

LEE LI MING  
PROGRAMME IN  
AGEING URBANISM

# Bukit Batok Community Café

*Café for, and by, Older  
Adults*

Spela Mocnik

Research has shown that the neighbourhood social capital has a positive impact on older adults' wellbeing (Nyqvist et al., 2013; Forsman et al., 2012). Neighbourhood social capital can be understood as community resources which everyone can use to extend their social networks and participate in their community. It is important to cultivate age-friendly initiatives that strengthen social capital for older adults in their neighbourhoods as this presents an important source of enhancing social ties.

The world, and Singapore is no exception, has seen various initiatives spring up that increase neighbourhood social capital that older adults can tap on. One such initiative is the Ibasho Café in

Japan.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by this community café, Dr Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State, suggested a similar café to be launched in Bukit Batok that would strengthen the community and give older adults an opportunity to benefit from.

### Ibasho Concept

- *Ibasho* is a Japanese concept meaning ‘a place where one feels a sense of belonging and purpose, and is accepted as oneself’
- It recognises older adults as ‘valuable assets to their community, empowering them to be active participants and changing the harmful outcomes created by society’s negative perceptions and expectations – social isolation, a loss of dignity and respect, and a sense of uselessness and irrelevance’

Source: Kiyota, E., Tanaka, Y., Arnold, M. and Aldrich, D. (2015). *Elders Leading the Way to Resilience*. Washington: The World Bank.

In late December 2018, I visited Bukit Batok café to speak to Mr. Ivan Ho from REACH Community Services Society (RCSS),<sup>2</sup> who is Programme Executive and the person in charge of the community café, about its operations and benefits for the community.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed overview of cafés for older adults in other countries, see Jasmine (2015).

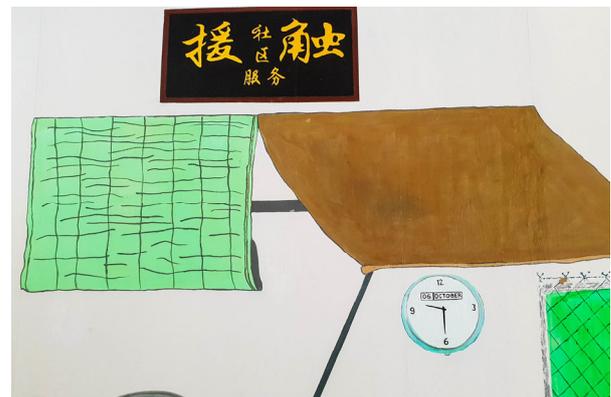
<sup>2</sup> RCSS is a charitable organisation that focuses on 4 main services: family, counselling, youth and senior services.



Entrance to Bukit Batok Café<sup>3</sup>

### Community Café’s Operations

In October 2017, a community café for older adults was established in Bukit Batok, a town in the western Singapore. This is no ordinary café. Not only that it is frequented by older adults, it is also run mostly by them.



Wall mural denoting the time and date of café opening (6 October 2017)

Following the initial idea by Dr Amy Khor, Mr. Ho said they got in touch with RCSS. RCSS already had a kitchen and an

<sup>3</sup> All photographs were taken by the author.

existing cooking class, so they thought of pushing the idea further by creating a community café that would serve Western breakfast to older adults. The reason for this choice of diet lies in the fact that many older adults, especially those who come from low income families, do not usually get access to such meals. Furthermore, according to Mr. Ho, Hong Kah North lacks a western-style café and so this was a way to introduce one in the area.

The café works on a pay-as-you-wish basis, where everyone pays whatever they want or can afford. On the question of how this worked out in the past year, Mr. Ho said that their ultimate goal is not to earn money anyway, and that they mostly get funding administered by C3A (The Council for Third Age) to cover their costs.

I visited the café on a Friday, and immediately noticed that it was full, with the atmosphere that is best described as bustling with joy and excitement. That day, the café organised a special Christmas event. Not only had older adults attended the event, but there were also children from a nearby childcare centre. The children sang Christmas carols and made Christmas cards with older adults.



*Lively atmosphere at a Christmas event in December 2018*

### **Weekly Get-Togethers**

On a regular week, when there are no special events being organised, the café is open every Friday from 9:30am to 12:30pm. Volunteers – 80 per cent of whom are older adults; during school holidays, they even have young volunteers helping – will come up with two different breakfast sets for visitors to choose from. To date, more than a year since the café was established, the menu has seen little repetition, as Mr. Ho proudly explained. Examples of breakfast sets include croissants with crab salad, and egg muffins – these are always paired with fruits, vegetables or salads to ensure a healthy and balanced meal.

