

Hawking Gawking in Singapore

The polylingualism of visual grammar in hawker centre signage.

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Abstract: This paper is a comparative typographic and pictographic analysis to identify the underlying layout and design structures of culinary signage at hawker centres in Singapore. A hawker center is a collection of stalls selling different types of affordable foods, housed in a covered but open complex, with a common seating area. Five hawker centres managed by the National Environment Agency of Singapore, particularly those that offer popular traditional dishes are identified. Compositional elements and principles of organisations which are used as a supportive/graphical form with the purpose to inform and persuade are also discussed to understanding how hawker centre signage is designed for a multilingual environment. There are cases of typographical errors, mismatched fonts, unexpected approaches as opposed to rarely radical, but safe, tidy, and usually bland designs, which seems to be the norm.

Key words: Signage, Singapore, food, hawker centre, food court, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Tamil, typography, multilingual, design, letterform.

1. Introduction

Singapore is a vibrant city-state with a multi-racial population of 5.4 million. While the Chinese ethnic group is at 74%, followed by the Malays at 13% and the Indians at 9.1% of the population (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2013), English is used for education, business, and government, with large segments of the population speaking Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil as second languages. Being at a crossroad within Asia, Singapore is also known for its culinary delights as the various ethnic groups have contributed to Singapore's food culture.

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, hawker centres have evolved into a unique attraction of Singapore, popular among Singaporeans and tourists alike where one can find affordable and different food culture under one roof. Street peddling by hawkers of different races was a common sight in Singapore since the 1800s and it continued to thrive even after World War II as a means of livelihood. It was a profitable trade that required little capital and it generated good income due to public demand for cheap and convenient meals (Lucky Stamps, 2011). However, without direct water supply and proper food waste management, street peddling became unhygienic. New policies and measures such as licensing were introduced by the Government in the 1960s (Makansutra, 2011).

Alongside the development of public housing, street hawkers were removed from the streets to facilities known as “market and hawker centres” or “hawker centre” for short. In a city known for its high living standards, the hawker centres in Singapore offer delightfully affordable dishes averaging \$4 (₹193) for an authentic local meal. Unlike food courts located in upscale malls, hawker centres are not air-conditioned and operational costs have been kept low as they are managed by the National Environment Agency of Singapore (NEA). Currently, there are 107 markets/hawker centres in Singapore, housing about 15,000 stalls altogether. Hawker centres will continue to become part and parcel of life for Singaporeans mainly because these food centres are conveniently located near public housing estates or transportation hubs. Over the years, the government has made significant efforts to enhance older hawker centres such as flexible seating arrangement for a more pleasant and congenial ambience. Upgraded hawker centres are better ventilated and lighted, with open courtyards and outdoor dining areas for smokers.

Singapore’s own experiences and cultures can contribute in bringing new meaning to commercial signage, particularly for the food and beverage industry. Having said that, how does Singapore face global diversification while retaining its local culinary culture in an increasingly Westernised world? Are local designs in the danger of extinction? What aspects of visual attributes would Singapore require to satisfy today’s market of bilingualism, trilingualism, polylingualism? With this frame of mind, the author wishes to seek new imaginations for Singapore’s uniqueness as a melting pot of different ethnicities in South-east Asia, with its colonialist past as the country forges forward. Once an adequate understanding of visuals used in the signage is understood, critical pursuit of what makes them uniquely Singaporean can then take place.

2. Methodology

A total of five (n=5) hawker centres as listed in table 1 are identified for comparison and the choice is based on triangulating published city guides such as Lonely Planet’s Singapore City Guide (8th edition), Berlitz Singapore Pocket Guide (6th edition), DK Eyewitness Travel Top 10 Singapore (2009), Singapore Tourism Board (via Yoursingapore.com) as well as from blogs written by locals (Makansutra, 2011, 2013; Zhou, 2012). On average, every hawker centre houses over 100 stalls. Other considerations such as their proximity to tourist attractions, historical precedence, and the choices of local foods served are also important factors for selection.

