare.<sup>13</sup>

Following these threads, this article investigates the developments of hawker discourse and movements in the decade after independence. It seeks to understand the ways in which hawkers, the public, and the government thought about the potential

<sup>9</sup>Historian James Warren examines the significant presence of street hawker stalls (sites to eat and gather) for rickshaw pullers, his main subjects, in James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2003; 2nd edn), p. 220. Anthropologist Rosemary Firth looks at the ways in which Kelantanese men and women moved in and out of petty trading work in her study of the household economies and gender divisions of Kelantanese Malays in 1939 and 1940, in Rosemary Firth, *Housekeeping among Malay Peasants* (London: London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 7, 1943).

<sup>10</sup>James M. Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning and Development Control: Hawkers in Kuala Lumpur (1940s–1960s)', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 2, no. 1, Feb 1987, pp. 112–124; Lees, 'Discipline and Delegation'; David Baillargeon, 'Spaces of Occupation: Colonial Enclosure and Confinement in British Malaya', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 73, 2021, pp. 24–35.

<sup>11</sup>For a broad overview of the Malay mass media from the 1870s to 1960s, see John A. Lent, 'Malaysia's National Language Mass Media: History and Present Status', *South East Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1978, pp. 598–612.

<sup>12</sup>BK/PKL/1/11–BK/PKL/1/19, ANM.

<sup>13</sup>Leong Yee Fong, 'The Impact of the Cold War on the Development of Trade Unionism in Malaya (1948–57)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1992, pp. 60–73.

and limits of hawker work, presence, and inclusion. It explores the direction of hawker politics and governance that led to changes in the regulation of hawker labour and the limits of access to public spaces. To do this, I aim first to characterize public and municipal perceptions of hawkers, illustrating the valences of class, gender, and race intertwined with hawking. Letters to municipal offices reveal a glimpse of hawkers' own understandings of their socioeconomic circumstances, while newspapers such as *Berita Harian*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, and the *Straits Times* contain opinions, eyewitness accounts, and fictional writings that provide clarity on the contingent situations that led people to hawk at that time. Rather than focus on a select town or city, my research is instead guided by the breadth of news coverage of discourse, movements, and conflict across the peninsula, drawing linkages between developments of hawker movements and town planning, and illustrating the ways in which hawking incited a more expansive nationwide discourse. In such writings, affiliations between hawking and precarity were formed, turning hawkers into complicated subjects on the margins of post-colonial Malaysian society. I then look at hawker licensing and enforcement tactics to illustrate the municipal governance of public spaces that hawkers navigated. Referring to licensing records in different towns across the peninsula provides insight into the overall shape and form of hawker governance structures in the period. The 'categories' part of hawker licensing quotas—location, race, and food—informed both municipal concerns and strategies of management. They also delineated hawkers' relationships and engagement with government processes of regulation, mediation, and enforcement.

Understanding public discourses and municipal regulation of hawker practices is critical in examining the political strategies developed by hawkers to protect their interests and contest control over planned spaces. Hawkers organized, protested against perceived injustice, and established dialogue with municipal and town councils. As the public and political parties expressed solidarity, the tone of government language about hawkers shifted from toleration to cautious reconciliation. Hearing the needs of hawkers, municipal authorities promised more support and resources for them in the planning and delineation of urban spaces. Sustained interactions between local governance and hawkers elaborated new legal, political, and spatial dimensions that legitimized hawking as a form of work.

### Hawkers, precarious subjects at the margins of discourse

The influx of hawking was informed by contingencies. Upheavals in the 1940s and 1950s—from anticolonial and militant labour movements as well as British strategies of control and violence against them—perturbed existing labour markets and systems, causing an inward migration to towns and creating a need for people to find other kinds of work.<sup>14</sup> The radical resettlement of communities, mainly Chinese, into planned urban settlement areas called 'New Villages' through the Briggs Plan during the Malayan Emergency period left many stranded, bereft of sources of income

<sup>14</sup>Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001; 2nd edn), pp. 257–261; Michael Johnstone, 'The Evolution of Squatter Settlements in Peninsular Malaysian Cities', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1982, pp. 364–380.

and in a state of malnourishment.<sup>15</sup> British disciplinary food control strategies over New Village inhabitants so as to shut down Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) supply lines further aggravated these conditions.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the changing nature of the rural rice and fish economy in kampungs, disease, and risks of travelling during the Emergency made old livelihoods unsustainable for rural Malays, while rubber estates gradually replaced Tamil estate workers and reduced the total estate workforce.<sup>17</sup> As unemployment and landlessness drove people into urban centres in the post-war years, jobs and food became harder to find.<sup>18</sup> Like Che Hasnah, individuals affected by such disruptions and for whom more conventional forms of labour were out of reach turned to hawking to make ends meet.<sup>19</sup> In their letters, hawker licence applicants appealed to the sympathies of town boards, expressing that they had no other work or had dependents.<sup>20</sup> One Kurpaya s/o Munion from Banting, Selangor, applied to sell *kachang puteh* (fried nuts) as he was old and had no support.<sup>21</sup> News outlets also documented stories. Unable to wait for the state welfare department to provide him with aid, another individual, Enche Ahmad bin Shanat, who had lost his legs, sold vegetable produce in Muar.<sup>22</sup> While numbers for the 1960s are hard to find, the Kuala Lumpur Health Department estimated that the number of unlicensed hawkers continued to rise throughout the decade.<sup>23</sup> This was not surprising, for low capital costs and the ability to decide on when and where to hawk meant ease of access. People were not subjected to a rigid schedule of work discipline under an employer and in plantations, allowing flexibility for those who found it difficult to work for sustained periods and parents like Hasnah who had to care for their children.<sup>24</sup> Hawker food was also appealing, for many in Malaya depended on affordable, convenient meals to

<sup>15</sup>Yvonne Tan, 'Food in the Counterinsurgency of the Malayan Emergency', in *The Provisions of War: Expanding the Boundaries of Food and Conflict, 1840–1990*, (ed.) Justin Nordstrom (Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2021), pp. 127–144, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1p2grb2.12>. See also Ray Nyce and Shirle Gordon, *Chinese New Villages in Malaya: A Community Study* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1973).

<sup>16</sup>Harper, *The End of Empire*, p. 149. For a social history of Chinese New Villages during the Malayan Emergency and British disciplinary policies and strategies, see Tan Teng Phee, *Behind Barbed Wire: Chinese New Villages during the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD], 2020).

<sup>17</sup>Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia*, p. 172. For an investigation on the politics and affiliations among different Indian ethnic, cultural, and topolect groups, see Michael Stenson, *Class, Race and Colonialism in Peninsular Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2019).

<sup>18</sup>Michael Johnstone, 'The Evolution of Squatter Settlements in Peninsular Malaysian Cities', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1982, pp. 364–380.

<sup>19</sup>Unemployment statistics in the early 1960s did not account for the 'passively unemployed', which included people who found it difficult to pursue work due to low nutrition levels, location, and institutional and other barriers. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia*, p. 172.

<sup>20</sup>Hawker licence documents in 1957, Kuala Langat Town Board (KLTB) 8/57, ANM; Records of a mobile licensed hawker with address 167, Jalan Besar Taiping, 5/11/63, ANM.

<sup>21</sup>Licence application letter by Kurpaya s/o Munian, 4 December 1957, KLTB 8/57, no. 157, ANM.

<sup>22</sup>'Penjaja chachat yang buka gerai kechil risau Jabatan Kebajikan ta' tunaikan janji...', *Berita Harian*, 24 November 1968.

<sup>23</sup>BK/PKL/1/11–BK/PKL/1/19, ANM.

