

Beyond Transit: The Role of Changi Airport in Singaporean Society

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ABSTRACT

Changi Airport, situated in Singapore, stands as a global aviation icon, evolving from a military base to a world-class transit hub. Recognized worldwide with hundreds of awards, Changi is an important part of Singapore's economy and national landscape. It accommodates more than xx million international passengers per year, making it the busiest airport in Southeast Asia. At home, however, Changi has emerged as more than a transportation hub. It plays a vital role in Singaporean society, both physically and symbolically, and the state's strategic planning and investment in Changi Airport have not only propelled it to international acclaim but also lead to an unplanned, grassroots use of Changi by locals. This thesis has two interrelated strands of investigation. First, I examine the ways in which the Singapore state sought to develop Changi into one of the top airports in the world while tying the airport's ambitions and achievements to Singapore's national identity. I demonstrate that the state has carefully curated discursive representations of Changi from the moment the airport was opened. Second, I explore how Changi, despite being a high-profile state project that is emblematic of Singapore's global ambition, has been used by Singapore residents for a variety of purposes beyond air travel. These uses have only increased in recent years as the state realizes that attracting local visitors to the airport in times of decreased air travel is important to maintain the strong link that already bonds local populations to the airport. From the perspective of locals, Changi is a de facto public place that locals appropriate for themselves, effectively blurring the line between public and private space.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Scene

It is a weekday afternoon in Singapore. At Changi Airport, a couple embrace next to their two children. The man wearing a suit is not leaving for a business trip. On the contrary, his workday is over. He has just arrived from the financial district and is reunited with his wife and kids. The family shares a moment together before splitting up again. The father and his son head to the IMAX theater in Changi's Jewel to watch a movie. The mother and daughter head for the grocery store nearby and fill their baskets with local produce. Nearby, a student, one of many relying on Changi's air conditioning to escape the Singaporean equatorial heat to study, is packing up her things to go and meet her friends on the third floor of Jewel: they finally obtained a reservation for Shiki Hototogisu, the Michelin-starred ramen restaurant.

These vibrant scenes of everyday life at Changi Airport demonstrate the societal role of the airport that extends beyond international air travel. Situated on the southeasternmost tip of the city-state of Singapore, Changi Airport, most commonly referred to simply as Changi, is broadly recognized as one of the top airports in the world (Chutipongdech, 2020; Landis, 2022; Loong et al., 2019; Paternoster, 2008; Seo, 2021). In the realm of modern transportation hubs, Changi Airport stands as a testament to Singapore's ambitions of having one of the top global airports, and to the remarkable transformations that have swept through the world of aviation in technology, service, and design. These days, it is difficult to picture Singapore without Changi Airport. However, there was a time when Changi Airport was only an air force base. Indeed, Changi is Singapore's third passenger airport, with Kallang Airport in service from 1937 to 1955 and Paya Lebar operational from 1954 until 1981 (Ward, 2022). As air traffic grew, the Singaporean state sought to expand the Paya Lebar airport in the mid-1970s, but this idea was rejected due to the lack of space. Instead, in 1975 the state purchased two-thirds of Changi Military Base from the Singapore Air Defense Command, known today as the Republic of Singapore Air Force (Ward, 2022). Changi Airport officially opened December 29, 1981.

Changi Airport was initially planned out in two separate phases. The government adopted a development policy to build years ahead of the actual demand in order to avoid congestion and

maintain high standards of infrastructure (Landis, 2022). In 1981, Terminal 1 was inaugurated as Phase I of Changi Airport, and in its first operational year, it had the capacity to receive over 10 million passengers (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). Phase II of the initial plans for Changi was inaugurated in 1990 through Terminal 2, which doubled the airport's capacity to 20 million (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). As a result of the budget air travel boom of the 1990s, the Singapore state announced the creation of a third terminal in 1996 (Kuang, 2009). With delays due to the SARS outbreak in 2003, Terminal 3 became commercially operational in 2008, being able to receive 50 million passengers per year (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). Terminal 4 opened in 2017 and augmented Changi's capacity to 80 million passengers (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). Over the decades, Terminal 1 and 2 have received several significant renovations to their infrastructure to ensure they remain state-of-the-art. The latest work on Terminal 2 finished in early November 2023 and added 21,000 square meters to the building, with the new amenities ranging from a new indoor garden, to modern art installations (*Our Story | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). However, the most notable recent addition to Changi is known as Jewel.

Jewel was a game changer for Changi Airport. Completed in 2019 at a whopping cost of S\$1.7 billion (CAN\$ 1.72 billion), Jewel is a “neo-futurist nature themed complex” (*Jewel Changi Airport*, n.d.) that includes 300 different outlets for dining and shopping. At its center is the world's largest indoor waterfall, which spans seven storeys. Jewel is an iconic attraction that embodies Changi's relentless pursuit of being a ‘world-class’ airport that redefines the airport experience. In the context of this thesis, the constant physical upgrades to Changi's infrastructure, including Jewel, are crucial in understanding the place Changi holds in the daily lives of Singaporeans. Underscoring Changi's excellence is the global recognition it has received from around the world. Less than 10 years after Changi Airport was established, it received awards for “Best Airport” from reputable outlets around the world, in the first of which was in 1988 (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). In 2023, it won World's Best Airport at Skytrax's “World Airport Awards” for the 8th time in 10 years (Skytrax, n.d.). One of few 5-star rated airports by Skytrax, it also won their World's Best Airport Dining and World's Best Airport Leisure Amenities awards, the latter being particularly relevant to this thesis. Influential actors, such as Conde Nast, the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Association (IFALPA), and *Business Traveler*, have all named it as the best airport of 2024. Since 1981, Changi Airport has been the

recipient of over 670 awards (*Awards and Accolades | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). This international recognition establishes Changi as one of the world's top airports.

Changi is a significant contributor to the Singaporean economy in various ways. First, Changi over 50 000 people work at Changi, making it one of Singapore's largest employers (Henderson, 2017). Second, beyond employment, it serves as a catalyst for trade, tourism, and investments into Singapore. It holds a strategic location at the crossroads of global trade, and not only as an entry point into Singapore, but also as a gateway to the region and a stopover point for many travelers. In 2019, the last year to be unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, over 68.3 million passengers came through Changi Airport, making it the ninth busiest airport in the world (Chutiphongdech, 2020). These passengers were spread across 374 different routes, and from over 45 countries. Still in 2019, it moved over two million tonnes of cargo (*Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). The airport's cargo operations have further grown in the last few years, thanks to the implementation of Pharma Changi, which addressed challenges in the COVID-19 vaccines global supply chain and now facilitates the handling of pharmaceuticals through the air (*Changi Pharma Hub | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.).

The future of Changi continues to be planned decades in advance by both the Minister of Transportation and Changi Airport Group (CAG). Announced in 2013 by then Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew, Terminal 5 is estimated by the Ministry of Transport to be able to accommodate over 70 million passengers per year when it opens in the mid-2030s, connecting to Terminals 1, 2, and 3 (*Terminal 5 | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). With construction expected to begin in approximately two to three years, Changi continues to plan ahead and position itself not only to meet the ever-increasing demand for air travel and capitalize on its growth opportunities, but also as the stopover destination of Southeast Asia. As a business, Changi Airport is well positioned to benefit from Singapore's ever-increasing popularity both as a tourist and business destination. It has planned rent out more spaces in its facilities by attracting more world-class retailers, as well as expand its airfield capacity (*Changi East | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). Already acclaimed as one of the best airports in the world, Changi is looking to ensure its long-term success, maintain its status as one of the top airports in the world, and meet the future demands of a growing tourism market in Singapore.

Changi Airport has woven itself into the fabric of Singaporeans' lives, transcending its conventional role as a transit hub. This thesis aims to peel back the layers of Changi Airport's evolution, all the while shedding light on its role as a pivotal element as a social space in Singapore. While there is extensive literature on Changi's exceptional passenger management (Sullivan, 2023; Wu & Tsui, 2020) and forward-thinking design (Seo, 2021; Whiting & Gasson, 2000), no scholarly attention has been paid to its profound impact on the social life of Singaporeans. While Changi is a globally recognized institution for its design (Landis, 2022), functionality (Paternoster, 2008), and efficacy (Chutipongdech, 2020), this thesis demonstrates that it represents more than a simple transportation node for local Singaporeans. While many airports primarily offer facilities for transient activities such as plane observation, Changi Airport represents a new type of multifaceted social space for domestic use. It transcends its role as an airport by providing an environment conducive to important parts of daily life, such as cultivating interpersonal relationships and studying. As a pioneer of an airport that is more than a transient space for international travelers, it raises questions about how Changi was adopted for uses beyond air travel by residents in a grassroots manner and how the state and managers of the airport helped to engineer the space for non-travel-related purposes.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

While Changi Airport officially opened to the public over 40 years ago, its role in Singaporean society has been under perpetual metamorphosis. As such, it is important to understand the history of Changi Airport's evolution from a simple, disconnected airport on an old air force base to its current form as one of the world's most well-regarded transportation hubs. In this thesis, I investigate how constant infrastructural and branding changes to the airport have redefined the notion of the modern airport as more than just a transient space. My research has two main aims. First, I explore Changi's official evolution, particularly how the airport has been portrayed and branded to Singaporeans, as well as how continuous expansions and renovations to reflect its vision. Second, I seek to understand how residents utilize the airport for purposes beyond air travel. This thesis contributes to the growing literature on Changi Airport but offers something new in understanding the roles it plays in Singapore's national landscape and the modern airport serving a role beyond being a mere transitional location.