Hawker centre	Description
Maxwell Market Food Centre	Because it is located at the edge of Chinatown in Singapore, it is popular with both locals and tourists alike for the variety of cuisines and local specialties especially the renowned Hainanese chicken rice.
Old Airport Road Food Centre	A place for an extensive menu of Chinese favourites, this refurbished but not sanitised hawker centre houses is where some “legendary hawkers” operate (Lonely Planet, 2009, p. 125) and it is popular with the locals.
Tekka Centre	Popular with the Indian community, Tekka Center is located in the bustling heart of Little India with dozens of Indian and Muslim stalls. Due to a nearby wet market that sells everything from sells fresh, raw meat and produce to electronics and clothes, the place is wrapped in noise and smells from the wet market.
Newton Circus	Otherwise known as Newton Food Center and it has been serving customers since 1971. A traditional favourite for visitors, the Newton Circus specialises in seafood meals.
Makansutra Glutton’s Bay	Another touristy location, this hawker center with waterfront view of the skyline of Singapore brings back the aura of the bygone era (Makansutra, 2013.) with stalls opening from 6 PM to 3 AM daily.

Table 1: Hawker centres identified and the description of their characteristics.

Unfortunately, two major locations are closed for renovation: i) Lau Pa Sat hawker centre with their unique satay stalls and beer vendors in an alfresco dining area at night time, located in the heart of the central business district and ii) the Smith Street Hawker Centre otherwise known as Chinatown Food Street, an open-air food street located in the centre of Chinatown.

Due to the overwhelming choices of food, the study is limited only to the choices of traditional local foods, desserts and drinks. The following food choices are considered representative of the main ethnic groups in Singapore (refer to table 2).

Malay food	Chinese food	Indian food	Dessert/Drinks
Nasi lemak (rice dish cooked in coconut milk and “pandan” leaf)	Bak kut teh (Pork ribs simmered in broth of herbs and spices)	Tandoori	Local dessert such as Cendol or Ais kacang (sweet and flavoured shaved ice)
Satay	Hainanese chicken rice	Briyani	Fruit juice
Mee rebus (noodle dish made of yellow egg noodles)	Char kway teow (fried flat rice noodle)	Chapati (an unleavened flatbread)	Soda
Mee rendang (similar to curry but but simmered with coconut milk and spices with beef)	Wonton noodle	Murtabak (stuffed pan-fried bread)	Hot/Cold drinks
Soto ayam (spicy)	Hokkien prawn noodle	Fish head curry	Kaya (coconut jam)

chicken soup with noodles)			toast
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Table 2: The choices of traditional foods that are representative of the main ethnic groups in Singapore.

Depending on the concentration of stalls available that sell the foods listed in table 2, the stall signage are analysed and reported in chapters 3 (What was discovered socially...) and 4 (What was discovered designerly...) respectively. These days, the encroaching malls that offer air-conditioned hawker centres locally known as “food courts”, essentially, an upscale version of hawker centres are left out as these places such as “Food Republic” (DK Travel Guides, p. 57; Lonely Planet, 2012, p.165) feature overly consistent signage that do not offer a multivariate landscape in their signage design for a comparative analysis.

Other determinant qualities of the signage include the following:

- The placement of the main signage must appear at the top for each stall although the stall may also feature secondary ones on the sides, usually placed underneath the main one signage. Secondary signage are mostly reserved to function more like menus that elaborate on the choices of foods as well as prices. For some, it is an opportunity to display credentials or endorsements;
- All the top signage are in a horizontal format although additional side signage is an additional feature but not necessarily a must;
- The signage must belong to stalls at hawker centres in an open space which is not air-conditioned; and
- The signage must utilise at least one of the four languages recognised in Singapore (English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil).

In deciphering the different compositional characteristics such as fonts, images, colours, and textures used to enhance the message on the signage, primary and support principles by Evans and Thomas (2013) are referenced as a theoretical framework for design. Further descriptions of the principles are provided in tables 3 and 4.

Primary Principles	Glossary
Unity and Variety	Unity is the control of variety. Variety is a complementary principle to unity which is necessary in creating visual contrasts [Evan & Thomas (2013), p. 5].
Hierarchy and	Hierarchy refers to an arranged order while dominance is the prevailing

Dominance	influence of one element over another (Ibid., p. 7).
Proportion and Balance	Proportion refers to the size relationships within a composition and balance in the visual distribution of elements in a composition. There are four types of balance: symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial and crystallographic with the latter defined as the “even distribution of like elements over the surface of a design” (Ibid., pp. 11-12).

Table 3: Glossary of the primary principles.

