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Is Joo Chiat's 'Little Vietnam of *pho* and sex' a thing of the past? – Essay and Photo Essay > Nicolas Lainez

Is Joo Chiat's 'Little Vietnam of *pho* and sex' a Thing of the Past?

Nicolas Lainez

Walking along Joo Chiat Road during the day, one is immediately struck by the co-existence of two contrasting worlds. Dotted along the quiet street are design studios, art galleries, fashion and home accessory retailers, vintage furniture shops, patisseries selling delectable cupcakes, ice cream and chocolates catering to trendy young Singaporeans dressed *à la mode*. However, between Mountbatten Road and the Kahlid Mosque, Vietnamese eateries sporting functional plastic seats and tables serve cheap Vietnamese food to an insider clientele – Vietnamese residents and Singaporean visitors from all over the island. The atmosphere is casual and low-key. In front of the eateries, Vietnamese women sit and chat with each other over tea. But as twilight approaches, Joo Chiat undergoes a transformation – from a quiet middle class neighborhood to a vibrant entertainment venue. The fashionable young Singaporeans leave and are replaced by older Singaporean men who arrive alone in taxis and leave in the company of women. These men sit in the pubs, karaoke lounges and Vietnamese diners, eating, drinking, shouting and flirting with scantily dressed Vietnamese women.

The neighborhood of Joo Chiat is the setting for an ongoing struggle between two contrasting visions of space – one that offers conspicuous consumption and another that peddles prurient pleasures. In this battle of values and ideals, the former vision is partly represented by grassroots campaigners which seeks to excise the group of

Vietnamese migrant entertainers, their Singaporean clients and businessmen who own entertainment outlets. This group has suffered severe losses, but maintains a silent siege in Joo Chiat.

Multicultural and multifaceted Joo Chiat

The appeal of Joo Chiat lies in its multifaceted nature. Each of these facets is attractive to certain groups, and the sum of them creates a space that retains its individuality. The neighborhood's gentrified ambience draws certain shoppers and families. The cluster of modest Vietnamese eateries caters to the rank and file. The bars and entertainers provide sensual and voyeuristic diversion. The combination attracts Singaporeans, Vietnamese and expats who appreciate alternative lifestyles.

In fact, diversity and multiculturalism have been a constant in Joo Chiat's history. The area is infused with different cultural elements, reflecting the various communities that have lived there. Joo Chiat was founded in the early 19th century as a collection of Chinese and Malay fishing and farming villages interspersed with several European homesteads. It gradually became known as a relaxed and scenic locale, popular with those wishing to escape the bustle of the city. In the early 20th century, shop houses in the Peranakan style were built. From the 1960s onwards, in keeping with the city's development, the area's traditional kampongs and holiday bungalows gave way to the growth of high-rise condominiums (Kong and Chang 2001).

Since the late 1990s, Joo Chiat's multicultural offerings have expanded to include a small Vietnamese community, a reason why some reporters have called it 'Little Vietnam' (Ling 2010). It has now become part of the landscape, joining the well-established Chinese and Malay communities. During this period, Joo Chiat witnessed a significant expansion of its entertainment industry, which began when a local economic downturn in 2001 provoked a drop in the prices and rentals of shop houses (Othman 2013). As such, the number of pubs, massage parlors, karaoke lounges and mid-range hotels offering hourly rates began to grow, attracting large numbers of Vietnamese migrant entertainers. Many of these women rented accommodation in Joo Chiat. At the same time, Vietnamese eateries, often run by Vietnamese-Singaporean couples, sprang up to cater to their tastes. In the mid-2000s, the area became known as a major 'unofficial' red-light district in the East, a Vietnamese extension of the more well-known Geylang. During that time, it boasted over dozens of licensed pubs and karaoke lounges along a 1.3 km-long stretch. At around the same time, designers, artists and people working in the media industry moved into the

area, adding to its diversity.

However, the addition of the Vietnamese community has not gone smoothly. Rather, conflicting interests embedded in unequal power relations have arisen, particularly between grassroots movements and the Vietnamese entertainment community.

Save Joo Chiat Working Group

'Ours is a story of a community coming together with a vision: to rebuild a neighborhood where residents can raise their families in a safe, secure and sleaze-free environment.' (Joo Chiat Community Website)

The main – but not exclusive – grassroots movement in Joo Chiat that has operated a campaign against the Vietnamese entertainment community is the Save Joo Chiat Working Group (SJCWG). Retiree Colin Chee and 11 other residents launched the group in 2004 with the support from then Member of Parliament Chan Soo Sen. Its goal was to provide local residents with the opportunity to voice their complaints about the growing entertainment sector. SJCWG grew rapidly, comprising more than 200 members in 2010 (Tay 2010). The group was driven by a desire to transform Joo Chiat into a place filled with Peranakan heritage catering to educated tastes. In order to achieve this, it was believed that the entertainment industry had to be expunged.