1.3 Thesis Structure

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 contextualizes the role of Changi Airport in Singapore through a review of three bodies of scholarship. First, I examine the geographical scholarship on airports and Changi in particular. Second, I provide an overview of the scholarship relating to the reappropriation and use of private spaces by members of the public. Third, I examine the theoretical concepts of place branding and nation-building in order to understand how Changi is represented both abroad and in Singapore. While Changi continues to attract a growing amount of scholarly attention, no scholarship to date has examined the role of Changi Airport in the social lives of Singaporeans and how locals treat the airport as a de facto public space, using it for a variety of activities beyond travel. My thesis begins to fill this gap by investigating Changi Airport's roles as a social space for residents of Singapore. Chapter 3 lays out the qualitative mixed methods approach I used to conduct a longitudinal study of Changi and how residents of Singapore use the airport, which includes semi-structured interviews, document research, analysis of social media posts (TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) about how residents of Singapore use Changi beyond air travel, and a site visit. Chapter 4 investigates the changing governmental narratives and infrastructure of Changi Airport since it opened in 1981. Chapter 5 examines how residents have appropriated Changi for their own uses in ways that have given new purpose to sections of the airport. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes that the Singaporean government has shaped Changi Airport as an important part of the Singaporean national identity and that locals have adopted the proposed discursive representations of the airport, reappropriating the space as a semi-public social space.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I endeavour to synthesize and critically analyze three bodies of scholarship that will help me understand Changi Airport's use. First, I examine the literature on airports in the field of transportation geography, with a particular emphasis on the human use of airports. Second, I investigate research that explores the repurposing of private spaces into semi-public domains, all the while providing an overview of the processes and motivations behind such transformations. Third, I review the scholarship pertaining to state efforts at place branding and nation-building in Singapore with a particular focus on Changi. This thesis aims to provide an understanding of the role that Changi Airport plays in the lives of Singaporean residents. It does so by addressing the critical lacuna in the literature, shedding light on the ways in which the Singaporean government has adeptly fostered a social milieu within Changi, a context that is conventionally used as a transient space.

2.2 Transportation Geography Scholarship on Airports

While scholarship on airports and air travel more generally has gained momentum in recent years, the airport has long been a subject of interest for academia in a variety of disciplines. Scholars of airport operations have been at the forefront of research in transportation geography, and this scholarship has mainly focused on the airport as both a port of entry (Cheung et al., 2020) and a business entity needing to adapt to the ever-changing nature of air travel, in particular following the COVID-19 pandemic (Alonso Tabares, 2021; Choi, 2021). With commercial air travel down still down 20% from its record 2019 numbers (IATA, 2023), recent scholarship has proposed operational solutions, including applicable health measures (Alonso Tabares, 2021), but more importantly how to modify current airport practices to better reflect post-pandemic times, including focusing on increasing commercial revenue to compensate for the smaller amount of money airports take from parking fees from airlines (Choi, 2021), or adapting check-in or security to reduce increased dwell times created by stricter public health guidelines (Kazda et. al, 2022). Over the last 20 years, demand for air travel globally has dramatically increased, and infrastructure has been slow to follow. Airport operations research has therefore highlighted passenger flow as an area of great interest (Adacher et al., 2017; Bertsimas & Frankovich, 2016). Most of the literature focuses on simulations done by engineers

to improve traffic while maintaining safety (Adacher et al., 2017; Fonseca i Casas et al., 2014; Guo et al., 2022; Malik, 2023). Scholars in airport management and operations have not only addressed immediate challenges posed by events like the COVID-19 pandemic but have persistently pioneered research, offering strategic insights into how airports adapt as multifaceted business entities amidst dynamic shifts in air travel, ensuring a balance between operational efficiency, safety, and financial resilience.

Transitioning to a more geopolitical dimension, transportation geography has also explored airports as nodes in a global network. The flights that connect world airports are often referred to as a global network in academic literature (Cheung et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020; Lordan & Sallan, 2019; Song & Yeo, 2017). In studying the global network, scholars have highlighted that this network is not distributed equally: countries like China or the United States exert great power in the air transportation dynamics and dictate intermediary routes that converge to larger nodes in the network (Song & Yeo, 2017). Researchers have also associated larger population centers with faster growth in traffic to their associated airport within the global aviation network (Cheung et al., 2020). When studying the Asian aviation market within the global network, scholars underscore that the quantity of flights available makes up for the less premium service traditionally available in the region (Chung et al., 2020). Changi Airport is recognized as one of the aviation powerhouses of Southeast Asia, along with the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Chang et al., 2020). Together, these two airports are important nodes in the network that connect Southeast Asia to the world. Relevant to my research, Changi is the airport that best connects Asia Pacific to both Europe and Oceania (Chang et al., 2020). Low-cost aviation has emerged as key in the regional connectivity of the Southeast Asian market. However, catering to lower-paying, regional customers has come at a cost to Changi, which wishes to be seen as a “first-class hub” in the global network (Hirsh, 2017). Balancing affordability with premium services becomes crucial in navigating the evolving dynamics of the aviation market in the region. Changi has made the conscious choice of separating regional low-cost flight to a separate terminal, Terminal 4 (Chutipongdech, 2020). In this way, Changi serves the evolving preferences of cost-conscious passengers while upholding its vision of being a premier aviation hub in the global network.

Within the expansive realm of transportation geography scholarship relevant to this research, there has been a discernable increase over the past decade in studies on the human geography of airports. Rather than focusing on logistics, human geographers examine human mobility, tourist development, and cultural aspects that are associated with airports. Scholars of human mobility have defined the airport as both a place that encourages human mobility, and one that creates situations of immobility – where passengers are forced to wait (Adey, 2008; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013). Economic gain is one of the reasons for this immobility, and passengers are held in various areas of the airport to encourage consumption, a process called “management of spectatorship” (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013: 5). In the book *On the Move*, Cresswell (2006) offers an interpretative framework of mobility and the airport, which he singles out as a hub that services the aforementioned global network and functions as the pinnacle of human mobility (Cresswell, 2006). Airports have also been observed to have a great impact on human mobility through their route development. When a large airport adds a route linking it to another city in the global network, connectivity between the two nodes is greater, and the number of individuals moving between the two is as well (Gabielli et al., 2019). This production of spatial relations firmly places the airport not only within its regional area, but as part of a broader network enhancing human mobility (Halpern & Graham, 2015). Human geographers have also studied the airport as a tool for developing tourism. As business entities, airports focus most of their route development efforts in building new connections, which are mainly used by tourists or for leisure purposes (Halpern & Graham, 2015). Scholars have also concluded that airports that serve tourist destinations are a crucial component of the supply chain that meets demand from visitors, and their efficiency has a significant influence on the region's appeal as a destination (Dimitriou, 2018). As such, airport management and academics alike have taken an interest in developing tourist flow models to best evaluate successful routes (Airey & Tribe, 2007; Fonseca i Casas et al., 2014).

Amidst this evolving landscape of airport dynamics, researchers have also taken interest in studying the airport from the perspective of incoming tourists. In particular, the role of facilities and amenities is a focus of a number of studies, as well as the tourist economy within the confines of the airport. Scholars have established a framework to understand tourists' experiences in the airport that encompasses all sociological, psychological, marketing and management aspects (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2016). Upon arrival, the airport is the first point

of contact for a tourist, and the subsequent impression they hold is key in establishing a positive relationship with the place (Bogicevic et al., 2013). Furthermore, upon departure, tourists look for retail outlets, amenities and appropriate facilities to pass time: fielding these services both procures more profit to the airport, but also enhances the tourists' experiences at the last possible time (Batra, 2014). In the context of Changi Airport, its continued success is in part due to the constant additions and improvements made on the airport's facilities (Henderson, 2017). Jewel (*Jewel Changi Airport*, n.d.) far exceeds what any other airport has on offer, with over 500 retail stores and 260 dining options (Chutipongdech, 2020). Changi portrays itself to tourists as a provider of experiences, where the airport functions as an attraction, rather than purely a transient space (Henderson, 2017).

Recent scholarship examines airports and its multiple facets under the umbrella of transportation geography. Initially focused on entry points and business entities, recent research shifts its gaze to post-COVID-19 adaptations, proposing operational solutions for sustained financial resilience. Analyzing airports as nodes in the global network reveals power dynamics, with large Southeast Asian airports such as Changi Airport strategically positioning themselves as pivotal nodes. Human geography also contributes by delving into the nuanced aspects of the airport experience. It highlights the dual role of airports in both fostering and constraining human mobility. Scholars further explore airports' impact on tourism development through both regional appeal and successful tourist flow models. In relevance to this study, Changi Airport stands out as a success story, continuously enhancing its facilities to offer a unique, experiential transit.

2.3 Private Spaces as Semi-Public Spaces

The concept of semi-public spaces has attracted growing scholarly interest over the past two decades, particularly in sociology. Scholars define semi-public space as the meeting point between the private and the public (Nissen, 2008). A space can be semi-public in two ways: first, a private space can become publicized; second, a public space can become privatized (Schindler, 2017). However, the main focus of researchers centers around the liminal realm between public and private, which constitutes semi-public space (Nissen, 2008; Peterson, 2017). In conceptualizing this border between the public and the private, scholars suggest that many urban environments are increasingly losing the clear boundary between private and public space (Acconci, 1990; Goheen, 1998; Nissen, 2008).