Support Principles	Glossary
Scale	Scale refers to size comparisons of the internal parts of a composition, or a size relationship in the comparison of one design element to another (Ibid., p. 14).
Emphasis	Emphasis is the use of a focal point to stress certain elements or to an arrangement of the elements. It is important to differentiate that “emphasis” is the importance of one element over another as opposed to “dominance.” Emphasis can be achieved by contrasting of size, light and dark, colour, shape or texture, and contrast of weight or density (Ibid., p. 14).
Rhythm and Movement	Rhythm is an alternating repetition of shape and space, or a planned movement of elements in a composition whereas movement creates implied direction and rhythmic path with the placement of elements as manifested through the eye of the viewer (Ibid., p. 309).
Proximity and Repetition	Proximity is the position and space given to the placement of elements in a composition by controlling the relative size and distance from one element to another. Repetition follows a regular pattern of related or juxtaposed elements (Ibid., p. 15).

Table 4: Glossary of the support principles.

The main purpose of this paper is:

- To understand how the typographic and pictographic elements can contribute to our impression in the signage surveyed;
- To investigate how the primary and support principles as a design framework can contribute to variations in the signage surveyed;
- To describe how elements of design such shape, space, line, size, color, texture and typography as compositional elements can affect internal relationships of the elements within a design composition on hawker centre signage; and finally

- To elicit any social issues that are fundamental in contributing to the sustainability of the growth of hawker centres through a typographic/pictographic-based perspective.

The report from this survey may offer an insight of how signage, as part of a larger social entity can aid visual researchers and policy makers in understanding local culinary signage that is unique to Singapore. As such, Singapore can seek to preserve the unique visual flavours of hawker centre as one of Singapore's institution.

3 What was discovered socially ...

3.1. A meeting place for everyone.

Hawker centres are seen as an important venue in a multi-racial and multi-religious society for social interaction and family bonding (Kong, 2007). With the abundance and accessibility of hawker centres, they have also become a venue for expressing the four nationally recognised languages. With rapid social, economic and technological changes, as well as increasing pressures and demands brought about by globalisation and modernisation, families in Singapore are facing greater challenges in staying resilient (National Family Council, 2009). The good news is that patrons can easily find high-quality food with low prices at these places. With touristy hawker centres like Newton Circus and Smith Street Hawker Centre, the need to cater to a large number of tourists has resulted in several stalls in Newton Circus cooking their dishes without pork or lard, making it a place of choice for those with dietary restrictions. According to a local blogger, Edna Zhou, over the years, the place has been overrun by tourist who consequently caused the prices to rise while food quality has not (Zhou, 2012).

3.2. Endorsements are an important must-have.

Halal certifications from the authority, politicians posing next to stall licensees, as well as endorsements from local magazines, TV stations, food critics, local as well as foreign television personalities such as Anthony Bourdain have become a common addition to stall signage that proudly display them (refer to figure 1). Madam Foo Kui Lian of Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice managed to beat celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay by six points in a competition organised by a local telecommunication company, Singtel on July 7, 2013 (Straits Times, 2013). In addition, the NEA also appraises the hygiene of stalls by granting grades of A, B, C and D to motivate stall licensee "to improve and maintain good personal and food hygiene, and housekeeping of their premises" (NEA, n.d.). Licensees are advised to display the certificate indicating their grade which enables patrons to make a more

informed choice when patronising these food outlets. Under the points demerit systems, every public health offence is a possible conviction in court or revocation of license. Needless to say, stalls that earned an A rating is inadvertently a tacit acknowledgement from the government, which in and of itself, a form of endorsement for the stall (refer to figure 16).



Figure 1. Tian Tian at Maxwell Market displays numerous credentials including an image of American chef Anthony Bourdain on its secondary signage to boost its position as the most recommended chicken rice stall.