<sup>24</sup>See E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, no. 38, 1967, pp. 56–97; Harper, *The End of Empire*, pp. 225–240; Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, p. 220; 'Penjaja muda merintahkan derita isteri bila di-cheraiakan', *Berita Harian*, 20 April 1968.

survive. On both sides of the market, hawking was both a means to survive and participate in a business informed by the cultural logic and historical affiliations of the food trade in Malaya.<sup>25</sup>

As hawkers occupied Kuala Lumpur, eyewitness accounts and stories in *Berita Harian* also framed hawkers as subjects at the margins of urban centres. Writers exhibited feelings of pity: for women hawkers who had to take care of their families and ageing hawkers who had no other means of support.<sup>26</sup> Colourable drawing strips expressing similar sentiments could also be found, evincing normative understandings of hawker precarity, as a step to be avoided by those fortunate enough to do so.<sup>27</sup> Short stories like 'Terkulai' ('Drooping') by Abdul Rahman and 'Rasa hendak terbang ka-tanjong' ('Feel like flying to the cape') by Ishak Tahir include Malay women hawkers as signifiers of struggle and precarity—hawkers were described as having bad *nasib* (fate).<sup>28</sup> Other stories use hawker stalls to contemplate an urban politics of class and socioeconomic difference.<sup>29</sup> The protagonist in 'Berkenalan dengan Enche' Bahrom' by M. Iskandar describes his frequented *warung* as 'a place to eat for "lowly" people like us' and expresses surprise that a wealthy Enche Bahrom would join them.<sup>30</sup> 'Do'a dan harapan' ('Hopes and prayers') by Shariff Rahman then suggests that young Malays are embarrassed to become hawkers like the *bangsa asing* (foreign race), explaining that they desire office or factory jobs, and would even resort to begging, rather than hawking, to earn money.<sup>31</sup> As opposed to modern jobs and more affluent sites to eat, hawking became relegated to racial and socioeconomic alterity as it was perceived as undesirable, only performed by those in need. Two poems by the playwright, poet, novelist, and Malaysian national laureate Usman Awang, published in the early 1960s, further characterize hawker precarity through the lens of state injustice.<sup>32</sup> In the second stanza of 'Penjual Air-batu' ('Ice pop seller'), he describes the law as a coercive power over lower-class people, as uniformed men relish their hunt of purported law-breakers: 'And the uniformed men scatter/Hunting for catches that "violate the law"' (7–8).<sup>33</sup> Another *sajak* (a form of poem), 'Penjual pisang di kaki-lima' ('Banana seller at the five-foot way'), continues his impassioned lament: 'The old purple-clothed nyonya gives up/(Children are definitely waiting at home)' (20–21), evincing the hawker's dejectedness at police oppression.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>25</sup>T. G. McGee and Y. M. Yeung conducted a comparative developmental study of hawkers and informal economies in Southeast Asian cities. See T. G. McGee and Y. M. Yeung, *Hawkers in Southeast Asian Cities: Planning for the Bazaar Economy* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1977).

<sup>26</sup>'Penjaja muda merintehkan derita isteri bila di-cheraikan', *Berita Harian*, 20 April 1968.

<sup>27</sup>An example of a quote is: 'Kids, look at the baby. Adoh! But let them be. They're only seeking a morsel of rice for their family.' Translated from 'Penjaja2 di-pasar', *Berita Harian*, 4 February 1959.

<sup>28</sup>Cherpen "Terkuai" chuba mendedahkan tentang kechurangan kaum wanita', *Berita Harian*, 12 June 1966; 'Isi cherpen sa-baik-nya jangan-lah berchabang2', *Berita Harian*, 24 July 1966.

<sup>29</sup>'Do'a dan harapan', *Berita Harian*, 20 October 1963.

<sup>30</sup>'Berkenalan dengan Enche' Bahrom', *Berita Harian*, 10 March 1960.

<sup>31</sup>Another line is: 'He doesn't go to a restaurant because his earnings can't afford it. It's cheap to eat at a stall, not even one ringgit he's already full.' Translated from 'Do'a dan harapan', *Berita Harian*, 20 October 1963.

<sup>32</sup>Usman Awang, 'Penjual Air-batu', in *Gelombang* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 7–8.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Awang, 'Penjual Pisang di Kaki-lima', in *Gelombang*, pp. 22–23.

Despite opinions about the hardship experienced by Malay women hawkers, the involvement of Malay women in hawking was also viewed favourably for its economic potential, complicating the discourse about Malay labour. *The Straits Times*, in its coverage of a Kota Bahru *pasar* in Kelantan, proclaimed that 'it is the women who run the stalls'.<sup>35</sup> Here, women's work in food-making, both in terms of growing crops, fishing, and in preparing meals, intertwined with their skills in food-selling: women-led stalls for produce, fruit, vegetables, fish, and meat, as well as those for kueh, like *dadar*, *kuih kasturi*, and *kuih lapis*, ran the gamut of the vibrant market. In the news, the ubiquity of women sellers in Kelantan was a subject of fascination. *Berita Harian* writer Hashim Idris claimed, 'the capacity of Kelantanese women, who are now racing with men, in every field of work and profession, has impressed the occasional tourist'.<sup>36</sup> Yet he cautioned against presumptions that Kelantanese women were only recently 'free' from the kitchen and home. The strict separation of domestic and economic work according to gender—the prescription of masculine and feminine divisions of labour—was foreign to them.<sup>37</sup> Back in Selangor, such coverage led to conversations regarding access to potential money-earning and a more expansive role of pecuniary work for Malay women. In a visit to a government-endorsed Monday *pasar* at Tanjong Karang, Selangor, Ratnamala, the journalist Azah Aziz (using a pseudonym), described:

Most who sell foodstuffs—including ulam, leaves, vegetables, and fruits—are women. If we think that only in the eastern shores are women selling in the markets, that's a wrong assumption! In the west too Malay women take part...<sup>38</sup>

Ratnamala evinced concerns that Malay women generally were keeping up with women on the east coast in terms of hawking. But this division of east and west coast belied the history of trading practices conducted by Malay women across the peninsula. The market in Kelantan was not an exception: vegetable produce sellers based in a Malay bazaar in Sabak Bernam, Selangor, and a *pasar* in Pasir Mas, Johor, consisted of mostly women vendors.<sup>39</sup> Kaum Ibu, the women's wing of UMNO, also held *pasar minggu* (weekly market) to encourage women to do business, while a market in Tangkak, Johor, allocated a stall for women vendors only.<sup>40</sup> This complicated the domestic roles of women as conceived by political hegemonies and even liberal modernist Malay thinkers in the early twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> Discourse among Malay women welcomed this, expressing the potential of women's involvement in business as the

<sup>35</sup>'Kelantan Market', *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1957.

<sup>36</sup>Taken from 'Rajin, tekun dan chekap', *Berita Harian*, 17 April 1959.

<sup>37</sup>Firth, *Housekeeping among Malay Peasants*, Chapters 1–3; see also Anthony Reid, 'Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1988, pp. 629–645.

<sup>38</sup>'Temasha menarek dan meriah...', *Berita Harian*, 19 May 1964.

<sup>39</sup>'Penjual sayur2 merayu', *Berita Harian*, 22 January 1959; 'Pasar yang kurang tempat berjualan', *Berita Harian*, 18 April 1969.

<sup>40</sup>'Pasar minggu UMNO berjaya', *Berita Harian*, 19 October 1957; 'Enam buah gerai yang di-khaskan untuk orang2 Melayu', *Berita Harian*, 13 December 1958.