By altering boundaries between the private and public space, the erosion of the public sphere has had a transformative impact on communal life. As early as Jane Jacob's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* published in 1961, scholars have expressed concerns about the decreasing availability of and access to public space. In more recent scholarship, the public sphere is created through the very existence of public space, meaning that the erosion of the public sphere is created by the shrinking number of public places (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015).

As put forward by (Acconci, 1990: 904), "private space becomes public when the public wants it". Scholars in the discipline have underscored that the erstwhile functions attributed to the public sphere, including its role as a locus of interaction, representation, and exchange, persist in altered forms both within the private sphere and online (Madanipour, 2003; Papacharissi, 2010). However, academic literature also reveals that privatized spaces in the 21st century are popular with users because they can offer a better urban design quality, and offer engaging activities for users to interact with or to base their interactions with others on (Mehta & Palazzo, 2020). In an Asian context, particularly in China or Southeast Asia, expanding engagement in public life can be facilitated by private-sector development if public does not mean governmental ownership of property but rather an urban social contact with strangers and casual acquaintances (Hogan et al., 2012).

The ongoing privatization of cities in Asia has been the recipient of much scholarly attention since the turn of the century. Scholarship on the subject arises from the quick urbanization the region has undergone in the last 30 years (Yamashita, 2017). With a large proportion of new urban developments in Asia being undertaken thanks to private funds (Bunnell et al., 2002), novel combinations of both public and private urbanism constitute a growing portion of the Asian urban landscape, particularly in strong and authoritative states like Singapore (Hogan et al., 2012). Urban scholars also take interest in how the process of urban planning is privatized in Asia: it is defined as more than private influence on the development, but rather it indicates an "increase in private sector ownership of or power over activities or assets that had previously been in government hands" (Shatkin, 2007: 8). In the context of Asia, that with the growing influence of international assistance and financing, organisations have embraced new models of governance that emphasize public-private partnerships (Goh & Bunnell, 2013). By opening the door to such partnerships, government and community-based

agencies are created as a result (Shatkin, 2007). Some scholarly attention has also been directed to Asian airports in particular. Research conducted indicates that governments are willing to depend on the private sector's organisational structure and incentive structure, but still desire a high level of direct control (Hooper, 2002). In the context of this research, it is important to note that Changi Airport is the property of the Singapore Government, under its wholly owned subsidiary Changi Airport Group, which is under the purview of the Ministry of Finance. This represents an exception, as scholars demonstrate that airports which are at least partly privately owned represent the majority of cases in Asia, and in turn are also more profitable (Oum et al., 2006).

In studying the role of space within the dynamic context of the airport, the conceptual framework of non-place is key to this research. Originally defined in 1992 by French anthropologist Marc Augé through his *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (2020), non-place is inherently transient, anonymous, uniform and has a functional purpose. They are usually identified through their lack of local identity, personal connections, or historical significance (Augé, 1995). Others tie the concept of non-place to the modernization more broadly, a theme that can be found within Augé's work on the subject (Arefi, 1999). Social scientists are also interested in the features of the non-place. Scholars in a variety of disciplines have argued that the non-place is designed for specific functions, such as transportation, commerce, or communication, rather than for social or cultural interactions (Korstanje, 2015). Further, the non-place is inherently standardized and generic in its quality, lacking distinctive features that contribute to a sense of place (Varley et al., 2020). The non-place is diametrically opposed to the concept of anthropological places, which are locations that hold cultural and historical significance, fostering a sense of community and identity (Blanton, 1976). The non-space is often explored in academic literature as a place of transit, namely shopping malls, highways, or airports (Korstanje, 2015; Varley et al., 2020). While airports have been seen as a traditional non-place, scholars in recent years have begun arguing that the airport, amongst other non-places, can reclaim its identity as a non-place (Elliott & Radford, 2015; Merriman, 2004; O'Doherty, 2017; Spinney, 2007). When examining the role of place and non-place amongst airport dynamics, scholars suggest that airports go beyond and have the power to embed a positive memory of the airport through lived experiences for tourists and locals alike (Elliott & Radford, 2015). In other works, the non-place can be a place of lived experiences by other

individuals interacting within the confines of a non-place (O'Doherty, 2017). Finally, scholars attest that the airport, a traditional, transient non-place, can be reclaimed and transformed into a place which holds meaning (Varley et al., 2020).

Scholarship that has examined the semi-public space, erosion of public sphere, ongoing privatization of cities, and conceptualization of the non-place has expanded over the past decade. As this section demonstrates, scholars position semi-public spaces at the juncture of private and public spheres, which are subsequently scrutinized for their liminal identity within urban landscapes. In the Asian context, rapid urbanization fueled by private investments and the privatization of urban planning processes has also attracted scholarly attention. Furthermore, the examination of airports as non-places, a concept introduced by Marc Augé, has undergone significant transformation and now challenges traditional categorizations, proposing the potential transformation of transient non-places into anthropologically significant spaces through positive lived experiences.

2.4 Nation-Building and Place Branding

Nation-building is a concept that has generated a great deal of debate within the social sciences and humanities for 40 years. The idea of the socially-constructed nation was first discussed within Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson, 1983). While developing key terms such as territorialization and imagined communities of nationality (Anderson, 1983), the concept of nation-building was popularized by American sociologist Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1994). Brubaker's work constitutes the building blocks of modern nation-building theory, in which he emphasizes the importance of understanding how nations and national identities are socially constructed (Brubaker, 1994, 1996). Nation-building is "a process which leads to the formation of countries in which the citizens feel a sufficient amount of commonality of interests, goals and preferences so that they do not wish to separate from each other" (Alesina & Reich, 2015: 3) and is a process that is dynamic and contingent, shaped by historical, political, and social processes (Brubaker, 1996). The goal of nation-building is "to build the collective capacity to achieve public results and to pursue a shared vision of the future" (Bourgon, 2010: 197). However, some scholars critique how the literature is approached, finding that ethnic diversity and identity is

treated as an unimportant factor which only places itself as a minor inconvenient to a bigger, national heritage (Connor, 1972).

There is an abundance of scholarship on nation-building in Singapore. Since independence from the British was achieved in 1965, scholars have taken interest in how the Singaporean state has created and recreated national identity. Early scholars of Singaporean nation building analyzed how authorities sought to instill pragmatic values that promotes the economic development crucial to Singapore's autonomy (D. W. Chang, 1968). Later, there was a surge of scholarly attention on the shift in state-promoted national values that occurred during the 1980s, originating from the ruling elite's worry about materialism within Singaporean society (Ortmann, 2009). In more recent decades, nation-building in Singapore has also occurred through creating new institutions, multilingual education, family planning, housing policy, and broader parapolitical structures (Hill & Lian, 2013). Other more historically-oriented works have traced back how Singapore has developed into a rich, developed country with an authoritative government which has been able to form a thriving population that feels and identifies as Singaporean (Barr & Skrbis, 2008). However, some scholarship contests these notions and examines how ordinary Singaporeans have formed their own distinct ideas about the national character of the city-state, which occasionally run counter to official nation-building initiatives and thus represent a subdued kind of protest (Ortmann, 2009). Specific to Changi Airport, scholarship shows that Changi Airport represents a possibility for bottom-up nation-building efforts that can be unplanned (Woon, 2015).

Place branding has been a popular concept in the social sciences since the 1980s. Scholars define it as the notion of finding or producing something distinctive to set one location apart from others and increase its brand value in the marketplace (Ashworth, 2009). Branding is a powerful instrument that can shape how individuals view, think, and feel in a given place (Kavaratzis, 2005). Branding is distinct from place branding, which is what makes a particular place unique and distinctive, rather than how it is identified through logos or slogans (Govers, 2013). Symbolic actions, aligned with strategy and substance, are important for building and enhancing a nation's reputation through place branding (Anholt, 2008). In more recent years, scholarship on place branding has undergone a renewal, choosing to challenge the theoretical

frameworks in place and proposing major questions to rethink rationales (Ashworth et al., 2015; Govers, 2013).

Since the 1990s, there is a growing body of geographical scholarship on place branding in the context of the airport. Several studies argue how airport place branding holds power in both passenger movement and shaping the wider tourist destination image (Kefallonitis & Kalligiannis, 2019; Abouseada et al., 2023). Airports worldwide have successfully established strong brands in the air transport industry through meticulous planning and collaboration with home airlines, airport management, and government support (Kefallonitis & Kalligiannis, 2019). Airport branding in scholarly works has also been credited with creating a sense of place and uniting like-minded passengers, fostering emotional affinity and loyalty that is associated with quality services, retail options, and premium lounges (Paternoster, 2008). In creating these links with passengers, airport branding has also been said to incorporate local cultural, artistic, and architectural elements, enhancing the overall passenger experience (Abouseada et al., 2023). Scholars also contend that airlines, associated with a home-base airport, contribute to strengthening the relationship between airport management, airport brands, ultimately creating sustainable air travel development paired with a unique airport brand (Raguraman, 1997). Finally, scholars have also analyzed how airport management companies focus much of their branding efforts into the future in the form of vision statements (Castro & Lohmann, 2014).

