Informal Urban Street Markets

International Perspectives

Edited by
Clifton Evers and Kirsten Seale

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Through an international range of research, this volume examines how informal urban street markets facilitate the informal and formal economy not merely in terms of the traditional concerns of labor and consumption, but also in regards to cultural and spatial contingencies. In many places, street markets and their populace have been marginalized and devalued. At times, there are clear governance procedures that aim to prevent them, yet they continue to emerge even in the most institutionalized societies. This book gives serious consideration to what these markets reveal about urban life in a time of rapid, globalized urbanization and flows of people, knowledge and goods.

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Khalilah Zakariya

In *The Bazaar: Markets and Merchants of the Islamic World*, Weiss (1998) wrote elaborately of the richness of the bazaar from four key perspectives: how the bazaar relates to the philosophy of life; its reflection of society; the buildings and layout; and its role as "the elixir of life." His in-depth narratives and descriptions of the bazaar connect the bazaar as a physical place with historical and cultural context, meanings, and experiences to reveal the bazaar's complexity and richness. Weiss wrote in the foreword of his book:

> The bazaar is much more than just a picturesque maze of workshops and shops in which tourists pick up souvenirs and get lost. It is a city within a city, with its own economy and way of life and a spiritual background from which western society has a great deal to learn.
>
> (p. 7)

The richness and complexity of a night market can be appreciated from a similar multilayered perspective. This chapter investigates night markets in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and maps a night market operating at multiple scales: the city, street, and the stall. The scales are interrelated. Operations and changes that occur at the street or the stall scale will affect how the night markets operate at the larger scale, and vice versa. The aim of this chapter is to encourage designers, planners, market stakeholders, and even visitors to reflect upon how the night markets work in urban Malaysia, informing decisions made in regards to them.

THE NIGHT MARKET AS AN INFORMAL URBAN SPACE

The night market is an informal urban event commonly found in most Malaysian cities, towns, and neighbourhoods. Night markets, which usually take place from late afternoon until late evening, started operating in cities in

Malaysia in the 1970s following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (1971–90). City councils fostered the night market as a platform for small entrepreneurs and farmers to sell their products as a source of income, and as a result urban night market activities have been assimilated into the Malaysian culture.

In Malaysia, people are attracted to night markets to experience a part of the local culture. People can find local delicacies alongside localized 'global' dishes such as burgers, ice-blended drinks, and gas-oven pizza. People 'bump' into each other. Night markets are social events. The market organizer positions food and drink stalls among clothes, accessories, and toys stalls. The effect is a variety of social and cultural experiences for visitors and vendors, as well as buying and selling opportunities.

While I acknowledge the *pasar malam* image of the night markets, I contest the hegemony of this interpretation. *Pasar malam* means night market in Malaysia, yet it also connotes something very informal and casual. The expression conjures up representations of a chaotic, crowded, and lively night market atmosphere. I want to consider the formalities of such markets and how the formal and informal work together. This line of thought allow us to rethink how night markets in Kuala Lumpur operate as part of the city, as a way of knowing city life.

THE NEED TO REDISCOVER

The cultural geographer Doreen Massey proposes that we need to understand how places change (Massey, 1991; 2005). Massey explains that places are not static, but rather go through processes and accumulate meaning accordingly. Massey (1991) writes:

> What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.
>
> (p. 28)

Massey's work urges us to rethink how places like the night markets and other informal street markets work. They need to be valued for their dynamic qualities that are a result of their progress over time, but that also drive that progress.

Norberg-Schulz (1996) explains that the character of place is represented as "a general comprehensive atmosphere" and "the concrete form and substance of the space-defining elements" (p. 419). He relates this character of place to the experience of a person who visits a foreign city and notices particular characteristics of the city. This, in turn, shapes the

person's experience. This sense that a place evokes in a person constantly refers back to certain unique characteristics that are different from other places. While designers and planners often search for a sense of place, Massey (1991) argues that such a "desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of movement and change" is problematic (p. 26). It would require places to have clear and rigid 'boundaries,' and the 'inside' and 'outside' of places would have to be distinguishable. Places would have to revert to having a single identity. Yet, informal urban street markets repeatedly demonstrate that there is always movement, change, dynamism, and porous boundaries.