<sup>41</sup>Manderson, 'The Development and Direction', p. 106.



vehicle of Malay advancement, explaining that such work would help sustain the Malay household alongside their husbands' work.<sup>42</sup>

Couched in the language of economic difference, Malay writings also framed Chinese hawkers as exemplary of the work ethos that could lead to socioeconomic advancement. Che Sabidah, a vendor at a market, observed: '[Chinese people] as a family work together to help the business. This is why they can be so advanced in their work.'<sup>43</sup> In an article 'Kemiskinan tidak harus melemahkan semangat' ('Poverty should not weaken the spirit'), a boy by the name of Wong Wai Wah, whose father was a hawker, expressed that: 'Even though the work is hard, my father said, if every person in the world is lazy to work, then in the end they will suffer. But if one is hardworking, no matter the job, they would find comfort.'<sup>44</sup> Such sources used hawkers to espouse the value of hard work in overcoming poverty. But it was also striking that in the public imagination hawkers exemplified both hard work and precarious hardship—affected as they were by discrimination, violence, fate, and insecurity—as many still struggled to make a living. These discussions about hawkers provide a glimpse into the racial and economic anxieties that were intertwined with making ends meet during insecure times.

### Governing hawkers and space

Hawkers were at once mobile in the pursuit of demand for their wares and rooted within their communities. Particularly in areas away from sites of food production, they bridged the supply chains of food, covering the distance between patrons and food producers. Hawkers explained to local administrations and the public the importance of their trade to their communities, often to validate their right to do business in neighbourhoods. To appeal against the cancellation of their hawking licence, one sundry goods stall vendor, U. C. Abu Bakar, explained the significance of their service to families of government employees in the area, who would otherwise have had to travel further for basic necessities.<sup>45</sup> A potential licensee, Mr Tee Tow, explained that a new street stall for the sale of fresh fish along Morib Road would fill an important niche for the community.<sup>46</sup> As people migrated inward and resettled in new locations, these food sellers assumed a special significance. Frustrated at the absence of hawkers in her new kampung, Che Hasnah described: 'There are no vegetable or fish hawkers who come here ... the market is far from here. Bus fees alone cost 50 cents for a return trip.'<sup>47</sup> Markets were a necessary feature of low-cost housing schemes such as Kampung Pandan, which relocated families away from familiar places and accustomed routines.<sup>48</sup> The movement of hawkers was critical to the provision of food and intimate to the public imaginary—the winning student essay of a weekly contest in 1957 explained the economic uses of the bicycle, describing traders who overcame the

<sup>42</sup>'Isteri berniaga bantu suami', *Berita Harian*, 20 July 1969.

<sup>43</sup>'Wanita Melayu di-Pasar P.J.', *Berita Harian*, 23 May 1965.

<sup>44</sup>'Kemiskinan tidak harus melemahkan semangat', *Berita Harian*, 24 May 1961.

<sup>45</sup>Letter by U. C. Abu Bakar, Town Board Port Dickson (TBPD) 1522/56, no. 12, ANM.

<sup>46</sup>Application letter by Mr. Tee Tow, KLTB 8/57, no. 121, ANM.

<sup>47</sup>'Che' Hasnah menjejak', *Berita Harian*.

<sup>48</sup>'Temerloh di-buka bagi orang Melayu', *Berita Harian*, 8 July 1957; 'Perkampungan baharu di-Ayer Hitam', *Berita Harian*, 8 July 1962; A. Mues Jabal, 'Pembangunan Kampung Baharu paling ranchak', *Berita*



distance between rural and urban areas to bring produce to cities and necessities to kampungs.<sup>49</sup>

Hawker occupations and mobility brushed up against municipal visions of planned spaces. In the development of urban centres and new settlements, local boards had to contend with the shifting presence of hawker communities in popular areas. They had to plan for the creation of new markets to accommodate vendors and the public. They also had to consider the mitigation of traffic caused by hawker stalls at the heart of Kuala Lumpur—a bridge over Tuanku Abdul Rahman Street, near the Chow Kit Road market, was built to relieve traffic congestion and provide safe crossing for pedestrians, especially women and children.<sup>50</sup> The relocation of squatter settlements also required the provision of market sites to encourage food commerce for displaced peoples. To facilitate the administration of hawker-run spaces, municipal authorities continued implementing and enforcing the hawker licensing system, a colonial measure carried over to Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's Alliance government.

Licensing, though ineffective at curtailing hawking, was the local government's means to understand and manage hawkers. Municipal authorities distributed licences to addresses in designated areas, which could include markets, houses, roads, and even cities. With this information, they upheld a licensing quota partitioned by towns and kampungs, rejecting applicants in areas where hawker numbers exceeded licence limits or from sites that were not yet approved for hawking. They also imposed restrictions according to the type of stall or vehicle used: stationary stalls, wheeled stalls, motorcycles, bicycles, trishaws, tricycles, or the *kandar* (a mode of carrying food with wooden sticks on the shoulders). An application could be rejected if, for instance, a certain vehicle exceeded permissible numbers in an area, as had happened to Na Hock Tong in Kuala Terengganu.<sup>51</sup> Extensive documentation of features, habits, and rhythms made legible the diversity of hawking. As a sign of heightened state intrusion after the Malayan emergency and the development of colonial health systems, prospective licensees also had to meet with a health officer to pass a medical examination, where they would be subjected to a physical examination and assessed based on their daily hygiene routines, such as how often they brushed their teeth, or whether they washed their hands after using a latrine.<sup>52</sup> Their premises, vehicles, and utensils would then be inspected to ensure sanitation standards were met before they could obtain a licence.<sup>53</sup> Licences for food were given particularly close attention, with municipal councils approving and distributing licences based on the kinds of food sold, from

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*Harian*, 22 September 1968; '200 gerai akan di-bena segera untuk Kpg Baru dan Kpg Kramat', *Berita Harian*, 5 July 1969.

<sup>49</sup>Patut menjadi chabaran kpd murid Melayu', *Berita Harian*, 6 February 1957.

<sup>50</sup>PKL, *Annual Report*, 1966, part I, BK/PKL 1/17, ANM.

<sup>51</sup>Pushcart licence and hawker licence under Kuala Terengganu Town Council, Na Hock Tong, 21F, Pulau Kambing, Kuala Terengganu, 9 June 1959, TCKT, 274/55 SUB-JACKET (23), ANM.

<sup>52</sup>Records for a hawker who lives at No.16 Jalan Lim Tee Hooi, Taiping, 5/11/87 A (Records at Jalan Lim Tee Hooi hereafter), ANM.

<sup>53</sup>Chinese hawkers in Temerloh, Pahang, had protested placing licence plates on their arms as they would represent the deaths of their parents. See 'Penjaja2 ta' mahu berlesen', *Berita Harian*, 13 February 1959.

produce to dishes.<sup>54</sup> This scrutiny was informed by concerns over sanitation and disease due to the broader management of colonial public health.<sup>55</sup> Licensing costs varied across states and depended on the kinds of vehicles or stalls chosen. In Taiping, Perak, costs could range from M\$4 to M\$50.50 per annum, depending on the hawker's set-up, while in Kuala Terengganu, licence fees were M\$2.50 per quarter<sup>56</sup> and in Kuantan, Pahang's licence cost M\$60 annually.<sup>57</sup>

Far more worrying to municipalities, however, was the continued growth of unlicensed hawkers. The Kuala Lumpur Health Department was persistently vocal about this issue, noting with alarm the annual increase in unlicensed hawkers.<sup>58</sup> In 1957 alone Kuala Lumpur accounted for at least 7,500 unlicensed hawkers, about twice as many as 3,500 licensed ones, and similar (if not greater) estimations were reported in 1965.<sup>59</sup> And more unlicensed hawkers were assumed, given the difficulties in accounting for hawkers in municipal records. Unlicensed hawkers were not only an affront to the regulation of hawking; they were indicative of municipal failures in understanding the needs of the towns' inhabitants—a significant friction between different logics over the use of open spaces. A Johor Bahru official expressed frustration almost to the point of crying as he described hawkers avoiding the police; he recounted one moment: for the approval of ten slots for hawkers, a hundred more hawkers showed up.<sup>60</sup> Enforcement authorities were few, with the Health Department imploring the municipality to recruit a special hawker control force, inspired by a similar move by the Hong Kong municipal authority.<sup>61</sup>

Allocating spaces for hawkers was thus a complicated task, for municipalities had to account for traffic congestion, hawker needs, and the unpredictable movements of unlicensed hawkers. Hawkers' desire for prime spots with more customers was at odds with the government's need to prevent hawkers from causing congestion on the main roads and public spaces. Hawkers disappointed with their newly allocated zones that attracted fewer customers could opt to return to their old spots, much to the exasperation of bureaucratic officials.<sup>62</sup> Some simply could not afford the rent charged by federal markets, like the Sabak Bernam women vendors who, gathered at the municipal

<sup>54</sup>'Lesen2 untok penaja2 di-luluskan', *Berita Harian*, 22 August 1966.