The terms used in the quote above – 'reconstruction', 'security' and 'sleaze-free' – convey clearly the moral undertones of the campaign. First, a discourse was created about the entertainment industry with the use of pejorative language ('sleaze'), and the association with moral and social peril. The campaign waged a war against public soliciting, scantily dressed women, public sex activity, public urination, alcoholism, public fighting and violence, noise pollution, drunk-driving, illegal parking, gambling, crime syndicate activities, sex trafficking and the presence of low income foreign workers as clients (Chua 2005; Quek 2005; Tay 2010). In particular, Vietnamese migrant entertainers have been held up as the *agents provocateurs* in the local entertainment industry. In addition to disseminating this negative image, particularly throughout local media, SJCWG engaged in ground visits and area patrols in collaboration with grassroots leaders, supported the imposition of a moratorium on the delivery of new licenses for pubs, massage parlors and karaoke lounges by authorities via a demerit points accumulation system, and supported multiple-agency raids on vice activities and late-night road checks for drunk drivers.

The campaign succeeded on many fronts. In 2006, the government imposed a reduction of opening hours for pubs: they had to close at 1 am, 2 hours earlier than before. Another important victory claimed by the group was the ban on hourly rates in local hotels: the Singapore Hotels Licensing Board imposed a full-day rate condition on 1 January 2009. The hourly-rate ban was first applied to the 9 existing hotels along Joo Chiat Road (among them 6 owned by the Hotel 81 Group, which has a strong presence in Singapore's red light districts), and extended to new hotels that opened in the area (Teo 2008). In addition, the group claims to have successfully shut down a number of pubs, reducing numbers from 46 in 2005 to 31 in 2008, and massage parlors, from 30 to 4 in the same period (Liw and Yeo 2009). In April 2013, according to my own calculations, 10 pubs, 5 karaoke lounges and 1 massage parlor for non-sexual services remained open. Raids have also proven effective. The number of women arrested for vice activities increased from 50 in 2003 to 418 in 2004, then dropped from about 400 a year in 2007 to 40 in 2009 (Chua 2005, Tay 2010).

As a consequence of the campaign, Joo Chiat has undergone a massive spatial and social transformation that reporters have called a 'facelift' (Tay 2010). Cupcake shops, trendy restaurants, interior design studios and art galleries in renovated Peranakan shop houses are replacing pubs, karaoke lounges and massage parlors on Joo Chiat Road. Real estate developments have literally mushroomed in recent years with many pockets of old houses being renovated or redeveloped into apartment blocks and landed homes. An example of this is the Lotus at Joo Chiat, a serviced apartment development that comprises several apartments and conserved shop houses, and also won the Urban Redevelopment Authority Architectural Heritage Award in 2002.

Is Little Vietnam a thing of the past?

The common perception of the Joo Chiat Vietnamese community that SJCWK and the media have disseminated is that of Vietnamese migrant entertainers soliciting Singaporean clients. However, the Vietnamese character of the place extends beyond this homogenous and simplistic image of sexualised women chasing lonely males.

On the one hand, the six remaining well-known and popular Vietnamese eateries cater not only to migrant entertainers, but also to Vietnamese students, young professionals and homemakers who gather in Joo Chiat. That said, Little Vietnam is not as developed as other niche areas in providing services and products for migrant communities, such as the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road and Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road that cater to the vibrant Thai and Filipino communities of Singapore,

respectively. Of course, the main difference is that these communities are safely contained in malls, whereas the Little Vietnam is situated in a residential neighborhood. In addition, the Vietnamese community is small – Vietnamese nationals only began to arrive in Singapore in the late 1990s – and diverse with regards to employment, legal status, and social class. Although less busy and vibrant than Golden Mile and Lucky Plaza, Little Vietnam still possesses a strong and unique Vietnamese identity that is hidden from many Singaporeans.