3.3. Colour imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

Stalls that lack endorsements resort to many other tactics for patronage. Some licensee at the touristy Newton Circus hire employees to persistently solicit for business while others resort to mimicry, in colours, to be exact. Colours are intrinsic hues with a practical application. When the different elements of type and image are selectively placed together, could similar colours psychologically and expressively unite to become an identifier for a particular type of traditional dish? Repetitive usage of blue and white on numerous Hainanese chicken rice stalls at Maxwell Market Food Centre is seemingly the

case (refer to figures 2-4). Led by Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice (refer to figure 2) stall which has been favourably endorsed by multiple tourist guide books as one of the top choices (DK Eyewitness Travel, p.56; Tam (2007), p. 80), blue and white have become the choice for chicken rice stalls. Tian Tian which occupies two stalls rendered their signage in blue for background and white for its Chinese characters and Roman letters. A simple and straightforward signage, it also uses white outlines to define the borders of its signage and its simplistic logotype. The signage for four other chicken rice stalls are also coloured in a similar fashion (refer to figure 3). It is as though these stalls are using colours as a branding mechanism. In addition to the similar colour scheme, another ingredient for success for one stall in particular is “Heng Heng” (refer to figure 4), another chicken rice stall that repetitively mimics its competitor, “Tian Tian” by doubling its name.



Figure 2. Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice. Notice the long line of patrons.



Figure 3. Other stalls that use the same blue and white colour scheme.



Figure 4. Heng Heng Hainanese Chicken Rice.

Figure 3.4. The trade suffering from a “slow death”?

According to the National Environment Agency's Hawker Centres Division, only about 3% of current hawkers are aged 35 and below. The impending shortage of hawkers and its impact on Singapore's cultural heritage has become a national concern. In 2009, the Urban Redevelopment Authority conducted a Lifestyle Survey and reaffirms the importance of hawker centres as 79.4% of respondents indicated that they patronised hawker centres. An overwhelming 96.6% of them stressed that hawker centres should be maintained as one of the key amenities, especially in public housing estates, making it the most-used facility in neighbourhoods. This reinforces the importance of hawker centres in enhancing the quality of life for residents (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2009).

Mr KF Seetoh, CEO and founder of Makansutra, describes the trade as a suffering from a “slow death” (Tam, 2008, p. 79) for two reasons: experienced and old food masters are not handing down their passion and skill to younger ones and the younger generation prefer instead to pick over “atmosphere and brand” which makes food courts a dangerous Goliath to fight in order to sustain this traditional trade. Makansutra Glutton's Bay is the only non-governmental hawker centre chosen for this survey because its outdoor setting is comparison to the experience of the original street hawking. The location sports a unified signage with taller but slimmer signage with consistently replicated typefaces which seems to mirror an atmospheric brand in an open space that only operates from 6:00 PM to 3:00 AM. While the food is always prepared to order, just like all the hawker stalls we observed, the carefully selected décor and the signage at Makansutra Glutton's Bay (refer to figure 5) are not only homogenising but are also corporate in appearance, much like the ones found at food courts. It is not a surprise that with many parts of Singapore being trampled by malls in a process that robs the invaded areas their sense of place and identity.



Figure 5. The homogenising signage of Makansutra.

3.5. Bound by a common script

Hawker stalls are managed by the NEA where constant upgrades take place every now. In the debate of what distinguishes a public space from a public sphere, Reynolds (2007) asserts that when the renovation is to “heighten consumption or to increase profits,[and] the more the spaces are “controlled,” the more likely new uses or practices develop as forms of resistance to order and control (p. 17)” Could it be the reason why some stalls at the Tekka Market exhibit signs of resistance by reinstating their sense of identity through their stall signage. A stall in particular proudly displays its religious affiliation in the form of Arabic scripts on its signage (refer to figure 6). Despite the pungent wet market located on the same level as the hawker centre of Tekka Market, the open-air setting seems to bring together a greater sense of cohesiveness in the community. This can be traced back

to early stages of the founding of Singapore in the 18th century. Unlike the various Malayan peoples who were bound by a common faith, Chinese migrant workers from southern China did not form a homogenous group because they were from different provinces. In addition to the different food and eating habits, they also spoke distinctively different dialects (Hutton, 2010).



Figure 6. An all-Arabic script signage at Tekka Market.

4. What was discovered designerly ...

4.1. Which type are you?

There are three attributes that are required to satisfy Singapore's market for multi-lingualism: type-driven, image-driven and lastly, one that exhibits "visual-verbal synergy" (p. 154, Landa, 2010). In type-driven signage, the visuals are de-emphasized and type becomes the sole element in the composition while in image-driven signage, the visuals are emphasised and it may employ minimal or no copy at all. A synergistic visual-verbal composition requires both the visual and type to work hand-in-hand, with both of them being evenly distributed over the surface of the signage to form a crystallographic balance (Evans & Thomas, 2013). Muslim stalls at Tekka Market and Newton Circus exhibit crystallographic balance where images of foods are "peppered" all over the signage while the stall name is balanced in the centre at varying heights. Viewed as a unit, the combined elements appear unified and symmetrically balanced (refer to figure 7).