METHODS: OBSERVING AND MAPPING NIGHT MARKETS

The investigation began by mapping 95 night market locations in Kuala Lumpur. Mapping is a method that records and reveals information to make invisible processes and characteristics visible. While maps traditionally function to record information or routes, maps also have qualities that reveal relationships between places and people (Harmon, 2004; Harmon & Clemans, 2009). When we choose to record specific things, we can 'see' and analyze how one thing relates to another. Black (2009) suggests that "mapping constructs a way of seeing" (p. 27). For example, choosing 'what' to map is critical to what and how a map might reveal.

Many artists and designers employ different modes of exploring and following certain objects, people or routes as methods to map the city (Calle & Auster, 1999; Careri, 2002; Hoffman & Irmas, 1989; Sadler, 1998; Wiley, 2010). From knowing the different ways people utilize, appropriate, or even ignore places, designers can then decide how and where to act. From the city to the street, the investigation followed a night market vendor for five days to his five different market sites. Through tracking the journey of a night market vendor, infrastructures and systems of the night markets became visible. The mapping process moved from the scale of the city to that of the street and the stall.

This study applied techniques of observation to understand how the vendor appropriates his temporary stall space. Observations were documented and photographed, and then mapped as a way of making connections between the night market, the city, and the users (Hood, 1997; Zeisel, 1984). Places like the night market are informal, temporary, and mobile. Visitors and vendors experience the senses of the night market at a human scale. When the market changes location, another spatial experience is created. Therefore, this study employed a more personal engagement with the night market sites in order to observe the market operation closely and broadly on shifting scales.
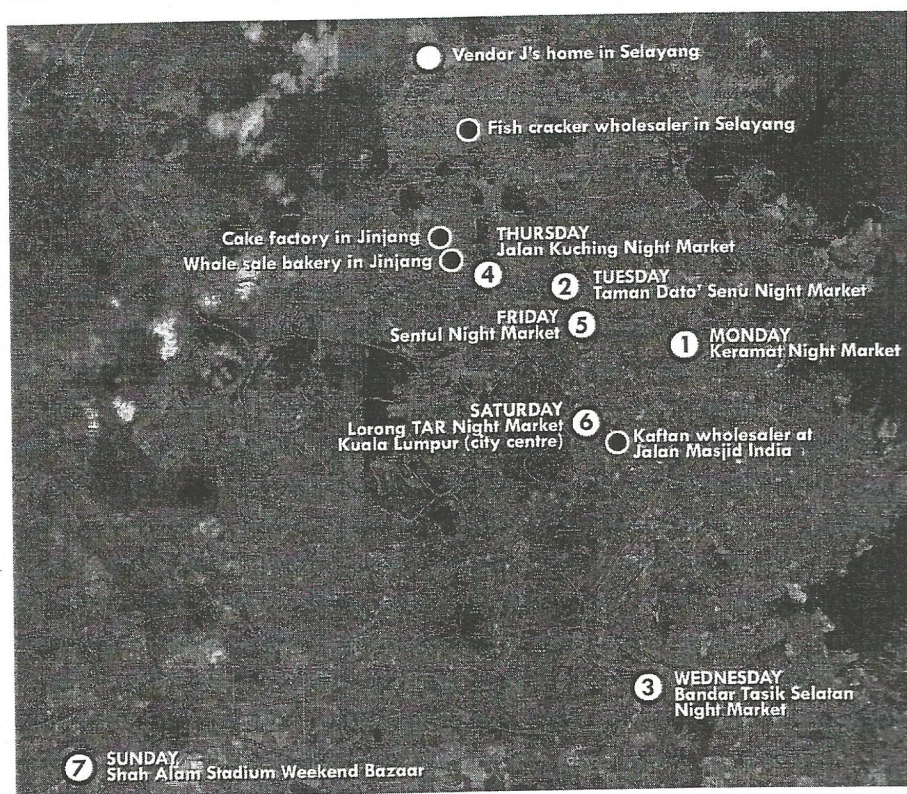
Figure 12.1   Vendor J's weekly market locations and supplier of goods.
(*Source:* Map data © 2014 Google, Sanborn)

MAPPING INFRASTRUCTURES AT THE CITY SCALE

Site mapping alongside Vendor J draws our attention to how night markets have 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructures. Hard infrastructure refers to components that physically support and enable the market operation. This includes location, surrounding context, the market space, and facilities that vendors and visitors find useful such as parking spaces, public toilets, electricity supply, and prayer rooms for Muslims. Adjacent neighbourhood contexts, such as commercial areas, residential areas, or tourist sites, are also vital components in the market system, as they act as the points of distribution for potential market visitors. In a way, the night market 'borrows' the functions of these more permanent and formal facilities.