The place-branding of Singapore has been the topic of many academic works. Since independence in 1965, Singaporean authorities have been branding and rebranding the city regularly in order to keep Singapore as attractive as possible to tourists to visit multiple times (Yee, 2009). Scholars have identified certain key themes which are recurrent in the various brandings given to Singapore, such as “East meets West”, multi-racial community, and business hub (Yee, 2009). Branding efforts of the Singaporean government is crafted to attract tourists, talented foreign workers, and investments and businesses and to accentuate the positive characteristics of the country (Ooi, 2006). From the perspective of Singaporean citizens, these branding efforts represent the aspirations of the Singaporean state (Ooi, 2006). The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has also made considerable efforts in “destination branding”, which took the form of “Uniquely Singapore” from 2004 to 2010, today known as “YourSingapore”. Scholars have analyzed the destination branding of the country and argued that the strategy

“demonstrates an appreciation of the limitations of Singapore’s image as a tourist destination connected to the manner in which much of the world apparently regards it as a nation state” (Henderson, 2007: 269). Koh emphasizes the economic underpinnings of the state’s efforts at place/nation-branding in Singapore, which he argues is singularly aimed at growing its GDP (Koh, 2011). Similarly, Ooi argues that recent place branding has sought to position Singapore as an important player in the creative economy (Ooi, 2008). When considering Changi Airport specifically, Henderson argues that Changi Airport has evolved as more than a business providing a service, in this case air travel, but rather it represents a venue in which to apply destination branding (Henderson, 2017).

Academic work on nation-building and neighboring concepts underscores the dynamic and contingent nature of national identities. In Singapore, the government has been hard at work since independence to shape the national identity and branding Singapore as a developed country for the purpose of economic growth. Place branding, defined as creating distinctiveness for a location, is a significant focus. In airports, scholars explore how place branding influences passenger movement and shapes tourist destination images. Airports are recognized for establishing strong brands and fostering emotional connections with passengers. Singapore’s efforts, which have evolved since it gained independence in 1965, aim to attract tourists, foreign workers, and investments. The STB plays a key role in destination branding. Changi Airport also acts as more than a service provider, viewed by the STB as the key place to engage in destination branding.

2.5 Examining Gaps in the Literature

While these three strands of scholarship have been examined individually, the case of Changi Airport in Singapore is unique. Although scholars have provided insight into how concepts like nation-building, place branding, or semi-public space are relevant in the context of an airport or in the context of Singapore, there is still no literature that examines the manner in which Changi Airport has become a semi-public space inhabited by locals who have made it their own. Previous scholarship has investigated how place branding and nation-building plays a role from a tourist perspective, but there is little to no literature on the impacts of these key choices on the local population. Singapore’s nation-building efforts and how they are displayed or formulated has been a hotbed of academic interest for many years. However, there lacks any

research into how the aforementioned is utilized by the Singaporean government to brand Changi. To fill this gap in the literature, my research will delve into the creation of Changi Airport as a semi-public space. Further, it will study the ways in which the Singaporean government utilized Changi for the country's nation-building efforts through effective place branding. In essence, this thesis examines the ever-changing role of Changi Airport within the local Singaporean landscape and how it has been transformed by both locals and government officials into more than a simple transitional location.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

My research fills a gap in scholarship on airports and on the public use of private space, as well as in understanding how Changi Airport is used by residents beyond its air travel function. Specifically, as Changi has undertaken various forms since its inception in 1981, this thesis investigates the changing patterns of utilization by Singaporeans, exploring how and why their interactions with the airport have evolved throughout its history, from both a top-down and bottom-up approach. In order to examine this, I made use of a qualitative mixed-methods approach to investigate the multifaceted narratives surrounding Changi Airport.

3.1 Longitudinal Study of Changi Airport

In first examining Changi Airport through the years, I created a timeline of the airport, from its creation in 1981 onwards, thereby offering a foundation for a more profound investigation into the intricacies of Changi Airport's evolving significance in the lives of Singaporean residents (Evangelinou, 2020). To establish a chronology, I make use of myriad primary sources. These primary sources include government publications from multiple departments, speeches by important actors, media archives from state-controlled newspapers, advertisements, and press releases. As the chronological timeline approaches the present day, there is an increased reliance on numerical content to encapsulate the evolving nature of Changi Airport's infrastructure and branding into our contemporary times. To construct the timeline, I make use of a systematic collection of data and categorization of pertinent materials, followed by the use of content analysis (Rainer, 2011). The latter is employed here due to its objectivity, consistency, and capacity to manage extensive textual and visual data efficiently, thus aiding in enabling the extraction of qualitative insights, particularly as the timeline approaches the present.

To scrutinise present-day discourse and presentation of Changi Airport to Singaporeans, I make use of governmental publications, airport press releases, online platforms held by the airport, and much more. These primary sources that make up the contemporary study of Changi are pivotal in understanding how Changi is framed to locals. In order to break down effectively these sources, I rely on discourse analysis. This approach facilitates uncovering key themes and narratives, usage of language, and perceptible shifts in the continuous public discourse

surrounding the airport. It enhances the cognizance of the impacts of public governmental discourse on such an important place for Singaporeans.

Complementing the aforementioned examination of primary sources that make up the longitudinal study of Changi Airport, I employ self-authored photographs taken in May 2023 to enrich analysis. These photographs are used here as a form of visual confirmation of the document research conducted, capturing the physical landscape of Changi, from amenities and infrastructure to posters and peoples. Indeed, the photographs offer a visual of the activities and behaviours of individuals visiting the airport for reasons other than air travel. They are also useful in illustrating how the Singaporean government's vision for Changi is implemented at the airport itself. Therefore, a combination of content analysis, discourse analysis, and self-authored photographs creates a robust mixed-methods approach to comprehending the ongoing narratives surrounding Changi Airport's use as more than a simple transient space.

3.2 Online Activities: The Public Portrayal of Changi Airport

Considering the contemporary and grassroots nature of this research, virtual data was pertinent in understanding how Singaporean residents use Changi Airport. In particular, social media platforms provide a wide-reaching and insightful view of how the public uses the airport for uses beyond travel. Instagram posts and comments as well as TikTok videos and comments were gathered in English to collect data on how Singaporeans feel, discuss, and represent their airport on large platforms and to provide insights into the various ways that citizens utilize Changi. I used a number of combinations of key words to center my search: Changi, local, activities, Jewel, date night, event. In order for the comments and videos posted to correctly represent a local lens, I only made use of content which was specifically marketed to locals, or individuals who mentioned they were locals in their response (Snelson, 2016). Furthermore, I also make use of the comments section, where local Singaporeans share their opinions and experiences, giving more insights into local perspectives. Examining the data collected helped me to understand the nature of comments and social media content made, highlighting certain key themes and communities which discuss in much length Changi Airport from a local point of view (Chan et al., 2016). Furthermore, in-depth searches revealed a number of full-length YouTube videos dedicated to the airport from a local perspective, which I make use of in this

study. The videos being made are diverse in subject and target audience, but all paint Changi Airport as integral to Singaporean social life.

Additionally, I utilized relevant primary documentation from Changi Airport's official website to display how the airport is being marketed to locals. I also made use of news articles published in different outlets which discuss the airport from a local point of view, taking the time to isolate key themes and bringing them to light. Some news websites are either fully owned or financially supported by the Singaporean government, which acts as a bridge between the governmental and local perspectives presented in this research.

3.3 Chapter Conclusions, Limitations, and Positionality

This research on the evolving nature of Changi Airport in Singaporean society faces certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the research predominantly relies on publicly available data, which may not fully encapsulate the nuanced perceptions and experiences of residents. Second, the important and active role the Singaporean government's plays in information dissemination is important to reflect on. It is quite possible that critical viewpoints or alternative narratives related to Changi Airport are underrepresented in available data, which can lead to biased research. Another limitation in this study is where I source information. Indeed, gathering data from social media overrepresents a younger demographic. It is also essential to consider that, as a non-Singaporean white male, I have limited cultural and contextual insights into the local dynamics surrounding Changi Airport, which can make it difficult to correctly interpret experiences. I acknowledge the potential for bias in my analysis. To mitigate these limitations, I rigorously engage with local perspectives surrounding Changi Airport. More specifically, I circumvent any sources which hold any governmental affiliation in the slightest in attempting to understand how or why locals take to understanding Changi Airport as a semi-public space (Chang & Yeoh, 1999).

CHAPTER 4: CHANGING GOVERNMENTAL NARRATIVES OF CHANGI AIRPORT

4.1 *The Early Years*

In exploring Changi Airport's early years, I seek to analyze the discourse surrounding the airport into three key components that represent how the airport was discussed from a governmental perspective addressing the locals: as a symbol of Singaporean aspiration, a source of unity, and a beacon of national identity.

4.1.1 *A Symbol of Singaporeans Aspirations*

Changi Airport's inception in the mid-1970s marked a seminal moment in Singapore's trajectory, symbolizing the state's aspirations for modernity, connectivity, and global recognition. During the airport's formative years, the Singapore state embarked on a concerted effort to shape the narrative surrounding the airport and what it meant for the fledgling city-state. The discourse surrounding the creation of the airport centered heavily on the necessity for Singapore to have state-of-the-art infrastructure to propel the country towards the future and to foster economic growth. At the opening ceremony for Changi on December 29th, 1981, then Defence Minister Hone Yoon Chon concluded his speech by stating:

Changi Airport is our major investment to exploit our geographic location. Singapore must be prepared and ready to seize every opportunity that comes its way. Whether we have been extravagant in investing in an airport of this size and level of sophistication is a question worthy of a rhetorical rejoinder. Can Singapore ever afford not to have such an airport? (Howe, 1981)

Changi Airport was promoted to the Singaporean population as a physical infrastructure project, but also as an embodiment of Singapore's aspirations. In a wider sense, this sentiment reflected the state's vision of Changi as a critical investment in Singapore's future prosperity, setting up the city-state for success over time in an area in which it was already performing quite well economically, that of air travel and cargo shipping. The extensive coverage of the airport in *The Straits Times* (NewspaperSG, 1981), a national newspaper with close ties to the Singaporean government, painted the project as more than an aviation hub: instead, it was taken as a representation of Singapore's goals and accomplishments (*The Straits Times*, 1 July 1981). Even predating the completion of construction, columnists for *The Straits Times* were raving about Changi Airport being the best in Asia and most modern in the world (*The Straits Times*, 24 June

1979). With such representation in the country's mass media, the government was able to shape perceptions and foster a deep-seated pride in Singaporeans regarding what would become one of the city-state's most recognizable features.