Figure 7. A signage with a crystallographic balance.

Be it a myriad of signage adorning storefronts or the ubiquitous food courts, at the heart of typeface is the relationship between form and content. Typefaces are forms that give words that extra meaning. Following this observation, the various signage in multicultural Singapore are capable of being the markers of identity in which typefaces, as a form of visible voice help to connect the basic human needs to communicate.

4.2. Characters convey meaning with greater immediacy than their alphabet counterparts

According to Ivan Vartanian, an author who has lived in Japan in the mid-1990s, Kanji (Chinese characters in Japanese), is totally devoid of meaning to a foreigner but they may identify with its graphical form (Vartanian, 2003). As such, a character's graphical element contains significance due to its graphical form. In his defence, characters can convey meaning with greater immediacy than their alphabet counterparts. In other words, Kanji or Chinese characters can carry meaning on a multitude of levels, from semantic to graphical representations. Vartanian's argument is contestable when simplified Chinese characters are used. Widely practiced in Singapore but not in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and the USA, traditional Chinese characters are more complex to write but are more semantically accurate in the meaning they represent. Due to the simplification of Chinese characters, problems that rarely surface such as homographs (words that are spelled alike but are different in meaning) is now a common contradiction between the traditional and simplified characters. For example, the traditional character for "face", 面 is also used to represent "noodle" in simplified Chinese (as opposed to 麵 used in traditional Chinese which adds the "wheat" 麥 character to the radical). There are numerous inconsistencies where both traditional and simplified characters are mixed on their signage (figure 8).

Traditional characters for “Prawn” and “Noodles”



Traditional character for “Prawn” and Simplified character for “Noodle”



Figure 8: Inconsistently mixed conventions of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters as marked by the yellow circles.

Characters carry semantic information while alphabets aid in the pronunciations of the alphabets they represent. In this case, Roman letters are language-specific in serving the needs for the signage. As such, the very same Roman letterform can mean one thing but when used for another language, a different meaning is represented. If so, what are some of the tricks that can be employed to make typographically-driven signage more effective? Is it possible for Roman alphabets to bank on aspects of graphical elements in order to rival its character-based counterparts? In print advertisements, advertisers link a wide variety of visuals with various products by providing its intended audience with a structure to understand the message advertised (Williamson 1978). Research has shown that advertisements that utilise symbolic visuals can communicate more complex meanings concerning the advertised product (Featherstone 1991; Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990; McCracken 1986). Similarly, Mitchell and Olson (1981) found that belief levels related to a product can be significantly raised, in addition to belief, attitude and purchase intentions of the targeted audience.

When the visual for a product or service shares a high number of relevant attributes, it contributes to a higher incidence of relevancy (Miniard, et al., 1991; McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Figures 9 and 10 illustrate that in order for visuals portrayed to match the expected meaning in the product, the first signage which utilises a completely script-driven design is only capable of communicating to a specific audience but when a secondary visual is added, it acts as a visual aid to a patron who does not read the characters. Likewise, if the iconic symbol used is too generic, the effectiveness of the signage is likely to be minimized (refer to figure 10). In this case, we are not certain what type of food at this stall really “sizzles...”



Figure 9. A signage at Maxwell Market that uses an all-script signage with subtle icons.



Figure 10. A signage at Newton Circus features a symbol over the “I” that is overly generic.