Besides delicious food, they also serve specialty coffee and gourmet tea such as fruit tea and Japanese roasted tea. They try to change tea every so often, so that visitors get to experience new flavours. Of course, they also offer local *kopi* and *teh*. This is necessary given that there is a balanced mix of customers who prefer

specialty coffee and those who like to have their usual Nanyang cup of *kopi*.

While the café caters to many regular visitors, it has also seen its fair share of new faces. Anyone is welcome, regardless of race and religion. Interestingly, not all visitors come from Hong Kah North. There are some who visit all the way from Bukit Panjang. Every Friday, about 45 to 50 older adults visit the café. Recently, it has even seen an increase of this demographic – especially when they have special events lined up such as the abovementioned Christmas event, when the number can go as high as 60. This is good given that the café is not being advertised anywhere; it is only by word of mouth that they attract so many people.

### Uncles' Corner

It is a common trend that more females than males attend community events. Things are no different in this café. For this reason, the organisers wanted to create a space where male older adults would feel comfortable and welcome. They created the so-called 'Uncles' Corner' for uncles to chill out, play chess, and drink coffee away from the hustle and bustle of the café area. As an extension of the café, it has been well used by male older adults. There is even a beautiful wall mural that was painted by older adults.



*Uncles' Corner and a wall mural*

### *More Than Just a Coffee Place*

However, there is more to this café than just delicious food and drinks. RCSS staff members wanted to build a platform for older adults to come down, especially the ones who tend to be more isolated. It is also a platform to keep older adults informed, entertained, and engaged. RCSS staff members regularly plan for talks such as health or police information sessions to keep them updated of new trends. They also organise news reading sessions to keep them better informed, as well as crafts and games such as Rummy O to keep older adults active.

According to Mr. Ho, one of the main benefits of these gatherings is that older

adults get to form their own safety networks as they get to know their peers in their neighbourhoods. If they notice that someone has not come for some time, they would be concerned and ask about that person – they call and check on each other. He also noticed that in the past year, many older adults have become more active. There are a few ‘success cases’, as he referred to them, of previously isolated individuals who started coming down to the café and attend other programmes offered by RCSS (for instance, exercises that focus on different groups of older adults, but these are not part of the café).

Feedback from older adults has been extremely positive. In essence, they enjoy the relaxed atmosphere, the café setup, and are happy that they get to try things that they usually do not eat. They sometimes also ask volunteers for recipes – and this is where the interaction starts.

Mr. Ho mentioned three main objectives of the café. First, they want those who are isolated to visit the café, interact with others, and form their own safety networks. Second, they hope that the whole community – Malays, Chinese, and others – can come together and have fun in a comfortable environment. Third, they wish to encourage volunteerism among older adults. As mentioned, about 80 per cent of volunteers in the café are older adults, with quite a few of them being café’s users before they decided to

voluntarily help out. Having experienced the benefits of the café, they decided to become volunteers and contribute their skills to better the community. RCSS staff members also empower them to come up with their own plan for breakfasts and contribute to other café-related activities. For instance, at the recent Christmas event, volunteers bought gifts for older adults. RCSS staff also sent the volunteers for food hygiene and barista classes. Empowerment of older adults is therefore another objective that the café has been successfully fulfilling in the past year.

## Conclusion

Mr. Ho said that the café is akin to a *kampong*. In the beginning, many volunteers did not know how to cook Western food, but they were willing to learn and did so with the help of others. This empowered them such that they can now show to others that they are not ‘useless’. Mr. Ho acknowledges that there are other similar cafés serving older adults in Singapore,<sup>4</sup> but as far as he is aware, theirs is currently the only community café run based on *Ibashi* café principles.

Following the success of the existing café, Mr. Ho and his team are looking forward to opening another one in January 2019. A new full-day senior activity centre beside Hong Kah North Community

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<sup>4</sup> For Singapore café for older adults, see Mocnik (2018).

Centre will be established, a part of which will be another community café that is eventually planned to run on Tuesdays. This is encouraging to hear, and we can only hope that more of such pleasant, beneficial and inspiring initiatives will emerge in other areas of Singapore.

**Sources:**

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