<sup>55</sup>Lenore Manderson, 'Health Services and the Legitimation of the Colonial State: British Malaya 1786–1941', *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1987, pp. 91–112. From 1948–1956, nutrition diseases (which at the time included dysentery and diarrhoea) accounted for three times as many deaths as infectious and water-borne diseases. Taken from Chee Heng Leng, 'Health Status and the Development of Health Services in a Colonial State: The Case of British Malaya', *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1982, pp. 397–417.

<sup>56</sup>Licence application for a bread hawker for the first quarter of 1957, Tan Kai King, No. 22A, Jalan Hiliran, 1957, TCKT 706 SUB-JACKET (3), ANM.

<sup>57</sup>Abu Bakar Haji Ya'Akub, 'Penjaja pasar minggu Kuantan makin kurang', *Berita Harian*, 25 February 1967.

<sup>58</sup>BK/PKL/1/11–BK/PKL/1/19, ANM.

<sup>59</sup>'Hawker Stalls', *The Straits Times*, 9 January 1965; Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', pp. 116–117.

<sup>60</sup>Soal usir penjaja2 JB', *Berita Harian*, 4 January 1966.

<sup>61</sup>Cutout of minutes for the cabinet meeting on 20 March 1969 regarding the establishment of a hawker control force in Kuala Lumpur, 9/917, ANM.

<sup>62</sup>'Pekan minggu maseh di-pulau oleh penjaja', *Berita Harian*, 30 August 1965; 'Pekan sari K. Pilah di-pulau penjaja?', *Berita Harian*, 3 September 1968.

office, requested to be able to vend at another nearby market instead.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, popular government-designated spots, such as the Pasir Mas market, could overflow with hawkers; some vendors even sought to carry out their business just beyond the designated market space—requests were made to expand the market instead.<sup>64</sup> Municipalities struggled to adapt to shifting markets.

As colonial categories of race had become deeply embedded in the structures of administration, so was race a significant and fraught category in licensing and the allocation of space. The racial distribution of licences reflected the make-up of hawker communities in respective towns, which administrations had to routinely adjust for. In Kuala Lumpur, licensed Chinese and Indian hawkers, numbering 1,614 and 797 respectively, far outnumbered just 11 Malay vendors.<sup>65</sup> The Ipoh Town Council had to cede a third of 150 new licences originally intended for Malay hawkers to Chinese hawkers.<sup>66</sup> Some town councils like those in Klang and Temerloh also sought to improve Malay participation in hawking by redistributing licence quotas and planning for markets dedicated only to Malay vendors.<sup>67</sup> These measures proved to be controversial. The Klang and Kuala Lumpur branches of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) protested against Klang Municipal Council for banning non-Malay vendors from setting up shop on Saturday nights on Goh Hock Huat Road, claiming that it would promote discord between Malay and non-Malay vendors.<sup>68</sup> Malay vendors, on the other hand, felt threatened by the intrusion of non-Malay hawkers into Malay-majority markets.<sup>69</sup> Among the Malay public, the term *penjaja bangsa asing* ('foreign hawker') signified a racial and political Other.<sup>70</sup> Hawkers complained about local municipalities' lack of action against the crossing of such boundaries, explaining that these spaces were rightfully Malay and that it was the government's responsibility to aid Malay socio-economic advancement. Yet, as previously discussed, this was also at odds with the historic presence of Malay commerce in markets across the peninsula, which revealed more about racialized anxieties of socioeconomic difference than the actual absence of Malay hawkers in the post-colonial era.

Food was also another dimension municipalities considered in the management of public spaces. Food hawkers had to describe their products when they applied for their licence, and they were evaluated according to a quota that was assigned to each food dish. Initially applying to sell *rojak* and *chendol*, Seethy was permitted to hawk on the

<sup>63</sup>'Penjual sayur2 merayu', *Berita Harian*, 22 January 1959.

<sup>64</sup>'Pasar yang kurang tempat berjualan', *Berita Harian*, 18 April 1958.

<sup>65</sup>BK/PKL/1/11, ANM.

<sup>66</sup>'Yi shiyihui kaifang baduan jiedao zhunxu xiaofan shedang yingye wuren xiaofan zhizhao gerang huaren wushige' 怡市議會開放八段街道准許小販設檔營業巫人小販執照割讓華人五十個 [Ipoh City Council Opened up Eight Streets to Allow Hawkers to Set Up Their Stalls; 50 Licenses Allocated to Malay Hawkers to be Given to Chinese Hawkers], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 27 July 1957.

<sup>67</sup>'Nasib penjaja Melayu', *Berita Harian*, 24 September 1963.

<sup>68</sup>'Renmin jinbu dang liang zhibu xiang basheng shiyihui kangyi jinzhi fei wuji xiaofan meizhouliu zai wufulu baimai bu gongping' 人民進步黨兩支部向巴生市議會抗議禁止非巫籍小販每週六在吳福發路擺賣不公平 [Two Branches of the People's Progressive Party Protested that it was Unfair for the Klang City Council to Ban Non-Malay Vendors from Setting up Shop Every Saturday Night on Jalan Goh Hock Huat], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 25 February 1961.

<sup>69</sup>'Bantahan penjaja2 Temerloh', *Berita Harian*, 12 June 1963.

<sup>70</sup>'Orang2 asing ka-Pekan Sari berniaga, penjaja2 Melayu resah', *Berita Harian*, 12 February 1965.

condition that he picked only one dish to sell.<sup>71</sup> Municipal authorities wielded these limits to control and balance the food offerings at different sites. They sought also to discourage food monopolies, for example when the Kuala Langat Board increased the number of hawker licences to prevent a fish sales monopoly. For fear of unwarranted competition, licensed hawkers similarly referred to the quota and lodged complaints about unlicensed hawkers selling the same kinds of goods as them. But imposing limits according to arbitrary food dishes led to confusion—Chinese traditional medicine hawkers, for instance, had food and non-food licences, each being governed by different laws. And new foods requiring legal scrutiny and evaluations complicated such limits further. In a 1957 Ipoh court case, a hawker named Loh Wah Siong was tried for selling *air batu* (an ice confectionary) to children. Tuan D. R. Seenivasagam, the lawyer representing the defendant, claimed that the treat could not be categorized as any food type in the dictionary or day-to-day usage and thus could not be banned from sale.<sup>72</sup> In the end, the Ipoh magistrate ruled that *air batu* was indeed a type of food, affirming its legal existence in municipal regulations. To overcome the inflexibility of food licensing limits, one would have to think about relational categories that tied their products together, for example how Tan Goay Meng, who applied to sell curry mee and fried *mee-hoon* (a type of noodle) in 1968, grouped her goods under the accepted category *mee masak* (cooked noodles).<sup>73</sup> If one were to begin selling a food item that was different from what their licence dictated, they would have had to amend it or, failing that, risk prosecution.<sup>74</sup> The overall scrutiny and process of sorting food into categories in licensing as administered by the government had a few effects. In naming the food items sold by hawkers who had obtained licences, and in enforcing these categories through policing and legal jurisdiction, the government affirmed these food items as objects for legal and public discourse, privileging such dishes in sanctioned food markets. This, coupled with the process of placing hawkers into categories of place and vehicles, played a part in shaping, standardizing, and normalizing the kinds of hawkers, as well as the offerings of food markets, in the eyes of the Malaysian public.