4.3. Though type matters, hierarchy matters even more.

Establishing a visual hierarchy is an important priority especially when many stalls are “fighting” to grab the patrons’ attention. A hierarchical order functions by drawing our attention to the most prominent feature which explains that the placement of a dominant element becomes important. This is due to the fact that areas of high contrast or unusual shapes immediately attract the eye (Evans & Thomas, 2013). How one language is imposed or juxtaposed next to each other becomes a question of prioritising, which means emphasising the importance of one element over another. In doing so, one element is relegated to a subordinate level. A display typeface is by the nature of its visual attributes

a dominant feature. Other elements that are arranged around them must be carefully selected for balance. Hence, the task to achieve similarities in design unity is to a matter of deciding whether the type or image will be dominant. A display type cannot be reduced in size as it will create issues of legibility. Additionally, one has to decide which subordinate elements can be in agreement with the dominant element (refer to figure 11). But what really affords the selection of typestyles, placement and balance of elements used is an underlying grid which acts as a transparent structure for any juxtapositioning to take place. Most of the stalls surveyed placed the name of the stall in the middle for visual unity and such symmetrical balance is the norm. However, by determining hierarchy, a symmetrical balance can be facilitated to control or direct the path of a viewer's eye which aids in capturing their attention.



Figure 11. An emphasis in the bold yet playful typeface results in a strong dominance for this signage for a fruit juice stall at Maxwell Market.

4.4. Where do you draw the line?

In formal terms, line can be interpreted as a moving path of points. Lines can serve different purposes and is context-dependent. For signage, lines can serve as an edge or as a border that is normally presented as frames to distinguish one section over another. As a physical property, it can be used as a graphical element. Lines can also be used as a border which forms the outer frame of a shape known as "contour." Alongside this observation, any type or script can be deemed as a contour of lines. Architecturally, the arch that perches on the main entrance of Maxwell Market can be seen as a contour and is effectively used as a seminal shape for signage throughout the hundred odd stalls. The arching of every signage at this hawker centre creates a unique identity for Maxwell

Market, purely from the standpoint of using lines as a defining shape. Refer to figures 12 and 13 for a comparison.



Figure 12. The entrance of Maxwell Market Food Centre



Figure 13. Signage at the Maxwell Market Food centre are consistently shaped as the arch located at the entrance and side entrances.

Heavy reliance on imagery to showcase the foods of stalls that utilise image-driven signage present an opportunity for design elements such as lines which are used to wrap around the type to distinguish them from the background (refer to figure 12).



Figure 14. Lines are heavily used throughout, not just as a border but also as a contour which serves to contrast the type against its background.

4.5. Versatility and creativity

In addition to lines, features that we commonly find in image editing software such as “drop shadow” and “glow” are also used to create the illusion of dimensionality. This is essentially a technique applied to grab our attention in a two-dimensional plane (White, 2005) such as the flat and static signage at all the hawker centres surveyed. For some, the blandness of the signage is remedied with flickering LED lights. Purists may argue that the best way to sell food is with type alone because the meaning and power of language is persuasive enough to do the job. After all, one can boldly brand the name of the store without having to rely on distracting and excessive images. Instead of replicating a simulated texture on a flat surface, dimensional props are used such as the one in figure 15 at a stall that sells “otah” (a local delicacy of cake made of fish meat and spices wrapped inside a banana leaf) at the Old Airport Road Food Centre. Similarly, a fruit juice stall at Newton Circus displays props of a variety of local fruits underneath its main signage, evoking a sense of freshness and wholesomeness for the refreshments they carry. A variety of materials such as plastic, metal, glass and wood also have a role in determining the perception of quality of the stall.



Figure 15. An oversized prop with a simple typographic treatment for this stall at the Old Airport Road Food Centre.

Playfulness is a refreshing approach that is a rarity in the signage surveyed. A hawker at the Old Airport Road playfully replaced the first character, 包 (bun), to substitute for the formal character of 保 (guaranteed) instead. Formally, 保不同 is translated as “guaranteed difference”. Colloquially, 包不同 also carries the same meaning. Like the English homonyms which are words that are pronounced the same but they carry different meanings, the Chinese language also has plenty of homophonic words such as “yang” (羊, 洋, 陽). By simply substituting one character for another, the meaning in the message is instantly changed. The homonym used is both a visual pun as well as a thoughtfully effective advertisement that appeals to its intended audience.



Figure 16. A homophonic signage. Notice the “A” rating for the cleanliness of this stall on the right side.

With physical limitations imposed by the rectangularity of the signage, the extent to which meaning is encoded in the alphabets when different languages are present, notwithstanding other elements of design, versatility and creativity are important tactical “ingredients” in promoting the specialty of each stall.