4.1.2 A Source of Unity

From a governmental perspective, the cultivation of Changi Airport as a source of unity during its formative years was a deliberate and multifaceted endeavor. As a young nation trying to carve itself out a spot on the world stage, Changi Airport represented a singular focal point behind which the population could rally (Chutiphongdech, 2020; Henderson, 2017). The government recognized the importance of establishing Changi Airport not only as a transportation hub but also as a symbol of cohesion. The airport was framed as a national project, a technological achievement, and a symbol of collective pride.

The government sought to engage with local Singaporeans to get them interested and invested in the project. Through a variety of initiatives and events, the Singaporean authorities aimed at promoting Changi Airport as a communal space for shared experiences and interactions. Public exhibitions and tours of the airport were organized to give all Singaporeans the opportunity to engage with the project on a personal level (*Our Story | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). In the comment section of a documentary available on the Changi website page detailing the airport's history, one commenter wrote: "The people in the airport [...] were members of the public when it was opened for tours before it began operations. I was there as an 11-year-old and was mesmerized by how advanced it was" (*Our Story | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). As evidenced by the quote, the state actively involved citizens in the airport's development, the government succeeded to some degree in creating a sense of cohesion and unity among many Singaporeans. This laid the groundwork for Changi Airport's enduring significance as a unifying force in the nation's identity and aspirations.

4.1.3 A Beacon of National Identity

Changi Airport further emerged as a beacon of national identity early in its tenure as Singapore's international airport. The government understood the power of the airport and its symbolic significance, as it embarked on a multifaceted strategy to position the airport as part of the national lore. A central element to that strategy was the representation of Changi as a nation-building project. Since Singapore's independence, its governing body has always sought to

represent the nation through the dialectics of survival (Seah, 1980). At its core, this discourse embodies the demonstrated resilience of Singapore and Singaporeans alike to overcome adversity. Largely credited to visionary leadership, pragmatic policies, and a relentless pursuit of excellence (Barr & Skrbiš, 2008; D. W. Chang, 1968; Hill & Lian, 2013), Singapore has continuously diversified its economy and reduced its dependence on traditional industries in the face of unfavourable economical and natural conditions. By investing in world-class infrastructure, Singapore maximizes its geographical advantage, enhancing connectivity and positioning itself as a global hub for trade and tourism (Henderson, 2007). Changi Airport is representative of Singapore's strategic approach to survival, as it was conceived as a vital economic lifeline and global gateway. As such, the government has, since its inception, made a spectacle out of large infrastructure projects, managing to create a bond between what the project represents to the nation and its citizens. These feelings were relayed recently by current Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong:

When Changi Airport first opened in 1981, it was a coming out party for Singaporeans of that generation. We were so proud of it. When someone was flying out, the whole extended family would come to Changi Airport to see him or her off, and at the same time, take pictures with the trishaw display and the water features. I remember it fondly. (Lee, 2020)

The narrative that surrounds Changi Airport's creation is deeply interwoven with the fabric of the nation as a symbol of national identity. The survival discourse, combined with the togetherness cultivated around large-scale infrastructure projects like Changi Airport, serves to reinforce Singaporeans' collective resilience and sense of identity. Changi Airport stands not only as a physical testament to Singapore's progress but also as a shared emblem of national pride and unity.

4.2 Through the Expansions

In this section of the thesis, I delve into how individual expansions to Changi Airport's infrastructure have added or modified to both the physical landscape and the discursive representations of the airport. I investigate these changes surrounding the openings of Terminal 2, Terminal 3, Terminal 4, and finally Jewel Changi Airport. I highlight the complex role that each expansion has played in carefully crafting the narratives of unity, aspirations and national identity that seep through the built environment of Changi.

4.2.1 Terminal 2

Phase II, which was part of the original plans for Changi Airport, was inaugurated in 1990. Terminal 2 allowed Changi to receive up to 22 million passengers annually (*Traffic Statistics | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). The expansion, which followed the addition of a second runway in 1983, represented a pivotal moment in Changi's history, not only in terms of accommodating a substantially higher volume of air traffic but also in its role as a symbol of Singaporean aspirations and national identity (Bok, 2015). The discursive representations from authoritative figures in the country continued, as the development of Terminal 2 mirrored the ambitions laid out during the airport's inception, emphasizing Singapore's commitment to modernity, connectivity, and global recognition. The government's narrative in the 1990s echoed the one which could be read, seen, and heard around the airport's inauguration in 1981 (Raguraman, 1997). Just like for Phase I of Changi, Phase II was primarily motivated by economic reasons, an effort to establish Singapore's position as a global aviation hub. However, the opening of Terminal 2 also allowed government to reinforce its survival dialectic, emphasizing the grand Singaporean aspirations, as well as Changi as a source of unity and national identity. In a speech given at the ceremonial opening of the airport on June 1, 1991, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong declared:

The growth of Changi Airport over a short period of 10 years is remarkable. How did we achieve this? The answer lies in our national pursuit of "excellence" not just at the individual level but also as a team. When each of us does his job to the best of his ability, it may not seem much. But if everyone does his best and works together as a team, much can be achieved. (Goh, 1991)

Terminal 2's creation continued the narrative established during Changi Airport's early years. Government leadership took the opportunity of the opening of Terminal 2 to reaffirm its status as a beacon of national identity and larger state aspirations. Terminal 2 represents continuity in the larger narrative of survival by advancement established since Singaporean independence.

4.2.2 Terminal 3

When Terminal 3 opened in 2008, it marked yet another significant milestone in Changi's expansion journey. With the yearly passenger capacity up to 68.7 million passengers (*Traffic Statistics | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.), Changi Airport epitomized Singapore's commitment to

aviation excellence, as it became a large player on the global stage of aviation. While Terminal 3 was again constructed for economic reasons (Kuang, 2009), it aligned with the broader narrative of unity, national identity, and Singaporean aspirations that was quietly established around the airport since its inception. Furthermore, the source of unity that the airport represents for Singaporeans was embodied in an art installation within the terminal. Named *Coming Home* (Figure 1), it was realized by Chinese artist Han Meilin and features a mother, father and their child, with the aim of representing “the universal concept of unity” (*Coming Home | Singapore Changi Airport*, n.d.).



Figure 1: *Coming Home* by Han Meilin in Changi Airport’s Terminal 3
Source: Changi Airport

Terminal 3’s *Coming Home* is a way for the Singaporean state to implicitly reinforce national unity through artwork. Furthermore, like previous ceremonies at the airport, the official opening of Changi on July 25th, 2008, gave the opportunity for Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to reinforce the state’s narrative around the airport. However, a new concept was introduced within his speech, that of the airport growing alongside the nation: “Ever since [the opening of the airport], Changi Airport has grown with Singapore. [...] Beyond its economic contribution, Changi Airport holds a special place in the hearts of many Singaporeans” (Lee, 2008). Over time, Changi has gained prominence on the world stage, to the point of becoming the gold standard of airport infrastructure and management (Chutipongdech, 2020). The government can therefore use Changi Airport as a successful embodiment of Singapore’s values of excellence, resilience, and unity.

4.2.3 Terminal 4

The addition of Terminal 4 in 2017 did not generate as much noise as previous expansions (Sullivan, 2023), however it did increase Changi Airport’s capacity to 82 million passengers per annum (*Traffic Statistics | Changi Airport Group*, n.d.). Terminal 4 remained a crucial component of Changi’s narrative, embodying Singapore’s aspirations and identity as an

ambitious and competent city-state operating as a player on the global stage. It still demonstrated Singapore's commitment to accommodating the escalating amount of air traffic and was still aligned with the broader narrative surrounding Changi Airport. At the groundbreaking ceremony in 2013, Minister of Transport Lui Tuck Yew also touched on the power of the Changi branding:

Changi Airport, which has won many top international accolades, has a special place in the hearts of Singaporeans. I have great faith that T4 will emerge as yet another outstanding terminal that Singaporeans will be proud of, and which will further enhance the Changi brand name. (Lui, 2013)

The Minister's words help to highlight the airport's enduring significance of Changi Airport in Singapore's narrative. While there was less media attention paid to Terminal 4, it reinforces the role of Changi in the government's pursuit of a collective Singaporean identity and aspirations.