The markets where Vendor J operates range from the neighbourhood night market to the city night market. Both types of markets have similar infrastructures. Neighbourhood night markets do not usually require public

toilets or prayer rooms because they are located near to the residential areas, where there is usually a mosque or community prayer hall, as well as public toilets. At city night markets, visitors and vendors can go to the nearest mosque or the public prayer rooms provided at shopping centres, while at the same time using the public toilet facilities. Five of the markets where Vendor J operates are located near a mosque or a community prayer hall.

The location of Lorong TAR night market is strategic because support facilities surround the market. The night market is within the vicinity of several commercial places in Kuala Lumpur: shopping complexes, fabric and clothing retail shops, a wholesale supermarket, and tourist attractions such as the Masjid Jamek (Jamek Mosque) and the heritage buildings along the main road. The Lorong TAR night market not only shares the hard infrastructure from its surrounding neighbourhood, but also 'borrows' the familiarity and popularity of this heritage city quarter. This location is also convenient for local and foreign visitors because of its proximity to hotels and public transportation.

Hard infrastructure is tied to soft infrastructure. For a city, a component like a policy or a guideline is an example of soft infrastructure. In *Invisible Infrastructures*, Ware writes that policy "shapes the physical form of cities and communities" (2004, p. 122). The acceptance of a certain culture in a community is also a part of soft infrastructure, as it is an influential condition that encourages people to conduct certain activities. The familiar image of a place and the attachment that people have towards a place are also instances of soft infrastructure. They attach values to the hard infrastructure of the city.

It is clear that there are agreements and degrees of acceptance that enable night markets to operate in Kuala Lumpur at the city scale. In an interview with members of the Vendor Association of Lorong TAR Night Market, the president of the organization informed me that the planning and operations of the night market involve collaboration between their association, the city council, the vendors, and other support services. This process reveals that the night market, while including informality, also involves organization. Processes and procedures to plan a market either goes from a top-down approach, where the city council requests a night market to operate, or from a bottom-up approach, where the vendor association proposes a night market.

For Lorong TAR night market, the collaboration between the three main parties demonstrates the involvement of individuals and organizing bodies at different levels. For instance, while individual vendors must apply for their vending licenses from the city council, they pay their stall fees to the vendor association. The city council monitors the licensing and regulations. The vendor association manages and monitors the operations of the market on the site. Other services come into this process to support the night market, such as the neighbourhood watch, community association, garbage collection service, and electricity supplier.
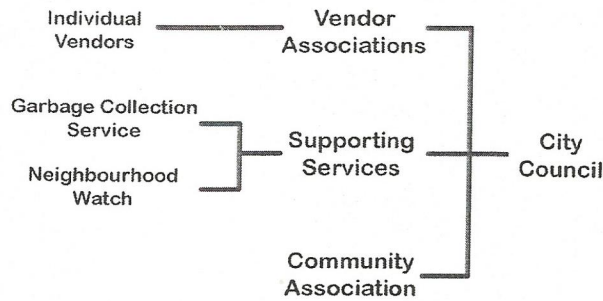
Figure 12.2   Components of the night market soft infrastructure.

In the case where the vendor association proposes a night market, it is required to submit a proposal to the city council. The council evaluates the proposal based on demand from the community, the flow of traffic that might change during the market operation, and the possible effects of the market on the surrounding business premises and neighbourhood. The relevant departments in the city council assess the proposed operations of the night market prior to approval or disapproval. Upon approval, the city council designates a site for the night market and a signboard is erected to inform the public about the market's operation. The council then demarcates the space for each stall based on the number of vendors participating in the night market.

The tracking and mapping activities of the night markets were conducted for five days around Kuala Lumpur, with one market outside of the city in Shah Alam. The network between Vendor J and his night market stalls is more robust than stalls and products. His products are a part of the larger wholesale product system and the formal industry.