Efforts to dictate the use of space through policing and enforcement often led to conflict between hawkers and the government. Hawkers consequently faced eviction, punishment, and abuse. Hawkers found unlicensed would be arrested and fined between M\$5 and M\$30, easily the cost of a few days of labour; and if fines were unpaid, hawkers faced weeks of prison time.<sup>75</sup> Hawkers found in unauthorized spaces—streets, alleys, or roads that, when occupied, could lead to traffic congestion—were evicted, even if they were licensed. In 1962, Kuala Lumpur recorded the following offence cases: 427 for setting up street stalls in unauthorized sites; 134 for trading without licences; and 162 for causing obstruction in market passages.<sup>76</sup> These cases were meant to be deterrents, as enforcement authorities were short-staffed, even with collaboration

<sup>71</sup>Letters between Seethy s/o Ookkayil Moidu and Kuala Langat Town Board, KLTB 8/57, no. 150–153, ANM.

<sup>72</sup>'Mahkamah menetap ayer batu makanan', *Berita Harian*, 6 August 1957.

<sup>73</sup>Records at Jalan Lim Tee Hooi, ANM.

<sup>74</sup>Complaints against unlicensed hawkers, KLTB 53/56(2), ANM; Records for a mobile hawker at 167, Jalan Besar Taiping, 5/11/63, ANM.

<sup>75</sup>BK/PKL/1/11, ANM; 'The Elusive Hawker is Jailed', *The Straits Times*, 2 November 1957.

<sup>76</sup>BK/PKL/1/11, ANM.

between police and health departments; complaints by shopkeepers, hawkers, and concerned citizens were crucial sources of surveillance.<sup>77</sup> Licensed hawkers also took to filing complaints as they tended to worry not only about potential competition, but also a sense of unfairness regarding hawkers who did not follow the rules and the due process of getting registered. Hawker fears of property destruction or confiscation were constant, as they worked at the mercy of the police's goodwill and temperament. In 1964, police officers dismantled the stalls of Singaporean hawkers after repeatedly warning them to move; while violence did not break out, the tension was palpable, and hawkers cried in response to the operation.<sup>78</sup> Other measures included raiding sanctioned markets to clamp down on unlicensed hawking and investigating cases of food contamination.<sup>79</sup>

Despite more official recognition by the state, hawkers continued to navigate around regulation, adapting to space and rules. This put on display hawkers' friction with the structures of the state. Indeed, these contestations also created divisions between hawkers. The Telok Anson Hawker Association was torn about an order by the Town Council to demolish its current site, resulting in altercations between members as to whether to follow the order or not, with the leader of the association subsequently resigning.<sup>80</sup> Tensions between licensed and unlicensed vendors surfaced, as when unlicensed hawkers decided to sell their wares right outside of the *pasar* or designated spots to take advantage of customer traffic, leading licensed vendors to request administrative action against people doing the same work as them. Friction between state control and hawker movements revealed more clearly political contestations between different hawker groups, complicating the terrain of public food markets.

The bureaucratic disconnect in a government attempting to systemically enforce hawking laws became another source of hardship and frustration. For hawkers interested in applying for licensing, processing delays, coupled with costs and other difficulties, led them to either spend time, unpaid, to navigate through the process or resume working and risk legal action.<sup>81</sup> Distribution of licences could also be suspended in response to complaints; this happened in Kuala Lumpur, when hawkers and petty traders were blocking Ipoh Road and Batu Road, stifling awaiting and future licensees.<sup>82</sup> The strict maintenance of licence numbers was also deliberate in Kuala Lumpur, and no new licences were distributed until after 1964.<sup>83</sup> Policing abuse was not uncommon, with police prone to exercising force, conducting unlawful arrests, and destroying and stealing hawker property, much to the ire of political parties like the PPP, concerned public members, and hawkers themselves. A letter published in *The Straits Times* in 1952 by an 'indignant housewife' detailed that she had witnessed

<sup>77</sup>BK/PKL/1/11-BK/PKL/1/19, ANM; General complaints of hawkers and street stalls, Port Dickson Licensing Board, 867, ANM; 'Basheng san xiaofan zu jiaotong beibu' 巴生三小販阻交通被捕 [Three Klang Hawkers Arrested for Obstructing Traffic], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 1 October 1961.

<sup>78</sup>'jianbanuzhang fengyunbianse jingfang xialing chaidang xiaofan kusheng zhentian' 劍拔弩張·風雲變色警方下令拆檔小販哭聲震天 [Discoloration of the Wind and Clouds, Police Orders Dismantlement of Files, Hawkers Cry Loudly], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 2 July 1964.

<sup>79</sup>'Kekhuatiran penjaja2 gunakan ayer kotor', *Berita Harian*, 7 March 1959.

<sup>80</sup>'Penjaja pasar bersengketa sama sendiri', *Berita Harian*, 7 October 1962.

<sup>81</sup>'Bandaran di-minta keluaran lagi lesen penjaja', *Berita Harian*, 20 July 1965.

<sup>82</sup>'Lesen2 penjaja di-gantong', *Berita Harian*, 3 November 1959.

<sup>83</sup>Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', p. 122.

'constables, sometimes in uniforms and sometimes in civilian dress, extorting money or edible goods from these poor inarticulate underdogs, the back-lane hawkers who, through fear of the majesty of the law, have tamely submitted'.<sup>84</sup> Two hundred members of the Penang Hawker Association similarly filed a complaint to sympathetic Mayor Ooi Thiam Siew that several of their friends were arrested and forced to admit wrongdoing without a clear reason behind the arrest.<sup>85</sup> Ooi himself even lodged a report regarding claims of police puncturing the tires of a tricycle owned by a Kuala Kangsar Road hawker and threatening other hawkers.<sup>86</sup> Some disputes turned murky, like in an altercation between a banana fritters hawker and an inspector, each of whom accused the other of attacking first.<sup>87</sup> Hawkers were victims of legal disjuncture and violence in a system that remained ambivalent over their rights in the public commons.

### Hawker associations—strategies and solidarities

To protect their interests and in reaction to mistreatment and discrimination, hawkers organized and formed associations to enact political strategies and accumulate support.<sup>88</sup> Conditions were ripe due to the rise of organized labour after the collapse of pre-war labour controls and British attempts to rekindle and regulate Malayan trade unionism to restore order after 1945. At the same time, the spectre of Malayan communism meant that trade union membership and activity were more restrictive; through the Trade Union Ordinance 1959, the Registrar of Trade Unions was conferred with more powers to deter further communist activity and maintain industrial peace.<sup>89</sup> Hawker associations endeavoured to have their voices heard by their respective municipal and town councils. One key issue concerned dedicated hawker sites and the construction of proper hawker centres. Some 20 hawkers in Kuala Lumpur sent in a petition to the Municipal Council to review the allocation of space for hawkers; along with its answer to review the proposal, the Council asked the police to be lenient regarding arrests for the time being.<sup>90</sup> Malay hawkers wrote letters to officials and appealed for better infrastructure in cities and kampungs to support hawkers in

<sup>84</sup>'Squeezing the K. L. Hawkers', *The Straits Times*, 5 May 1952.

<sup>85</sup>'Penjaja2 na' bantah tindakan polis', *Berita Harian*, 21 May 1963.

<sup>86</sup>'Polis di-adau oleh Dato Bandar', *Berita Harian*, 27 April 1961.