4.3 What About Now? The Case of Jewel



Figure 2: Jewel at Changi Airport. Source: Author

The creation of Jewel at Changi Airport embodied the zenith of Singapore's narrative of advancement and resilience. Not only was Jewel a complete departure from traditional airport infrastructure, but it transcended what was conceived as possible at the time, instead becoming a thriving nexus of commerce, leisure, and vegetation (Figure 2) (Sullivan, 2023). At his National Day Rally Speech in 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong dedicated a large segment of his yearly address to talking about Changi Airport, which exemplified Changi's established

discursive narrative. The most listened to or watched speech of the year (cite), it is also the most important, as it serves ideological purposes (Koh, 2011). He emphasised Changi's importance to the nation and merits before announcing plans to improve Changi so that Singapore can continue to benefit from its strengths. He highlights Changi's position in Singapore first:

What is Changi Airport? To travellers, an icon of Singapore. To Singaporeans, a welcome landmark telling us that we have arrived home. To me it is a part of the Singapore identity, a symbol of renewal and change [...] but Changi Airport is more than an emotional symbol. We have Changi Airport today because in the 1970s, 40 years ago, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew had the vision to imagine the old RAF Changi Airbase becoming an international airport to replace Paya Lebar. (Lee, 2013)

The prime minister utilizes the most important and symbolic speech of the year to exalt Changi's emotional and economical importance to Singaporeans, which is attributed to the foresightedness of the first prime minister, his father. Not only does he underscore Changi's role in Singapore, but he emphasizes the government's role in manufacturing this success and symbolism, essentially validating the narrative of unity, national identity, and physical representation of Singaporean aspirations which was created around the airport's launch. Later, he leverages his earlier comments into reasoning to upgrade Changi for the sake of Singapore's future:

Do we want to stay this vibrant hub of Southeast Asia or let somebody take over our position, our business, and our jobs? We have to plan ahead and continually build up Changi, and we have plans to do so. We are going to replace the Terminal 1 carpark with what we have codenamed "Project Jewel". It is not just for visitors but for Singaporeans too: families on Sunday outings, students maybe studying for exams. These are very ambitious, long-term plans. It is an example of how we need to think and plan for our future, and it reflects our fundamental mindset and spirit to be confident, to look ahead, to aim high. (Lee, 2013)

This quote from the prime minister highlights the proactive stance that has been adopted by the Singaporean government to ensure Changi continues to be at the forefront of the global aviation curve. Jewel represents the most forward-looking approach in airport development (Chutipongdech, 2020), and significantly caters not only to the traveler, but also to the local Singaporean (Choi, 2021).

Interestingly enough, students had already been using Changi's terminals as study spots long before the inception of Jewel, a subject which I delve into during Chapter 5 (Henderson,

2017), but the explicit inclusion of families and students alike in the planning of Jewel underscores its role as more than an airport: as a communal space, as a non-transient place, a place in a world of non-places (Augé, 2020). This aligns with the government's broader narratives of fostering unity and cohesion within the country, which simultaneously reinforces Jewel's significance as a symbol of national identity. This intention was emphasized by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his 2019 Jewel opening speech, in which he stated:

Many people have come here just to see and enjoy Jewel. There was plenty of buzz and excitement among Singaporeans young and old. [...] Indeed, Changi is special to Singaporeans. We have watched how our airport has grown and developed. Who would have imagined that when we decided to shift our airport from Paya Lebar to Changi, that one day we would make it the best airport in the world. [...] Let me share a back story with you. In 2013, when I was considering whether to talk about Jewel and our plans for Changi at the National Day Rally, we did some message testing, but the focus groups were not enthusiastic. [...] I wanted Singaporeans to understand that Jewel and Changi Airport were not only an infrastructure story. Instead, they represented an idea; they were a symbol. They epitomised how Singapore, here, we must dream boldly to create possibilities for ourselves. (Lee, 2019)

Since the opening of Jewel, the discursive representation of Changi as a whole is one of national pride, a beacon of Singaporean aspiration and a source of unity. Singaporeans are included in this discussion, they are both explicitly and implicitly invited to interact, visit, and talk positively about Changi Airport. The Changi brand name has reached its paroxysm, and represents the best of aviation hubs (Sullivan, 2023). Jewel is a testament to Singapore's growth and development, to how the government's proactive stance has solidified Changi's role as a communal space and symbol of national unity. What was once a symbol of Singapore's economic ambitions, has in time turned into a symbol of its prominent role within the global aviation industry, now the gold standard.

CHAPTER 5: INVESTIGATING CHANGI AIRPORT AS A SEMI-PUBLIC SPACE

As Changi Airport has evolved over the past four decades, so too have the narratives that surround its various facets. From its inception, Changi has always been more than a simple airport for the state; instead, it has been actively promoted as a symbol of Singaporean excellence and cultivated as a source of pride. However, the creation of Jewel at Changi Airport represents a novelty in the world of airport infrastructure. In this chapter, I explore how Singaporeans use the airport for activities beyond air travel, with a particular focus on the way in which Jewel has emerged as a semi-public space, now part of their daily lives.

5.1 Context of Malls in Singapore

In understanding the role of Jewel in the eyes of Singaporeans, it is first important to establish the role of malls in Singaporean society. Malls occupy an important function in the social lives of individuals (Chiodelli & Moroni, 2015; Hagberg & Styhre, 2013), and as semi-public spaces, they are more than simple retail areas (Henderson et al., 2011). Jewel at Changi Airport is no different, but it is far more than a mall, catering to both locals looking for a retail experience, but also to transient travelers looking to enjoy a layover. However, to understand how locals make use of Jewel as a mall and social space, the context of malls in Singapore must be understood.

Malls in Singapore are more than simple retail shops in close proximity. Scholarship has demonstrated that malls act as highly social spaces for Singaporeans (Hudson, 2015). They are deeply integrated in the city-state's fast-paced lifestyle, are mixed-use developments, and act as the primary space for individuals to socialize (cite). Singapore has the highest amount of retail space per capita in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): a mall for every 53,000 people (Ward, 2022). With 171 malls operating as of 2024 (cite), they are truly a cultural phenomenon in the country. Each new mall opening is greeted with excitement, drawing crowds eager to explore the latest retail offerings, culinary delights, and entertainment experiences (cite). However, beyond the façade of buzz and glamor from luxury shops, malls in Singapore face a lot of roadblocks in becoming profitable long-term. High standards from the clientele requires mall developers to always better, improve, or renovate their malls. A vicious cycle of over-development ensues.

The lifecycle of malls in Singapore begins with an announcement about an imminent grand opening. Many Singaporeans eagerly await the new retail experience, creating a craze around the new mall. Business is good for the first few years, but suddenly a new mall opens its doors close by, the initial allure fades, and malls find themselves losing both clientele and money (Yee, 2024). Developers react to the vacant retail spaces, the empty food courts, and shops by deciding to adapt to the ever-changing taste and preferences of Singaporean society. The constant need for reinvention in order to revitalize an aging mall to maintain their relevance usually results in slight rises, followed by steeper declines. So forth goes the lifecycle of the Singaporean mall. In displaying this concept, I look at two malls which have been going through this continuous cycle: Raffles City and Suntec City. Raffles City is a mixed-use development that opened in 1986, highly connected to the MRT network within Downtown Singapore (Goh, n.d.). While Raffles City performed quite well economically during the first 15 years of its opening, bigger and better malls, with new attractive experiences and architecture subsequently opened. This forced the Raffles City developers to renovate the mixed-use complex. Renovations have since occurred in 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2010, being the biggest overhaul (Goh, n.d.). These upgrades of facilities are seen as necessary by the owners. Raffles City's basement food-courts, for example, have been gutted five times over the last 20 years (Nanyang Business School, 2022). Suntec City has also undergone a large number of extensive renovations and upgrades. Once built as an upscale alternative to Raffles City, it now sits mostly empty, despite attempts to draw in clients with a \$410 million facelift (Ong, 2013).

Despite their inherently commercial nature, Singapore malls serve as multifunctional spaces. The newest and best malls will receive ample visits from locals finding refuge from the city's heat and humidity in air-conditioning. Other Singaporeans view the malls as a recreational destination, where days can be spent making use of the shops, the food, and the activities offered such as free concerts (Henderson et al., 2011). In a city where large, open areas are scarce, malls play a crucial role in providing tempered accessible areas for relaxation or social interaction.

5.1.1 Jewel as a Mall

There is immense pressure for malls to go bigger, newer, and better to attract Singaporeans. Jewel's grandeur and innovation exemplifies this ethos, as it represents a larger-than-life destination, pushing the boundaries of the mall as well as airport infrastructure. Jewel

represents the crossroads between the narratives created surrounding Changi Airport and the idea of having to push the possibilities of infrastructure to impress and attract the locals. While certain Changi terminals were used by locals as studying spaces, as hangout spots away from the heat (Lee, 2013), these dimensions of the airport are only exacerbated by the arrival of Jewel into the fray. Its emergence introduces a new dimension to Singaporeans' interaction with Changi Airport, inviting them to an array of state-of-the-art facilities. Jewel as a mall provides an additional incentive to interact with Changi Airport. As such, locals on various social media networks have been discussing Jewel and its role in their lives since 2019. Under an Instagram Reel discussing new attractions at Jewel, one commentor wrote "Honestly, us Singaporeans just treat it like another mall" (@Isaacexploress, 2024). Liked by over 60 thousand individuals, this comment emphasizes how Singaporeans see Jewel as simply new mall in the long list that have opened in recent years. Another commenter wrote underneath, "I live in Singapore, and this is normal honestly. Its just a newer mall", further underscoring the normalization of mall culture within Singaporean society, where a new shopping destination evokes familiarity, rather than novelty. Despite Jewel's uniqueness as both a local and tourist destination, its seamless integration into the fabric of everyday local life as "just another mall" reflects the existing attitude regarding urban amenities. Widely considered as one of the best malls in the world (*Awards and Accolades* | *Changi Airport Group*, n.d.; *Jewel Changi Airport*, n.d.; Sullivan, 2023), Jewel is a destination in itself. As part of the wider Singaporean survival and pursuit of excellence discursive representation, it not only refines the airport experience, but it also makes a traditional non-place (the airport), a semi-public space, enhanced by the way malls are utilized by locals in Singapore.