Arriving at Lorong TAR, Vendor J sets up his cake stall first and then the kaftan stall. The step-by-step installation process is as follows:

Step 1: Park van temporarily near the stall lot

Step 2: Unload the tents from the van

Step 3: Open the tent that is approximately 3.6 meters by 2.4 meters (requires two people)

Step 4: Set up foldable table footing and unload the packs of fish crackers

Step 5: Arrange the plywood table-tops onto the table footing

Step 6: Unload the stacks of crates filled with cakes (requires two people)

Step 7: Unload two large containers filled with plastic bags, coins, light bulbs and cords, and store them under the tables.

Step 8: Cover the table with table mats

Step 9: Arrange the cakes according to the types—banana cakes on the far end, followed by cheese cakes, marble cakes and others. His assistant arranges the cakes in rows and stacks the similar types of cakes on top each other to maximize the space.

Step 10: While arranging, some customers are already visiting the stall to purchase the cakes

Step 11: Convert the unused crates into a stool and stores the remaining cakes under the tables

Step 12: Plug-in lighting to the nearest plug points

Vendor J's installation process uncovers further hard and soft infrastructures at the scale of the stalls. Foldable, mobile, and modular components are necessary for Vendor J because his kit of parts and products needs to fit inside his van. It was interesting to observe how Vendor J arranges the cakes that he bought from the wholesale bakery and cake factory. He stacks the
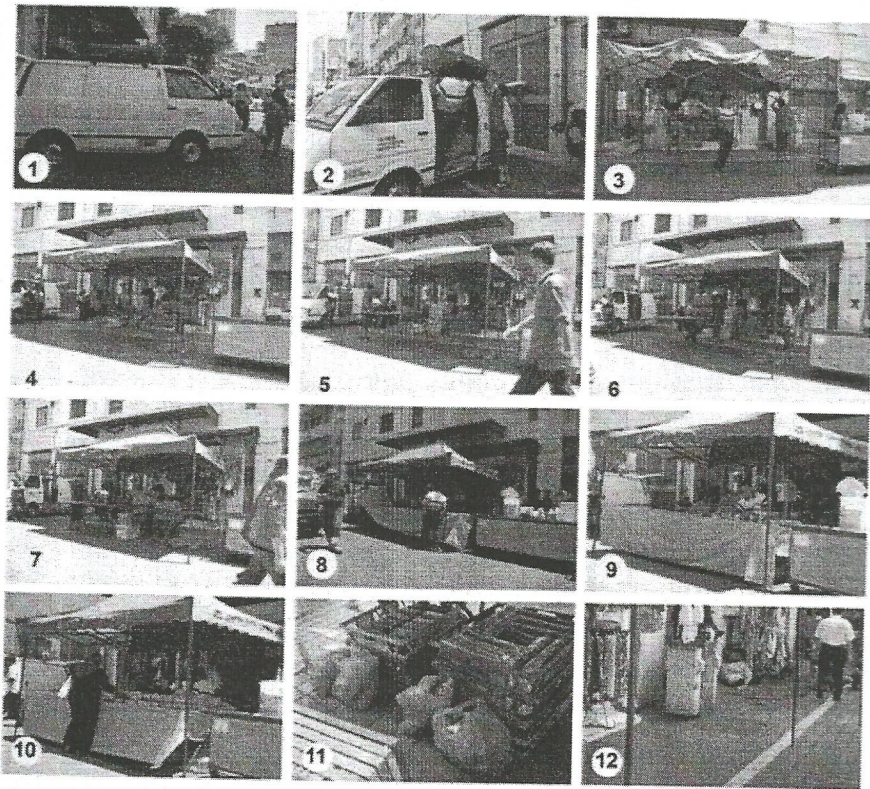

Figure 12.3   Vendor J's cake stall installation process.

cakes according to type on top of each other. The flat surfaces of the packaging made it easier for the cakes to be stacked so that Vendor J does not have to add an additional display rack. At the kaftan stall, he hangs the hangers on the stall frames. Here, the stall frames becomes an armature for vending. His appropriation techniques demonstrate that the kit of parts for vending at a night market needs to be adaptable to the products, and vice versa. In designing props and equipment for market vendors, modularity and practicality of installation must be considered.

