



SPRING FESTIVAL |

Retail landscape evolves with Chinese immigration

Lunar New Year is a lucrative time of year for Chinatown and Asian-themed shopping centres

BY BRIAN MORTON
VANCOUVER SUN

Lunar New Year is a big, big deal for Metro Vancouver's Chinese business community, now ramping up the 15-day celebration that kicked off Monday.

While activities surrounding Spring Festival, as it's known in China, are a major economic generator – bigger than Christmas for many businesses – it's also a time to reflect on how Chinatown and other Asian-themed shopping areas have grown and prospered as the face of Asian immigration changes.

More than 20 years ago, most immigrants were from the Hong Kong area and spoke Cantonese, while today's immigrant is more likely to be from mainland China and speak Mandarin. This has inspired Asian-themed shopping centres to appeal to a wider range of budgets and tastes throughout the Lower Mainland.

Richmond's retail scene has been altered significantly by the surge in Chinese immigration, with the most notable example being Aberdeen Centre, a huge Asian-style shopping mall that's packing them in.

In Richmond, where 60 per cent of the 200,000 residents are immigrants (44 per cent of Chinese origin), the Lunar New Year represents an important economic opportunity for the mall's 160 merchants.

Opened in 1989, Aberdeen Centre has evolved from a shopping centre catering primarily to immigrants and visitors from Hong Kong to one that attracts a broader clientele today. "For the past five or six years, mainland Chinese have dominated immigration, [but] we now cater more to the [larger] Asian community and locals," said the mall's promotions and public relations manager Joey Kwan. "Our mall is a reflection of that change."

For example, last Friday Aberdeen officially opened its newest grocery store, the Korean supermarket, H-Mart.

Kwan noted that Mandarin-speaking employees are in great demand as more shops and restaurants cater to mainland Chinese or Taiwanese tastes. For many of the mall's merchants, Kwan added, the Lunar New

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JOEY KWAN
ABERDEEN CENTRE MALL'S PROMOTIONS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGER

Year is a bigger retail season than Christmas, with increased spending among Asian customers and increased interest from outside the Asian community.

"[Customers] spend more than usual, whether it's going to the restaurant or buying a new household item or clothes for the family," she said. "And every year, Chinese New Year attracts not only Chinese people, but Caucasians who want to see how they celebrate the new year."

In Vancouver, the arrival of T&T Supermarket and the Asian-themed International Village mall on the edge of Chinatown was met with some trepidation in the Chinese business community, said Albert Fok, president of the Vancouver Chinatown Business Improvement Area Society. But the community has adapted.

"Initially, people [in Chinatown] were concerned because of the brand-name effect, with virtually everything under one roof," he said. "But they don't have a negative impact on us. The good thing is they bring people down to the community [and] they explore the neighbourhood."

Fok said Chinatown has evolved, with many restaurants now geared to northern Chinese tastes, and more non-Chinese are setting up shop.

He cited Peking Lounge as one "very successful" example. The furniture store at 83 East Pender owned by Michael Bennett and Daniel Poulin specializes in Chinese antique furniture.

According to Poulin, Chinatown has changed a lot since he opened the store in 2003. More Chinese are buying Chinese antiques for their homes,



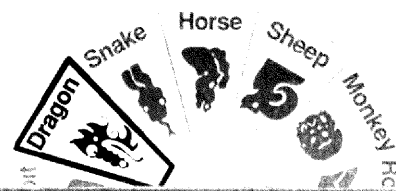
Joey Kwan, the public relations manager for Aberdeen Centre, says this time of year is a bigger retail season than Christmas.

he said. Newer, trendier Chinatown shops are also attracting a more diverse range of customers. "There's more people living here," he said.

Thomas Tam, CEO of the immigrant services organization S.U.C.C.E.S.S. and its former director of business and economic development, said Chinatown has suffered over the last decade, but has turned a corner by attracting modern businesses.

T&T and International Village have not hurt Chinatown, as they draw new people to the area and provide other options for residents, added Tam, who is also on the Chinatown Revitalization Committee. "[Customers] can go to T&T and International Village and then go to Chinatown as well."

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LUNAR NEW YEAR

Saturday, Jan. 21

WESTCOAST NEWS: The customs and traditions of Lunar New Year.

Monday, Jan. 23

WESTCOAST NEWS: A visit with three former Miss Chinatown ambassadors.

Tuesday, Jan. 24

STYLE: How to wear lucky red and look great.

TODAY

BUSINESS: The rise of Chinese business centres.

Thursday, Jan. 26

WESTCOAST LIFE: Guide to the Lunar New Year festival.

Friday, Jan. 27

MOVIES: Hollywood east: Taiwan's booming film biz.

Saturday, Jan. 28

WESTCOAST NEWS: Behind the scenes as participants prepare for the annual parade.

Monday, Jan. 30

WESTCOAST NEWS: Complete coverage of the annual new year's parade.