5.2 Jewel: Beyond Air Travel

In this part of the chapter, I explain the different ways in which Changi Airport as a whole, and more importantly Jewel, acts a semi-public for a wide demographic of local Singaporeans. I highlight how Changi Airport manages to attract both through discourse and concrete actions any given section of the local population. More specifically, I give emphasis to the students, the families, and young couples.

5.2.1 Studying at Changi Airport

The quest to find the best studying spots is a cultural phenomenon in Singapore, with students constantly on the lookout for quiet, comfortable, and cool locations to enhance their productivity. In Singapore, the pursuit of academic excellence is not merely a personal endeavour, but a societal expectation (Kent, n.d.). There is immense pressure on students to perform well academically, due to the high-competition education system and the large number of high-stakes national examinations. Furthermore, this culture of studying is reinforced by societal norms and parental expectations, which place a premium on academic achievement as a pathway to success and social mobility (Ng, 2020). It is in this spirit that Singaporean students adopt rigorous studying habits and develop routines to pursue academic goals.

Studying in Changi Airport may seem out of the ordinary, but it is a practice that is deeply rooted in the studying culture. Its existence was even acknowledged in 2008, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong opened Terminal 3: “Changi Airport is probably the only airport in the world which students flock to during exam periods, in search of a cool and pleasant place to study in” (2008). Prior to the opening of Jewel in 2019, Singaporean pupils were already frequenting the airport for its large amount of seating areas, its free Wi-Fi, and its air conditioning. However, after the opening of Jewel, the phenomenon skyrocketed in popularity. This trend has been documented by a number of news outlets and websites alike, generally in articles centered around the hunt for good study spots. Academic websites (*Changi Airport Study Areas – Miao Academy*, n.d.), local Singaporean blogs (Fattah, 2023), travel blogs (Yue, n.d.), and Singapore websites (Best Rated Singapore, 2023) all frequently publish articles detailing the nooks and crannies, cafes, and seating areas across all 4 terminals which are best for studying. In this manner, the local students are made aware, if they were not already, of the conducive studying environment that can be found at Changi Airport. In the spirit of capitalizing on a potential clientele, Changi Airport Group (CAG), through its magazine “Now Boarding by Changi Airport”, offers similar content to the one mentioned above: some articles more wide-ranging study spots (Chee, 2021) and others that are targeted specifically to the best publicly accessible study spots in Changi Airport (Vaishnavi, 2023).

Students have also taken to YouTube to share their studying experience at Changi Airport. Some videos are dedicated to reviewing Singaporean studying spots more broadly (yongsheng,

2022), and include amongst their suggestions the Terminal 3 lobby, for example. Other videos are formatted in a “vlog” format, and feature one or more students utilizing Changi’s Jewel, for example, to study (4’s a crowd, 2022; Daniel Tamago, 2021a). These videos offer viewers a look into the Singapore intense studying culture and exemplify how a non-place can become one through discourse. As such, CAG has also embraced this studying culture by sponsoring certain creators that display in a positive light its communal spaces (Figure 3). In such cases, CAG invites the creator back to the airport and provides complimentary access to a premium lounge (Daniel Tamago, 2021b), where users would usually pay a fee to enter (*Singapore Changi Airport*, n.d.). By courting these students and offering state-of-the-art amenities to local students, it has cemented its reputation as a premier destination for studying.

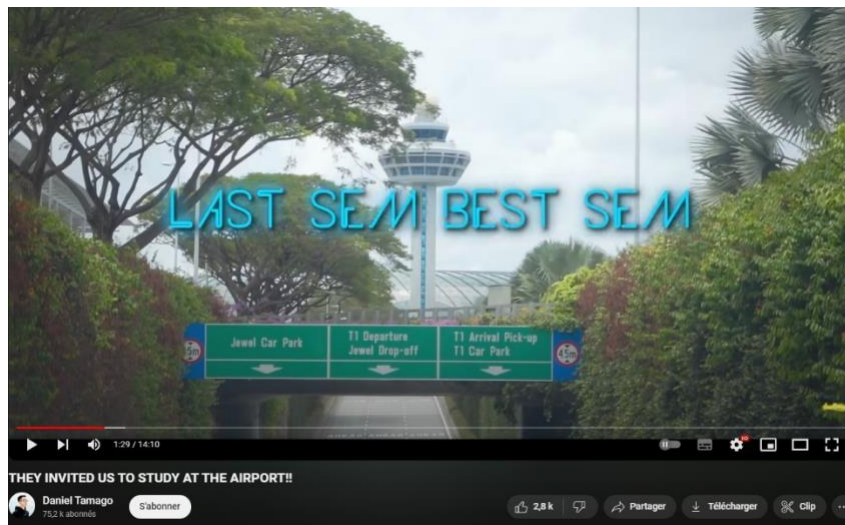


Figure 3: Sponsored “Vlog” Content on Changi Airport. Source: YouTube

During my visit to Changi Airport, I observed a large number of students on the premises, scattered across various seating areas in all of Changi’s terminals and Jewel (Figure 4). While some were engaged in intense study sessions, others were balancing studying with leisure activities. Whether stopping for a drink or taking advantage of the retailers on site, these students took full advantage of the coffee shops, various food stalls, lounging areas, the forest around Jewel and enjoyed a break, sometimes with their friends, before returning to study.



Figure 4: Students enjoying a study break at Jewel Changi Airport. Source: Author

5.2.2 *Jewel: A Local Favourite*

Changi Airport does not only cater to young adults. Instead, it has become a destination that offers a wealth of family-friendly activities that cater to all ages. Similar to their strategy regarding couples and dates, Changi advertises family activities to Singaporeans. One such example is the “A Night at the Airport” Family Camp (Changi Airport Group, 2023). Started during the COVID-19 pandemic, this sleepover camp in Jewel is held every few months and hosts families with young children within the airport’s premises. These camps offer access to some of Jewel’s exhibits, play areas (Figure 5), free climbs at the rock wall present in Terminal 3 or take control of a plane in the flight simulator. These activities engage young children early on with Changi Airport and creates a direct bond with the place as a semi-public space. From a local perspective, residents holding parenting blogs write positive detailed reviews about these family camps, which give them even more publicity (Cherilyn, 2023; Gomez, 2023). These reviews were also useful in pointing out that the role of family was further highlighted and catered to by the airport: “If you’re pressed for family activities, this experience will definitely be worth it, since all of the activities are specially designed for quality family bonding time!” (Gomez, 2023). In this way, Changi Airport is further engrained in Singaporean family life by creating activities to attract local families.



Figure 5: Children Play Area at Jewel Changi Airport. Source: Author

Aside from the camps and the IMAX theater, there are also regular activities catering to young children to get them engaged with Changi from a young age. Advertised across Jewel and the terminals is a Jurassic Park-themed quest aptly named “Jewel-Rassic Park” for children to partake in (*Jewel Changi Airport*, 2023). While any interested party can participate, it is indicated that the target age of the activity is around 6 years of age. These interactive displays capture the attention of young Singaporeans and give them a reason to visit Changi Airport. Changi Airport Group attempts to cater to all ages and capitalize on any opportunity that presents itself. Jewel recently held a singalong event as Taylor Swift was in Singapore to give six concerts from her Eras Tour (Soh, 2024). The highly publicized event was named “Bejeweled” (after one of the pop star’s songs and Jewel) is just one of many recent examples of ephemeral occasions which Changi Airport Group have attempted to attract large crowds to its facilities. This representation is facilitated by the discourse established which makes Changi Airport a part of Singaporeans’ daily lives. Overall, Changi’s commitment to providing activities for Singaporeans of all ages is a testament to its integral role in Singapore’s national discursive representation, showcasing how it has evolved to become an embodiment of the nation’s values.

5.2.3 Dating at Changi

As established, beyond its primary function as a traveling facility, Changi Airport emerges as a semi-public space reclaimed by local Singaporeans, who engage in social and leisurely activities in the airport. Jewel benefits from a large selection of coffee shops and dining options, including the world’s only Michelin-starred ramen restaurant (Figure 6) (*Jewel Changi Airport*, n.d.).



Figure 6: Michelin-Starred Ramen at Jewel.
Source: Author



Figure 7: Cinema, Supermarket and Food Court.
Source: Author

In addition to these more traditional dating spots, Changi offers a wide range of activities and amenities that cater to the different interests or preferences. For example, Jewel contains a full-sized IMAX movie theater (Figure 7), showing the newest blockbusters in English, Malay, and Chinese (*Shaw Theatres*, 2023). Another popular dating spot at Jewel is the Canopy Park, which is located in the heights of the glass dome around the rain vortex, which is the highest and largest indoor waterfall. With inexpensive admission prices (\$10), local couples flock to it in the evening, according to many online articles on date night locations in Singapore (Now Boarding, 2023; Singapore Now, 2022). When I visited Changi Airport, I observed many couples waiting in line to buy the discounted couple's tickets, a promotion at the time to attract more locals to Jewel. When considering that Jewel is part of the larger Changi Airport infrastructure, it is out of the ordinary to see a grocery store on the premises. However, as Jewel has evolved into a staple of daily life, many young couples combine a date at Changi with filling their fridge. In this way, Changi Airport becomes a one-stop shop for daily needs and leisure. As I wandered the halls of Changi during my visit, I frequently saw couples who were on a date shopping for their local produce at the grocery store before heading to the MRT station located under Changi.