While Vendor J sets up the cake stall, his assistants arrange the products at the kaftan stall. The kaftan stall involves the use of three tents: a large tent (3.6 × 2.4 metres) and two small tents (1.8 × 1.8 metres). The assistant vendors hang the kaftans around the three sides of the stalls on clothing hangers that attach to the tent frames. The assistant vendors then partially wrap a clear plastic around the stalls to create a thin wall between the kaftan stall and the adjacent stalls. This plastic cover acts as a separator from the fried chicken stall next to it while at the same time still allowing the colourful kaftans to be seen.

At the scale of the stall, micro infrastructures become apparent. Taking Vendor J's cake stall as an example, the hard and soft infrastructures for this one stall involve several components. The operation of a stall at Lorong TAR night market includes different fees. Vendors pay the space rental and purchase of standardized tents to the vendor association. They pay the fees for electricity and garbage collection services to a different organization.

The stall lot at this night market costs MYR52 (US$15) for one year, rented from the vendor association. Each vendor's license costs MYR26 (US$8) for one year paid to the city council. The vendor then purchases a standardized tent with the colour theme and logo of the city council and the vendor association for MYR235 (US$71) per stall. However, the vendor can use additional nonstandardized tents provided that they are extensions of the standardized stalls. This is a method for the association to monitor and regulate registered vendors. For the use of electricity, the city council

Figure 12.4 Vendor J's kaftan stall.

Kuala Lumpur City Hall

trading license

RM 26.00 / year

RM 235.00

Vendor J purchased the stall/tent from the Vendor Association

RM 4.00 / tent
for garbage collection fee

each vendor pay this fee weekly to the Vendor Association

garbage collection service

RM 52.00 / year

each vendor pay this annually to the Vendor Association

vendor's products

fish crackers from wholesaler

+

cakes from wholesale bakery

+

cakes from cake factory

light bulbs

1st + 2nd + 3rd
RM2 + RM1 + RM1

weekly electrical plug-points fees collected by another commercial/shopowners association

sometimes Vendor J sublets his extra space to another vendor who sells fish satay
RM *negotiable*