4.6. West meets east, east assimilates west

In a westernised culture such as Singapore’s, people in general, read from left to right and top to bottom but when Arabic writing is combined, the reading is redirected from right to left, with numbers that are read from left to right. Type and graphics that exist on the same plane are displayed on standardised panels but when different letterforms are involved, most of the signage surveyed follow a westernised convention but there are exceptions. Vertically aligned text can provide a form of contrast as shown in figure 17 where a double-sided stall at the Tekka Market places two vertical signs at the converging edges of their stall by stacking the Roman alphabets on top of each other. As a result, the message becomes harder to decipher in comparison to the ones that are displayed horizontally.



Figure 17. A double-sided stall which squeezes a vertically aligned alphabet signage on both sides of its stall.

When more than one language is pulled into a compositional mix, often times, the visual presentation is jarringly intertwined. As seen in figure 18, Chinese characters can be arranged vertically due to their similarly blockish shapes. Unlike Roman letterforms which can be difficult to read when aligned vertically, Chinese characters are still readable for long and short phrases. Setting Chinese characters vertically can be a convenient and functional way of taking advantage of a limited space which makes the Chinese characters flexible. In contrast, vertically positioned Roman characters appear odd and out of place, not to mention issues of legibility.



Figure 18. The Chinese characters at the far left are stacked vertically while the Roman letterforms and Tamil script are aligned to be read from left to right for the main entrance signage for Tekka Centre which houses the Tekka Market.

4.7. Different but similar

Seeing type being set in Roman alphabets in the same context as Chinese or Tamil can be the most edifying experiences because in general, successful combination in any Western alphabets with non-Western are rare. Due to the different characteristics and shapes of these different languages, any attempt only seems to reinforce the mishmash nature of typographic conventions. For instance the Tamil script, while being read from left to right as the English alphabets, appears decorative due to its curvy shapes (refer to figure 19).



Figure 19. In comparison to the over-sized English alphabets, the Tamil scripts appear weak as the tracking is widened to accommodate the bigger English characters underneath.

While poor leading and mismatched typestyles are the norm, by carefully considering the fundamental characteristics of these scripts and letterforms, a sense of unified balance can be achieved. For example, in terms of leading alone, Chinese characters do not look cohesive when the vertical spaces between each character are large (Jiromaiya, n.d.). This is because the Chinese characters are logogram and are blockish in appearance whereas English words are variable in width. An important step in developing scripts and letterform relationship is to realize that although they are different, they can be stylistically similar (Ibid, n.d.). A side by side comparison reveals that the SimHei typeface bears a close resemblance to Arial or Helvetica. Likewise, the Song Ti typeface with its thinner horizontal lines and thicker vertical strokes is similar to the Times New Roman typeface. Other unexpected inconsistencies include the concurrent usage of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters which is conventionally unacceptable but avoidable (refer to figure 8). Unifying the inconsistent written forms is a challenge but diagram 5 shows the similarities between Chinese typestyles and its Western counterparts. Depending on the context, both of these letterforms are inherently different are stylistically similar.

Name of Chinese typefaces	Roman letterforms
黑体 SimHei	Arial

宋體 Song Ti	Times New Roman
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Diagram 5. Although Chinese characters and Roman alphabets are different, stylistically, they can be unified.

5. Conclusion

Singapore's hawker culture began with the needs to provide affordable food to early immigrant settlers. The unique "flavours" of hawker center signage today can best be described by a popular local dish called "rojak" which is a form of mixed fruit salad. The grammatical and typographical mistakes are indicative of the underlying social stereotyping of hawkers as blue collars who lack proper education. In essence, such "mistakes" (intentional or not) bring out the simplicity and unpretentiousness of cooks, like the forefathers before them who had relied on authentically hand-prepared food as a way to support his/her family instead of a glitzy sign that does the selling.

With everything that goes on with the layout and organisation of text, it becomes clear that as a medium for communication, signage is not just merely a decorative notice board, it is capable to influence the effectiveness of the message. How the message is understood depends largely rooted in the textual and visual descriptions of what is composed on the signage. While patrons may find the signage is nothing more than a notice board, when food meets presentation, essentially, what matters more is how the food actually tastes. This uniquely Singaporean epicurean tradition is likely to continue for many decades to come, albeit it may take on a different form which is now seemingly the case with the equally noisy, crowded but air-conditioned food courts in shopping malls that are sprouting in different parts of the island.

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