Dates at Changi Airport have evolved into a significant aspect of locals' lives. As such, there has been a diverse array of content made surrounding them, ranging from "vlog" style short-form content on platforms like TikTok, to cinema-like YouTube videos produced by Changi-backed outlets. One of the prominent categories of content revolves around identifying the best dating spots within Changi Airport. This phenomenon was observable prior to the opening of Jewel. Changi had already established itself as a dating destination, with couples gravitating towards the Changi gardens, the dining options in the terminals, but also plane-spotting. Around the opening of Terminal 4, Changi Airport's official Instagram posted a picture

of the new terminal, along with the caption “My favourite dating spot in #ChangiAirport is _____” (@changiairport on Instagram, 2018), with commentators listing off locations within Changi’s various terminals. With the opening of Jewel in 2019, this trend only gained further momentum, as the indoor forest and rain vortex attracted local couples. Similarly, the Jewel Instagram account targeted Singaporean couples with a promotion for free Canopy Park tickets, an attempt to entice locals to spend their money and time at Jewel (@jewelchangiairport on Instagram, 2019). Content on Jewel and Changi official accounts continues to this day to be posted in the hopes of attracting couples to the amenities (Changi Airport on Lemon8, 2023). Apart from social media, Changi-backed outlets also post articles showcasing curated lists of romantic spots, both pre and post-Jewel (*Now Boarding by Changi Airport*, 2018; 2021). On the other hand, locals have also been taking to social media to share their personal anecdotes, and suggest viewers use Changi Airport as a place to go on dates (Ashley@simmer on TikTok, n.d.; @natashalee on Lemon8, n.d.). Singaporean influencers share their insider tips and publicize the airport from a local perspective. In a way, they are aiding Changi Airport Group in continuing the narrative of excellence and personal attachment which surrounds the airport.

5.3 Part of Singaporean Life Since 1981

From a local perspective, Changi Airport is not merely a transportation hub, but rather a symbol of Singaporean pride, deeply embedded within the nation’s identity. Locals identify with the airport and the narratives which surround it. Keshia Naurana Badalge, a Bloomberg journalist, recounts as she would spent days in her childhood entirely at Changi Airport (Naurana Badalge, 2019). She summarizes the role of the airport in the local eye: “The city-state of Singapore is a small space, and many of us live relatively close to the airport, which over the years has played a unique role in our lives as an open-all-night, free-to-all air-conditioned public amenity” (Naurana Badalge, 2019). This accessibility, combined with round-the-clock operations, allows Changi Airport to transform the purpose of the traditional airport: Changi Airport therefore emerges as a semi-public space, viewed by the public as an active part of their social lives, and reclaimed as such. The opening of Jewel only solidified Changi’s role as a part of Singaporeans’ lives. With shopping for your daily needs, the movies, and an air-conditioned rainforest at your disposal, Changi caters to any single need in one large state-of-the-art complex. As local Adrian Tan explained to the BBC, “I don’t think any other airport in the world can boast that the locals visit it just for fun” (Yong, 2023). This quote underscores the exceptional status of

Changi Airport: a destination for locals in its own right, rather than a transit hub. Changi holds distinct appeal to locals, with this phenomenon reflecting the unique position of Changi within Singaporean society. It is not simply viewed as transportation, but it is a vibrant social and cultural hub.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided an in-depth account of Changi Airport's development as a global air hub and a local social hub, offering an insight into how a semi-public space was created in an otherwise transient space. Specifically, I have sought to outline how the local government has created overarching discursive representations of the nation that are deeply embedded within local daily life and ideals. I also argue that locals have reappropriated the airport and turned it into a semi-public one. Below, I summarize the key arguments of each chapter, before providing final reflections on both the contributions of the findings and the directions for future research.

6.1 Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 introduced Changi Airport and outlined its status among top airports in the world. I introduced by research questions and how I sought to understand the role that Changi Airport plays in the Singaporean national landscape, from both a top-down (government) and bottom-up (local) perspective. Chapter 2 provides an overview of three bodies of scholarship that informed this thesis: transportation scholarship on airports, semi-public spaces, as well as nation-building and place branding. Chapter 3 outlines the methods I used to answer my research questions: a longitudinal study of Changi based on document research, and a look into local life at the airport through social media research.

Chapter 4 explores the evolving narratives that surround Changi Airport and its infrastructure, from inception to the present. It emphasizes the governmental perspectives and the discursive representations relevant to Changi. The discourse and content analysis underscores three key dimensions of the discourse which were carefully crafted and further developed over time: Changi as a symbol of Singaporean aspirations, a source of unity, and a beacon of national identity.

While the airport was being planned, Changi symbolized Singapore's ambition as a transportation hub for Southeast Asia, as well as their striving for modern installations. The government strategically framed the airport as both an investment for the city-state's future and as a symbol of what Singapore was able to produce. Using speeches and state-friendly media, a wide-encompassing, national narrative was born. Changi was also portrayed as a source of unity for Singaporeans, with the government attempting to foster a sense of collective pride. Initiatives

put forward by the relevant authorities included public exhibitions and tours, in an attempt to include locals in the development of the airport and portray the airport as a national project. National identity was part of the narrative. Indeed, government figures used the public stage to highlight how Changi was a physical representation of Singapore's ability to excel on the global stage.

The analysis then extended to more recent developments, such as new terminals, terminal renovations, and Jewel. The latter has been framed as the piece de resistance of Singapore's narrative of advancement and resilience. Throughout the chapter, the idea that Singaporeans care deeply about the airport and perceive it as a part of the country's identity is reinforced.

Chapter 5 delves into the role of Changi Airport as a semi-public space that is key to Singaporean life. Using content analysis, the chapter examines how Changi Airport holds different roles in local life, including but not limited to a mall, a dating spot, a family-oriented space, and a haven for Singaporean student. Firstly, the chapter establishes the particular role malls play for locals in Singapore, emphasizing malls as a multifunctional social space which must innovate to be relevant in a highly competitive market.

The analysis then focuses on Jewel, explaining its unique position in that landscape because of its association with Changi Airport. It showcases how its grandeur exemplifies Singapore's ethos of striving for better always. Despite its status as part of airport infrastructure, Jewel transcends traditional the traditional etiquette and uses the narrative built around Changi to blur the line between public and private space. Discursive representations are also discussed, underscoring how social media is used both by locals and Changi-backed outlets to shape perceptions of Changi Airport as integral to Singaporean identity. By utilizing content creation, Changi Airport Group continues to cultivate a sense of pride and attachment to Changi Airport. Overall, Chapter 5 illustrates the complex interplay that exists between infrastructure and discursive representations of the nation, shedding light on the role of Changi Airport as a Singaporean agora, a semi-public space.

6.2 Contribution and Significance of Findings

This thesis has broadly contributed to scholarship on Changi Airport, a subject garnering more interest in the last decade (Bok, 2015; Chutiphongdech, 2020; Seo, 2021; Sullivan, 2023;

Wu & Tsui, 2020). This research has primarily sought to fill the gaps in the literature outlined in Chapter 2, including the lack of scholarship on the role of Changi Airport in the Singaporean national landscape. First, this thesis examined the cultural narratives and societal practices that surround Changi Airport, and subsequently highlighted its social significance beyond function. It has underscored how Changi has become a symbol of national identity and pride, following the discursive representation of the airport by authorities. Second, the analysis of Changi Airport and Jewel as a semi-public space expands understanding of the role played by urban infrastructure in shaping both social interactions and social practices. By blurring boundaries between private and public space, Changi represents a modern case of the evolving nature of space in the city. Third, the thesis also sheds light on the manner in which Changi Airport is branded to locals in modern times. With the goal of displaying it as a destination in and of itself, Changi Airport Group employed social media campaigns, promotional events, and strategic partnerships to actively cultivate a sense of attachment and loyalty amongst Singaporeans. Subsequently, Changi's standing domestically and internationally is enhanced.

6.3 Directions for Future Research

As discussed in previous chapters, limitations to this thesis are associated with the remote nature of the research. While the site visit was useful in increasing my understanding of the infrastructure, I was limited in my interactions with the local population. In addition, I was not able to question government official as to the place of Changi within the national landscape. Finally, it is also worth noting that Changi has changed in real time as this thesis was redacted. Events like the singalong were not known when I visited Changi and were only announced a month before they occurred in March 2023. As a result, some aspects of this thesis may well become incomplete fairly quickly. I use this premise to suggest directions for future research on Changi Airport, and its role for locals.

Future research relevant to this thesis could look at the blurring of public and private lines in Singapore, in particular focusing on the claiming of private space by the public. Dissecting the phenomena behind these occurrences could better our understanding of urban governance, social cohesion, and cultural identity. Furthermore, additional research could investigate the implications of locals internalizing and self-regulating according to the discursive narratives around a semi-public space. The erosion of civil liberties, or the reinforcement of

power dynamics should also be studied. Overall, future research could concentrate on the interplay present in Singapore and abroad between the public and private spheres, especially when constructing discursive representations of the nation through infrastructure.

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