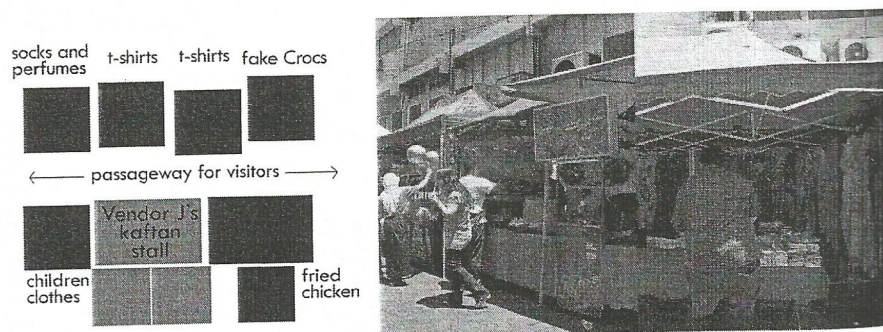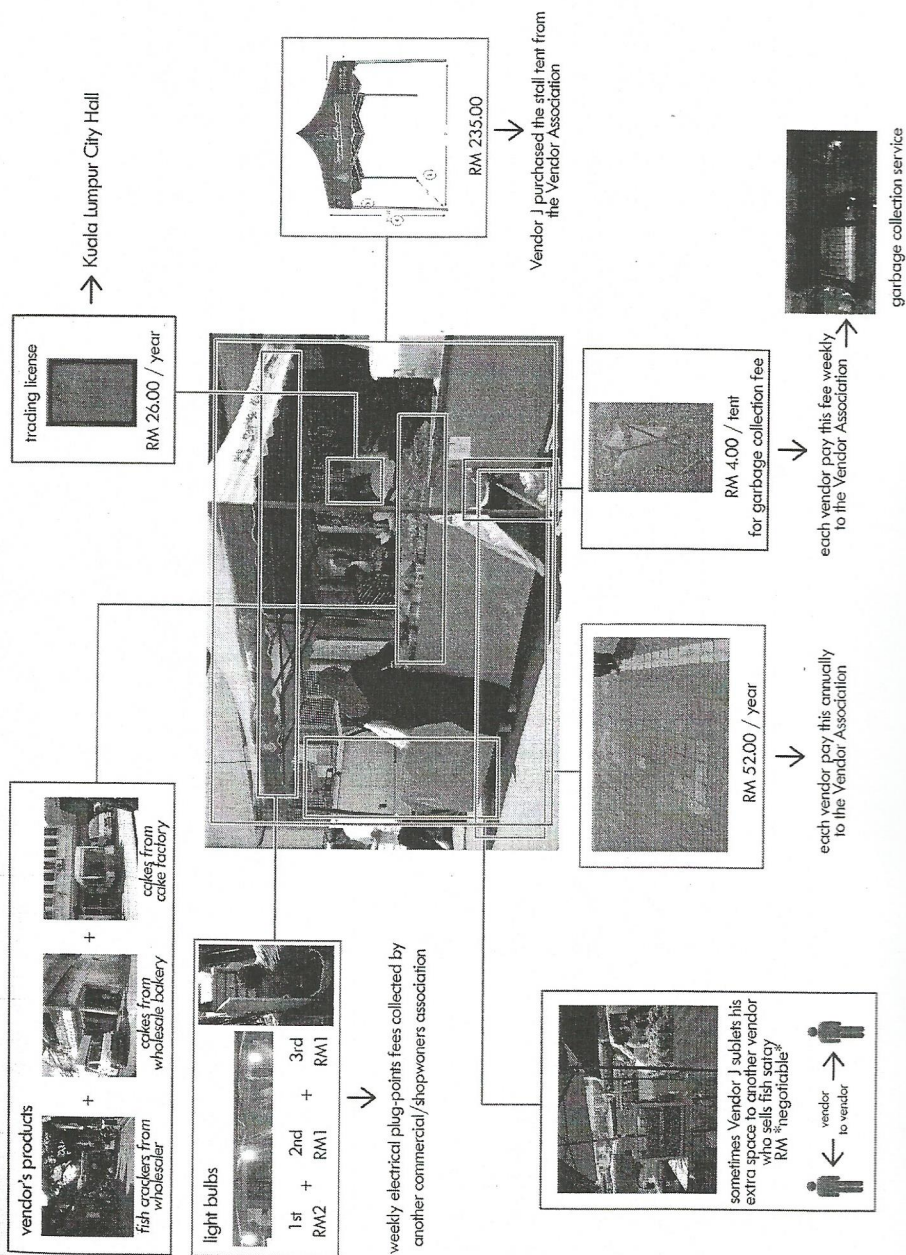vendor to vendor

Figure 12.5 Hard and soft infrastructures for Vendor J's night market stall.

provides plug points with a fee of MYR2 (US$0.60) for the first light bulb, and MYR1 (US$0.30) for each subsequent light bulb. A representative from another association collects the fee weekly at the night market. As with the garbage collection service, vendors pay MYR4 (US$1.20) per stall. According to the vendor association, certain markets include the fees for garbage collection and electricity into the fees for the stall rentals. This depends on how the vendor associations manage their night markets. Additionally, there are vendors who sublet part of their stall space to other casual vendors. This becomes a subsystem, the vendor making a 'gentlemen's agreement' with the casual vendor.

LESSONS FROM THE NIGHT MARKET

At a glance, the night market may appear to be *ad hoc* and informal but, in fact, it works *with* a formal and an organized system. The system is a unique one, as it requires the framework to be flexible enough to suit the evolving and dynamic nature of the night market. Mapping the hard and soft infrastructures of the night market has been key to revealing this process, and exposes how the night market fits into the larger system of the city through operations at the scale of the city, the street, and the stall. The infrastructures that they need to operate also demonstrate that the system of a night market differs from other public spaces or commercial developments, due to its informality and temporality. With these observations in mind, urban planners, designers, and market organizers can better identify where and how to act.

Vendor J's journey map reveals a network of systems that exist as part of his night market operation. The network includes points of distribution where he sourced his products before selling them at the night markets. The map reveals the connections between Lorong TAR night market and systems of the city. Each night market vendor's operation contributes to the Lorong TAR night market at large. Vendor J purchases his night market products from manufacturers and suppliers and then sells to the customers at the night market. The products become part of the elements that give the night market its informality and richness, yet they may come from wholesalers in the formal sector. The different range of product choice and the variety of ways that the vendors display them create the colourful and rich image of the night market. This is part of the essence that makes the night market a vibrant event in the city.

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