<sup>87</sup>Liangming baimai jianxiangjiao xiaofan ouda xiaofan xunchayuan tui shi pan zuiming chengli fenbie fakuan erbai ji yibai yuan' 兩名擺賣煎香蕉小販毆打小販巡察員推事判罪名成立分別罰款二百及一百元 [Two Hawkers Selling Fried Bananas Assaulted a Hawker Inspector and Judge Convicted and Fined 200 and 100 Yuan Respectively], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 26 February 1964.

<sup>88</sup>Kwee Hui Kian, 'Chinese Economic Dominance in Southeast Asia: A *Longue Duree* Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5–34. See also Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie*, pp. 3–82; Maurice Freedman, 'Immigrants and Associations: Chinese in Nineteenth-century Singapore', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1960, pp. 25–48.

<sup>89</sup>Leong, 'The Impact of the Cold War'; Harper, *The End of Empire*, pp. 131–132.

<sup>90</sup>'Long shiyihui jue chongxin jiantao xiaofan baimai didian wenti qing jingfang zan fangkuan daibu xingdong jiang shefa qudi paihuai qiaotou jiebian qigai' 隆市議會決重新檢討小販擺賣地點問題請警方暫放寬逮捕行動將設法取締徘徊橋頭街邊乞丐 [Kuala Lumpur City Council Would Reconsider Hawker Locations and Asked the Police to be Temporarily Lenient Towards Arrests; Would Find a Solution to Remove Beggars Who Hung Around the Bridge], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 1 February 1961.



Kedah, Perak, Pahang, and Selangor, as well as for dedicated space for Malay hawkers.<sup>91</sup> Through organizing and writing letters, hawkers were also able to extend their social reach, purportedly catching the attention of government leaders, like Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak and Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. When their needs were not met, hawkers even built makeshift hawkker centres themselves, although these efforts were sometimes met with an order to dismantle their establishments.<sup>92</sup> Forming associations was a means to gain access to space and political legitimacy. As Inche' Hussin, the secretary of a hawkker's association at Raja Bot Lane, explained, the hawkkers of Chow Kit Road and Raja Bot Lane, from Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, and other states, founded the association to submit requests asking for permanent rights to their vending space. Having only a provisional claim to the site, they had to routinely clean and pack away their stalls after business hours. They sought proper attention from authorities to enact repairs and sanitation schedules for their area, where there were mounds of garbage in the morning when they opened their stalls. They even offered to, with the permission of the Municipal Council, carry out repairs and improvements on their own.<sup>93</sup>

Through associations, hawkers also organized in response to municipal measures to control hawkers, abuse, and other incidences of hardship. Singaporean hawkker associations protested against the increase in hawkker fines, gathering signatures in Singapore and Batu Pahat, Johor, in cross-state solidarity and appealing for the abolishment of hawkker licensing.<sup>94</sup> When their fellows were wrongfully arrested and abused, 500 hawkkers in Kuala Lumpur picketed outside the Municipal Council, an initiative organized by the PPP, reminding members of the Council that they had a responsibility to protect hawkkers in their jurisdiction.<sup>95</sup> Over 200 Penang hawkkers organized similarly, meeting Penang Mayor Ooi Thiam Siew, lodging complaints, and deliberating over appropriate forms of protest against the wrongful arrest of hawkkers by police in 1963.<sup>96</sup> Associations also provided funds to members in need or found ways to recoup losses suffered. Both hawkker associations in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya implemented death benefit funds that members were required to contribute to.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup>'Penjaja2 Melayu na' tudoh persatuan', *Berita Harian*, 16 June 1962.

<sup>92</sup>'Perkara penjaja di-sampaikan kpd Tun Razak', *Berita Harian*, 2 October 1962; 'Tindakan atas gerai2 tak berlesen akan di-perhebat', *Berita Harian*, 3 March 1969; 'OCPD bela polis yg kena adu', *Berita Harian*, 29 April 1961.

<sup>93</sup>A. R. Hadzrami, 'Penjaja2 ini meminta tempat yang tetap untuk berniaga', *Berita Harian*, 2 September 1965.

<sup>94</sup>'Xiaofan zuo jinxing qianming kangyi jiazhong fajin' 小販昨進行簽名抗議加重罰金 [Hawkers Protested by Signing Against Increasing Fines Yesterday], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 13 May 1956. The website of the 'Malaixiya fanshang tongye zonghui' 马来西亚贩商同业总会 (Federated Hawkers and Traders Association of Malaysia) explains its background as a federated hawkker association spanning Malaysia and Singapore. It appears to have existed since 1951 and was officially registered on 27 March 1953, suggesting broad and profound intercity and interstate solidarities in the period. Further research on hawkker organizational archives, where permitted, could shed light on these developments. Found in 'Malaixiya fanshang tongye zonghui' 马来西亚贩商同业总会, available at <https://gpppkm.gbs2u.com/bd/index3.asp?userid=42797929&idno=1>, [accessed 11 December 2024].

<sup>95</sup>'Penjaja2 berpiket di-depan pejabat bandar', *Berita Harian*, 7 January 1961.

<sup>96</sup>'Penjaja2 na' bantah tindakan polis', *Berita Harian*, 21 May 1963.

<sup>97</sup>Files on Petaling Jaya Hawkkers' and Petty Traders' Association, Registrar of Societies Malaysia (RSM), RSM 708/72, ANM.



Associations provided a form of insurance to members, for example when the Kedah Hawker Association provided M\$20 each to seven members affected by a fire in 1964.<sup>98</sup> Sixteen Kuala Lumpur hawkers, who had their stalls swept away by the police, in turn relied on their association to come up with solutions to overcome this issue.<sup>99</sup>

Protecting hawker interests also extended towards participation in electoral politics. The hawker issue became a particularly contentious topic in cities with significant hawker numbers like Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Singapore, so much so that candidates in local elections discussed the ways in which they would protect the welfare of hawkers and mediate the different issues of traffic, space allocation, and hawker licensing in their mandates. Kuala Lumpur-elected politicians could not afford to ignore 10,500 potential hawker votes.<sup>100</sup> Aware of their numbers and influence, in 1961 the Batu Pahat Hawker Association rallied around Zhao Pingkai and Chen Yushun in the Town Council election, both of whom gave assurances that association operations would run smoothly.<sup>101</sup> The Persatuan Penjaja-penjaja Ibu-kota (Capital Hawkers Association), decrying the lack of fair treatment towards their over 200 Muslim members in licensing applications, wrote a letter to the Kuala Lumpur municipality pressuring them to recruit one of their own onto the licensing committee, so that they would have a direct voice that would protect their interests.<sup>102</sup> The same association also endorsed Tunku Abdul Rahman on 6 August 1969, amid a wave of criticism towards him over the 13 May 1969 race riots.<sup>103</sup>

In their struggle, hawkers also found public support from leftist class-oriented political parties, like the Socialist Front (SF), Labour Front (LF), and the PPP, as well as the Rural Industrial Development Authority (RIDA), the organization founded by Dato' Onn Jaafar dedicated to bridging the socioeconomic inequity faced by rural Malays. In 1959, SF councillor V. David was the spokesman for hawkers in the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council, raising questions concerning hawker issues and advocating for more humane treatment of street vendors by the police;<sup>104</sup> similarly, the SF admonished police and the Johor Bahru authorities in April 1962 for arresting unlicensed hawkers, impeding the flow of hawkers from outside cities, and confiscating the licences of these hawkers, exclaiming that they were just trying to 'mencari

<sup>98</sup>'jida xiaofan shangye gonghui jiuji shouzai qi huiyou meiming xianfa ershi yuan' 吉打小販商業公會救濟受災七會友每名先發二十元 [Kedah Hawker Merchants Association Provides Relief to Seven Members Affected by the Disaster with an Initial Payment of M\$20 Each], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 17 February 1964.

