

29/03/2002

Old Petaling Street gasping for preservation

Tina Melan

A READER once wrote to Travel Times to express what a joy Petaling Street and the Chinatown area are to her.

"From imitation designer watches, to clothes and handbags, I entered Chinatown as a regular woman on the street and left with a Cartier watch, a Louis Vuitton handbag and a couple of DKNY and Ralph Lauren shirts as well as three movie titles on VCDs for less than RM150. Personally, no other place can make me happier."

These days, Chinatown means exactly that to tourists.

One thing for sure, the place is packing the crowds in - at night especially when it is colourful, vibrant and bustles with people and their activities. Food outlets are in abundance and there are many small inns, which cater mostly to backpackers.

To compare the area to what it was way back then, here's how author J.M Gullick, in his book *The Story of Kuala Lumpur (1857-1939)*, described Petaling Street:

"The town teemed with people - Petaling Street was lined on each side by stalls; crowded in every conceivable crook and cranny by Chinese; two continuous lines of carriages, gharries and rikshas ... a glaring sun, a blinding dust and a strong odour of cooking, etcetera, floated around."

Going by such a description, Petaling Street (which many assume is the accurate name for the entire Chinatown area) certainly hasn't changed very much in the last 100 years or so.

But visit the area during the day, look closely and your eyes will catch it; talk to its longtime residents and your heart might just feel the difference.

It probably helps to know a bit about the history of old Kuala Lumpur and Chinatown.

Kuala Lumpur was a typical "pioneer" town, filled with a rough and tough population that was largely male. There was the continuing problem of maintaining law and order.

Up to his death in 1885, Kapitan Cina Yap Ah Loy, who owned much of the land in the area, was responsible for maintaining peace. Left to his own devices, he made use of the secret society's coercive power.

Chinese leaders provided for the community through associations, benevolent societies, temples and foundations. Through these organisations, free lodging, work, contact with China, education, medical and funerary needs were facilitated.

Chinatown became the centre for the Chinese social life, where residents eat, sleep, work and form life-long relationships with neighbours. There was a "community" of closely bonded tenants, who looked out for each other from one generation to the next.

Association and business premises remained where they were from the beginning, some renting while others ending up as landlords.

Now, slowly but surely, the face and feel of Chinatown is changing, partly due to the repeal of the Rent Control Act in Dec 30, 1999 as well as property owners' lack of funds to see to their buildings' upkeep.

With the repeal of the Rent Control Act, owners, who have been renting out their property for what is considered a song, are now free to "put a price" on their rental fee.

The repeal of the Rent Control Act has brought to bear development pressures in a place of historical value like Chinatown.

In part of Jalan Balai Polis, the look of some shophouses, which was once typical of the 1920s, have been transformed into modern restaurants and bars.

These kind of facade renovations by owners and the nature of business of new tenants certainly suggest the former enjoying better rental income, never mind if the new look clashes with the neighbourhood and is somewhat of an eyesore.

Old and aplenty, "kopitiam" in the area are now taken over by American-born fastfood chains and fashionable (pretentious?) designer coffee outlets.

While development is extreme in some cases, a local resident's heart will bleed to see other buildings left to rot, as if they never mattered to anyone.

In Jalan Sultan, what is left of the once-significant Colonial Hotel is only its outer shell, with branches of trees jutting out between loose bricks.

The hotel, as with some of the other structures in the area, are left to dilapidate, never mind if it was listed in the Malaya Directory 1959 as a first class boarding house.

What used to be the Old High Street (now Jalan Tun H.S. Lee) Police Station is now a huge parking lot, earning "easy money" for its landowner.

Badan Warisan Malaysia executive director Elizabeth Cardoso when asked to comment says: "Architectural heritage is a statement of our history and provides us with our sense of place.

"Through preserving our architectural heritage, we recognise and celebrate the achievements of our nation and our people".

She says much of the built fabrics of Chinatown are gone, as well as many traditional trades.

"The facades are changing very drastically and because of this the character changes inevitably. The social structure has changed and the nature of what the businesses sell has changed too - there's no tenacity of the trades anymore," she points out.

And why, one may ask, is it necessary to protect these communities?

Cardosa replies: "Because they're fragile. However, there is nothing wrong with change but social values are very important. This is actually one of the biggest issues today.

"The stigma of all things old is that old can be marginalised but physical legacy and social values go hand-in-hand in preserving our identity.

"Imagine this - a building of significant heritage value has been demolished and you have no picture of it. After a while, you lose its memories - you lose the emotion and you forget. The community will forget and values will change.

"Is it possible for us to retain cultural values without the physical legacy? These are quite challenging social issues that we must continuously think about."

But the struggle between the new and the old is something that will continue.

National historian Professor Datuk Khoo Kay Kim says in the name of "development" and profit, we tend to prefer the new to the old.

"Old buildings are mostly unique, they express our character and gives us an identity," he explains.

"There seem to be a problem in our urban development. Authorities feel that the central area must be thoroughly developed. All these without any space increase, just increase population, vehicles and buildings. In the end, it all gets chaotic."

Khoo says in regards to Petaling Street and Chinatown, the bulk of the

responsibilities boils down to the owners.

"It is not just a matter of profit vs heritage. It's also a matter of technology vs culture. But unless everybody takes part, one or two people cannot change anything," he says.

"How do we teach people to value heritage? I don't know. People are just not interested in anything old. It's a cultural battle which I think the whole of Asia is losing. Singapore has basically regretted what they have done and honestly, I think it's already a little too late to save Kuala Lumpur."

In the midst of the battle of physical heritage and social values vs profit and development, one business in Jalan Balai Polis seems to be doing it right. While being profitable, it also strives to preserve the physical heritage as well as serving the community and tourists with shows and music reminiscent of bygone days. The outlet - Old China Restaurant and Antique Gallery.

Furnished with antique blackwood furniture of yesteryears and two enormous feng shui mirrors, quaint Old China is located in a 1920s Chinese shophouse in the heart of Chinatown.

The interior hasn't changed since the 1930s - the doors still have wooden latches. Upstairs is an antique gallery which doubles as a theatre for shows and movie presentations.

According to entrepreneur Huang Ke Wen, Old China occupied the building at the end of 1997. Its previous tenant was the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Laundry Association.

Pictures of the association's members are still being hung on the wall of the restaurant.

Huang says: "In the old days, the Chinese set up associations to double up as social clubs. Social life was centred around places like these, making it an important part of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown history."

The restaurant-cum-gallery has hosted some well-known figures, among them Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his family.

Opened for lunch and dinner, the outlet is usually packed with locals and foreigners alike.

"Hong Kong and Taiwanese stars like Leon Lai, Jordan Chan, Wang Lee-Hom and Stephen Chow Sing-Chi have dined here," adds Huang.

The restaurant serves Nyonya (Straits Chinese) cuisine as well as Chinese food.

Efforts to preserve our physical heritage like this should be applauded. Each building or site tells a story. They are unique and representative of cultural traditions of their era.

Without physical legacy and sound traditional values, the country may one day become a robotic fast-paced society whose only concerns are of the "perceived achievements".

Would we then be unique enough for tourism to thrive?