

Geylang: The new Chinatown

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China nationals are flocking to Geylang, drawn by low rents and cheap food. Jamie Ee Wen Wei scouts out the area.

Ask Hebei native Albert Li where the real tang ren jie, or Chinatown, is in Singapore, and he will tell you confidently that it is in Geylang.

'Among the Chinese nationals here, we have privately discussed this many times,' he said in Mandarin.

'Geylang is more like a tang ren jie than Chinatown. There must be more Chinese nationals living and working here than in Chinatown,' said the 25-year-old.

Mr Li, who has been in Singapore for almost two years, mans a provision shop on Geylang Road which sells goods from China.

Indeed, his sentiments are shared by most of the China nationals whom The Sunday Times met in the neighbourhood known for its red-light allures and food.

No official numbers are available but anecdotal evidence suggests that a growing number of China nationals - namely the working class, students and entrepreneurs - are flocking to the precinct.

Singaporeans certainly have noticed their presence. In a letter to The Straits Times Forum two months ago, a reader observed how Geylang has evolved from a racially mixed, multilingual area into an enclave for new residents from China, with a growing prevalence of Chinese-only shop signs.

When The Sunday Times visited the neighbourhood last week, many such signs were seen, advertising Chinese products and services like hairdressing and Internet usage. Mom-and-pop eateries serving authentic Chinese cuisine dotted the shophouses.

Their waitresses, almost all China nationals, greeted passers-by in various Chinese accents. Drive by in the evenings, and you spot groups of Chinese workers sitting along the busy streets to unwind.

Why is Geylang such a magnet?

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that historically, immigrants from developing countries tend to congregate in the less fanciful or desirable town centres because of lower rent and cheaper food.

This was true of Chinatown in Singapore, and elsewhere, like the Newtown suburb in Wellington, New Zealand, and the Fortitude Valley in Brisbane, Australia, he said.

'Geylang is a food haven and a district populated with places of worship, clan associations and other traditional enterprises. New arrivals could have been drawn to Geylang because of these characteristics,' he said.

Indeed, China nationals who live and work there said they chose Geylang for its lower rents, array of Chinese food and accessibility.

Mr Liu Yang, 28, who lived in a dormitory for foreign workers for eight months, said the rent for a bed space in Geylang is between \$150 and \$180 a month, way below that elsewhere.

'I've a friend who works in Chinatown. He tried to find a place to stay in Outram and was quoted \$280 for a bed space,' said Mr Liu who works at a beancurd shop in Geylang. He lives in Whampoa now.

Ms He Wen Wen, 24, chose Geylang as it is near her school in Aljunied, where she studies accounting and finance. The Henan native lived in an HDB flat in Sengkang before moving to a condo in Geylang with seven friends - all students from China - five years ago.

'I like the food here, such as the beef hor fun at Lorong 9. I can also find Shanghainese food like xiang la xie (spicy crab), which I enjoy.'

Dr Leong said the nooks and corners in the neighbourhood also favour small-time businessmen who can nurture their trades at a lower cost. Indeed, businesses like Internet cafes and eateries targeting the Chinese have mushroomed.

Earlier reports estimated that there are about 200 food outlets opened by China nationals. On weekends especially, scores of their countrymen living elsewhere flock to the area for a touch of home.

Singaporean Kelvin Ho, 35, who runs two supermarkets in the neighbourhood, has benefited from their presence. Some 70 per cent of his customers are China nationals.

'I've been doing business here for about 10 years and it's obvious to me the number of China nationals is growing,' said the businessman who stocks items like vegetables and beauty products.

Dr Leong said a social enclave like the one developing in Geylang is harmless and is a natural coping mechanism for new immigrants.

'It is only human instinct to want to meet and socialise with people who share a similar cultural background and nationality.'

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore agrees, noting that social enclaves serve the needs of new immigrants and help them settle in faster.

But if it becomes a segregated community with different habits and values, it could lead to prejudice, discrimination and tensions, he said.

Already, some Singaporeans whom The Sunday Times spoke to are complaining that the China nationals tend to talk loudly and some have undesirable social habits. Ms Linda Ong, 40, who

runs an electrical goods store on Geylang Road, said they sometimes discard empty bottles or food outside her shop.

However, Geylang Serai citizens' consultative committee chairman Eric Wong said he has not received any feedback specifically about China nationals, although residents do complain about the crowds and noise in the area.

He does not think Geylang is evolving into a Chinatown. 'There is a good mix of foreigners and locals here,' he said.

Whether the area will continue to draw the China nationals remains to be seen. Dr Lai Ah Eng, a senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, noted those who have moved up socially and economically tend to relocate.

Dr Leong agreed, saying: 'There is no reason why a successful immigrant, who is financially well-off, can speak English and has a bigger circle of Singaporean friends, would choose to patronise shops only in Geylang or Chinatown.'

Ms He, for one, hopes to move out of Geylang once she finds a job after completing her studies. She does not find the area ideal - she has been mistaken as a streetwalker and has been propositioned. She said: 'The culture here... it's too complicated.'