<sup>99</sup>'jilong xiaofan gonghui jinri kai dahui taolun zaoshou saodang wenti' 吉隆小販公會 今日開大會討論遭受掃蕩問題 [Kuala Lumpur Hawker Association Held a Meeting Today to Discuss the Issue of Raids], *Xingzhouribao* 星洲日報, 29 January 1961.

<sup>100</sup>Anthony, 'Urban Development and Planning', p. 116.

<sup>101</sup>'Bazhu xiaofan gonghui yu tongye toupiao zhichi guwen chenyushun' 峇株小販公會籲同業投票支持顧問陳裕順 [Batu Pahat Hawkers Association Called for Their Peers to Vote for Consultant Chen Yushun], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 14 May 1961.

<sup>102</sup>'Penjaja2 mahu wakil-nya dalam J-kuasa Lesen', *Berita Harian*, 7 July 1968. It is unclear whether the Persatuan Penjaja-penjaja Ibu-kota was the same as the Kuala Lumpur Stall Owners, Hawkers and Pedalers Association, which comprised mainly Chinese members. See Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', p. 116.

<sup>103</sup>'Sokong Tengku', *Berita Harian*, 6 August 1969.

<sup>104</sup>Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', p. 117.

rezeki' ('make a living').<sup>105</sup> Singapore's LF favoured abolishing hawker licensing, recommending instead that licences for hawkers should only concern health matters.<sup>106</sup> In addition to organizing the protest in Kuala Lumpur in 1961, the PPP questioned the Klang Municipal Council about the proposed alternative location for hawkers after their eviction from under the Klang bridge in May 1962.<sup>107</sup> The Johor Bahru branch of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), part of the Alliance coalition, organized a forum as per the state hawker association's request to discuss solutions surrounding hawker arrests by the police.<sup>108</sup>

Departing from the stance of previous colonial administrations, municipal and town authorities sought to accommodate hawkers better in public spaces. Yet they approached with caution as they were worried about concomitant issues of health, sanitation, and congestion that allowing hawking could potentially cause. On hawker matters, the local administration reached out to hawker associations. Municipal councils in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore established hawker consultation committees to negotiate on matters pertaining to hawkers and urged their respective hawker associations to send a representative who could speak English or Malay to participate in the dialogue.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, Melaka Town Council cooperated with the Melaka Hawker Association's advisory board to discuss the construction of new hawker sites and allocation of temporary stalls at the bus station.<sup>110</sup> Despite tensions on both sides in such dialogue and even cases of altercation and disrespect, these set precedents with hawkers that enabled more inclusive discussions about hawker sites. In exchange, hawkers were required to move away from spots with high traffic. It was as much a decision to improve city order as it was to provide a space for hawkers. At times, high traffic conditions were even allowed with public celebrations such as Chinese New Year. For example, Kuala Lumpur offered temporary licences to allow hawkers to set up shop on

<sup>105</sup>'Soal tangkapan penjaja2 jadi perbincangan hebat Per/SF', *Berita Harian*, 4 April 1962.

<sup>106</sup>'Front Hawker Row: Mrs. Smith Quits', *The Straits Times*, 26 September 1957.

<sup>107</sup>'Penjaja di-halau bukan soal Majlis Bandaran', *Berita Harian*, 11 May 1962.

<sup>108</sup>'Xinshan mahua mingwan zuotan jingfang jubu xiaofan wenti' 新山馬華明晚座談警方拘捕小販問題 [Malayan Chinese Association Johor Bahru Discusses Hawker Arrests by Police in a Forum Tomorrow Night], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 27 September 1961.

<sup>109</sup>'Long shiyihui jihua sheli xiaofan zhongxin shichang yi gong jiebian xiaofan jizhong yingye' 隆市議會計劃設立小販中心市場以供街邊小販集中營業 [Kuala Lumpur City Council Planned to Establish Hawker Centres to Allow Streetside Hawkers to Centralize their Stalls], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 25 February 1961; 'Mou jiejie xiaofan jizeng yinqi shichang wenti xiaofan zixun hui jiang chengli quanquan chuli xiaofan shiyi gaihui jiang yanjiu he liding kaipi xinshichang jihua xiaofanju jiang he xiaofan hezuo duifu daitu lesuo' 謀解決小販激增引起市場問題小販諮詢會將成立全權處理小販事宜該會將研究和釐訂開闢新市場計劃小販局將和小販合作對付歹徒勒索 [To Solve the Issue of Insufficient Markets for Increasing Number of Hawkers, a Hawkers Consultation Association Would be Established and Given Full Responsibility for Hawker-related Matters; The Association Would Also Research and Decide on Plans to Start New Marketplaces While Teaming up With Hawkers to Curb Threats by Criminals], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 5 January 1961.

<sup>110</sup>'Jiaoshihui xiaofan zixunju tongguo zai bashi chezhan huading zanshixing baimai didian cuqi anlu xiaofan zunzhao shiyihui guiding' 甲市會小販諮詢局通過在巴士車站劃定暫時性擺賣地點促祈安律小販遵照市議會規定 [Melaka Hawkers Association's Advisory Board Approved of the Plan to Allocate Temporary Stall Locations at the Bus Station and Urged Jalan Kee Ann Hawkers to Follow Rules and Regulations Set Down by the Town Council], *Nanyangshangbao* 南洋商報, 8 December 1961.

Petaling Street for the festivities.<sup>111</sup> Building markets proceeded apace across towns and kampungs as the government saw hawking as a means for the struggling poor and farmers to earn a living in insecure times—even the Kuala Lumpur Health Department, once only tolerant of hawking, recognized that it was now a livelihood for many.<sup>112</sup> The construction of markets and stalls expanded in towns and districts away from urban centres such as Ulu Langat, Selangor, Temerloh, Pahang, and Telok Anson, Perak, to meet the needs of Malay hawkers who requested more infrastructure.<sup>113</sup> To encourage their involvement, markets for Malay hawkers were also built in towns and kampungs, for example when the Menteri Besar of Selangor, Dato Harun bin Haji Idris, officiated at the opening of a market and three community halls in Port Klang, Selangor, in 1965.<sup>114</sup> Questions on hawker needs also reached UMNO meetings.<sup>115</sup> As the Kuala Lumpur commissioner proclaimed: ‘It is accepted that the hawker is an essential part of the economy of Malaya.’<sup>116</sup> Hawker associations found allies in state and federal governance, with member of parliament for Bukit Bintang Tan Toh Hong and Selangor state legislative assemblyman for Bukit Nanas Loong Foong Beng representing hawker interests in the parliament and state assembly respectively.<sup>117</sup> As hawkers engaged with local administrations, they could now bring their critiques of public governance to the table.

As a statement of deepening commitment, cities invested millions in markets and even constructed new buildings and hawker centres, equipped with parking and utilities. Such structures, novel in form and function, and far costlier than many markets, and the incorporation of hawking markets into town architecture and state urban planning, became a physical affirmation of hawking’s place in the public space. In 1961, the Municipal Council of Penang announced their decision to build a new market on Penang Road costing M\$1,310,000.<sup>118</sup> Kuala Lumpur made a similar landmark decision as they spent about M\$1.3 million to build two new hawker centres which were completed in 1967 and 1968.<sup>119</sup> Deputy Health Officer Dr T. Visavanathan confirmed that two buildings would be built for this purpose at Haji Hussin Road and Sekolah Road, each providing parking amenities for hawkers to use, alleviating surrounding traffic. While, of the two buildings, one achieved mild success and the other turned out to be a failure, this marked an important shift for the government. Not only were they primed to provide long-term venues and legitimacy to hawkers, but they also wielded

<sup>111</sup>‘Chunjie zai jilongpo’ 春節在吉隆坡 [Chinese New Year in Kuala Lumpur], *Xingzhouribao* 星洲日報, 1 February 1968.

<sup>112</sup>‘Temerloh di-buka bagi orang Melayu’, *Berita Harian*, 8 July 1957; A. Mues Jabal, ‘Pembangunan ampong Baharu paling ranchak’, *Berita Harian*, 22 September 1968; ‘200 gerai akan di-bena segera untuk Kpg Baru dan Kpg Kramat’, *Berita Harian*, 5 July 1969.

<sup>113</sup>‘Pekan sari: hampir lengang’, *Berita Harian*, 13 March 1961; ‘Gerai baharu untok sateh’, *Berita Harian*, 21 April 1965; ‘Peruntokan bena gerai2’, *Berita Harian*, 19 January 1966; ‘Dia gesa penjaja di-arrah masuk ka-gerai khas’, *Berita Harian*, 2 June 1969.

<sup>114</sup>‘Pasar khas di-buka untok Melayu’, *Berita Harian*, 29 June 1965.

<sup>115</sup>‘Kesulitan penjaja2 Melayu di-timbang’, *Berita Harian*, 30 May 1962.

<sup>116</sup>Anthony, ‘Urban Development Planning’, p. 122.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>118</sup>‘Tanah2 kosong untok penjaja’, *Berita Harian*, 24 March 1961.

<sup>119</sup>PKL, *Annual Report*, 1967, BK/PKL 1/19, ANM; ‘\$1.3 juta utk menyelesaikan soal penjaja dan kereta di-ibu kota’, *Berita Harian*, 7 January 1966.

a new kind of structure to reconcile hawker spatial organization in urban planning.<sup>120</sup> And soon hawker concerns were incorporated into government economic and financial policies, evincing more widespread recognition of hawking work. In 1967, Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council considered planning more night markets, allocating six areas, to reduce unemployment rates and increase municipal revenue.<sup>121</sup> In January 1968, Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin introduced the new income tax floor, explaining that the minimum wage earned before being charged income tax would be raised from M\$1,000 to M\$2,000, a move specifically aimed at easing the burden of small business owners, hawkers, and labourers.<sup>122</sup> Responding to a call for financial assistance during the second Malayan emergency period, when citizens were under lockdown, the National Assistance Fund handed out cheques of M\$250 each to 103 struggling hawkers, whose stalls were destroyed as a result of riots.<sup>123</sup>

Accompanying this support and endorsement were efforts to control the ensuing problems of sanitation, unlicensed hawking, and congestion, evincing a growing maturation of government handling of hawkers as state authorities endeavoured to integrate hawking into their own locus of control. In the late 1960s, coverage of the issue of garbage and the disorganization of hawker stalls intensified. Reports appeared in Kota Bahru, Klang, and Kedah regarding 'lawless' and scattered placements of stalls and unfettered littering, tarnishing the image of these cities. In August 1969, Johor Municipal Council took swift action, launching a monthly 'cleaning campaign' in Johor Bahru, seizing 39 vehicles and arresting 29 hawkers that month for trespassing and parking in areas not allowed.<sup>124</sup> In 1965, Kuala Lumpur launched an operation called 'Penjaja tutup jalan' ('Roads closed to hawkers'), a weekly measure to remove unlicensed traders from roads, five-foot ways, and markets, clearing 16 roads and the Kuala Lumpur central market.<sup>125</sup> And in the announcement of the construction of two major hawker centres in Kuala Lumpur in 1966, the campaign against illegal hawkers by the government was reaffirmed, further elucidating the ways in which the government, while recognizing hawking as legitimate work, controlled and delineated the boundaries of permissible hawking in public spaces. And in November 1969, a Kuala Lumpur hawker control force was finally established after years of delay.<sup>126</sup> Even towns away from urban centres employed more scrutiny: the District Council in Tanjung Malim enacted regulations enforcing sanitation rules, while in Telok Anson the local administration intensified clamping down on unlicensed hawking.<sup>127</sup> Public areas continued to be sites of contestation between hawkers and local governments.

<sup>120</sup>Their lack of success was attributed to location and rental costs. Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', p. 113.

<sup>121</sup>"Pasar malam" untuk mengurangkan lagi jumlah penganggor', *Berita Harian*, 6 February 1967.

<sup>122</sup>'Chukai yang tidak bagitu menyakiti', *Berita Harian*, 19 January 1968.

<sup>123</sup>'Bantuan \$250 kpd penjaja2', *Berita Harian*, 4 June 1969.

<sup>124</sup>'Majlis Bandaran Johor lancar kempen berseih', *Berita Harian*, 22 August 1969.

<sup>125</sup>PKL, *Annual Report*, 1965, part I, BK/PKL 1/15, ANM; 'Police Clamp on Road Hawkers', *The Straits Times*, 12 April 1965.

<sup>126</sup>BK/PKL/1/11-BK/PKL/1/19, ANM; Anthony, 'Urban Development Planning', p. 118.

<sup>127</sup>'Wei zhengjie ji meihua shirong danrongmalin shi hui cu ge shangdian xiaofan zunshou tiaoli yingye' 為整潔及美化市容丹絨馬林市會促各商店小販遵守條例營業 [To Clean Up and Beautify the City, Tanjung Malim Will Urge Hawkers in Shops to Comply with the Regulations], *Nanyangshangbao*

## Conclusion

Following hawking reports in the news and reading correspondence between hawkers and local authorities offer new social, cultural, and economic perspectives concerning food markets and labour in twentieth-century post-colonial Malaysia. The different accounts of hawking suggest that it was a dynamic and contingent form of access to labour, a practice that people from different communities had long relied on and continued to when other work opportunities were not feasible. Hawking was enticing as it offered ways of work that were amenable to diverse rhythms of living for people and had relatively few barriers, unlike the fixed schedules of work that wage labour required. Such was its significance in rebuilding Malaysian food markets and economies that, through dialogue, infrastructure, and policy, local government and hawkers expanded the limits of access to public spaces. At the same time, writing on hawkers also positioned them as precarious subjects on the margins, both respected for their trade and seen as a cautionary tale of socioeconomic difference. The ease with which people could hawk was complicated by regulation, policing abuse, crime, and natural elements. Even potential applicants themselves invoked their hardship to obtain hawker licences. Discussions about Malay women hawkers also raised questions about the gender of labour, as thinkers talked, compared, and encouraged women-led businesses in the peninsula.

Yet in the allocation of spaces, hawking also engendered uneasy sentiments about socioeconomic differences between racial groups—*penjaja bangsa asing* continued to persevere as a political Other, at once envied for their economic prowess but also pitied for their perceived hardship. Managing hawkers through the lens of location, race, and food informed the spatial politics of food trade—hawkers of different races competed for rights to do business in different areas, and vendors complained about unlicensed competitors selling the same wares. Out on the streets, post-colonial insecurities were apparent and intertwined. But once primarily seen as a sign of urban disorder that needed to be reined in, local authorities now mustered to consider a deepening inclusion of hawkers in Malaysian towns and kampungs. Friction produced moments of conflict and resistance, but also provided opportunities for dialogue, solidarities, and compromise between hawkers, municipal authorities, and political representatives. In conversations and debates, alternative plans to govern open spaces materialized, providing more legitimacy to hawkers. But besides offering support and infrastructure, authorities also articulated new dimensions of control, negotiating with hawkers to move to places away from sites of concern, implementing new policing operations and forces, and continuing to rely on licensing to regulate hawking. New controls of trade unionism designed to combat communist insurgency and industrial unrest also curtailed the kinds of political mobilizations hawkers enacted. As hawking became legitimized in politics, labour, and discourse nationwide, hawkers were now subject to new modes of governance in post-independence Malaysia.

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南洋商报, 9 October 1967; 'Tindakan atas gerai2 tak berlesen akan di-perhebat', *Berita Harian*, 3 March 1969.

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