In 2010, I conducted research in a boarding house for Vietnamese migrant entertainers located at the heart of Joo Chiat which revealed the Vietnamese character that embodies this social world^[1]. The term 'Little Vietnam' does indeed correspond to the social world in which Vietnamese migrant entertainers inhabit. In the boarding house, everything was related to Vietnam: the migrants spoke Vietnamese, prayed to Vietnamese gods and carried magic amulets from Vietnam to increase the possibility of success in business and as protection from the police and immigration, the Vietnamese manager and migration broker cooked Vietnamese dishes, green tea was the main drink available, Vietnamese newspapers brought by newcomers were available, and entertainers constantly interacted with their families from Vietnam using international telephone cards and other modern communication technologies such as the Internet. Clearly, one could only eat, drink, speak, read and breathe Vietnamese air in this heavily guarded, functional and transient space. Outside the house, the area of the notorious 'Blue Zone' ten-meter stretch, where several pubs operate next to the former Blue Lagoon Lounge, which closed in November 2010, extended this social space: Vietnamese restaurants sold inexpensive but tasty Vietnamese dishes in a cheap and functional environment, where customers spoke freely and loudly amongst themselves.

Little Vietnam has become even littler in the past few years. The Save Joo Chiat campaign has dramatically decreased the scale of the entertainment industry. The Vietnamese migrant entertainer community has lost on all fronts, as it is currently losing its middle-end customer niche^[2], free of competition from women from other countries and of sex and crime syndicate activity such as in Geylang. Some women have started to move towards other red light districts including Geylang, particularly Lorong 11 and 24, and Orchard Towers, or to work sporadically in highly restricted areas such as the casinos, where a local and foreign male gambling clientele demands entertainment services (Khoo 2011). Although Vietnamese women are powerless and voiceless in the ongoing spatial transformation in Joo Chiat, however, this does not necessarily mean that their expulsion will come to an end quickly and smoothly. Joo

Chiat has been and still is a Vietnamese space, and women have lots to lose by moving elsewhere. Their silent – but efficient – resistance does not center on trying to counter the SJCWG campaign, or to pressure the gentrified middle class to change their views and projects, but simply by staying.

Conclusion

The social and economic transformation that Joo Chiat is undergoing reflects two things. On one hand, it reveals how social groups in Singapore (re)define and (re)construct space. SJCWG has undoubtedly succeeded in imposing its view of a gentrified middle-class neighborhood, reducing deviant sexuality and questionable morals. Their plan of action has proven to be effective in the discursive arena and in collective action. The Vietnamese entertainment community, particularly the migrant entertainers, has been less vociferous due to its lack of cohesion and political will. In fact, evidence shows that Vietnamese migrant entertainers are not the unified and homogeneous group that is assumed by the campaigners in their labeling. In addition, neither the Singaporean clients nor the entertainment outlet owners have the desire or power to counterbalance grassroots movements such as SJCWK.

On the other hand, the way in which the space has been transformed has also raised questions about Singaporeans' perception of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. SJCWG's campaign consisted of eliminating the sex component of Joo Chiat, but seems to be less concerned with other aspects of Little Vietnam, such as budget eateries that serve as a hub for the Vietnamese residents in Singapore. This cuisine adds to the multicultural character of Joo Chiat, but contrasts with the restaurants and patisseries that serve middle class cuisine and confections in the neighborhood. It would seem that Vietnam has something to offer multicultural and multiethnic Joo Chiat – its food but not its migrant entertainers (Carruthers 2012). While gentrification goes on, working class migrant communities are moved out but the ethnic 'flavor' of the place remains in the form of *pho* and *nem*, Vietnamese conic hats, *ao dai* and exotic imagery. Here in Joo Chiat, life turns into heritage.

Joo Chiat: A Photo Essay (All photos by Nicolas Lainez)



1) Advertisement posters from a cake shop (left) and a Vietnamese eatery (right) in Joo Chiat



2) Cakes (above) and spring rolls (below) on sale in a cake shop and in a Vietnamese eatery in Joo Chiat.



3) Cakes on sale (left) and fruit and incense offered to the gods in the boarding house of Vietnamese migrant entertainers (right) in Joo Chiat.



4) Local visitors eating in a Vietnamese eatery (up), the interior of a cake shop (down).



5) Entrance of an art gallery (up), advertisement for international telephone cards (down).



6) Decoration on the display window of a cake shop (up), painting representing Vietnam in an art gallery (down).



7) *The living room at the boarding house of Vietnamese migrant entertainers (left) and showroom of a furniture shop (right) in Joo Chiat.*



8) Showroom of an interior furniture shop (above) and a Vietnamese migrant entertainer sleeping in the boarding house (below) in Joo Chiat.



9) A Vietnamese sex worker walking in front of the Joo Chiat Bettel Box Backpackers hostels (left), Vietnamese imagery displayed in shops (right).

Nicolas Lainez is a PhD Candidate at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (France), a Research Associate at IRASEC (Bangkok), and a photographer for OnAsia Photos

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, I had 16 Vietnamese migrant sex workers as informants. They included 6 migrant sex workers in Ho Chi Minh City and 10 from a boarding house of Vietnamese migrant entertainers in Singapore. I conducted 5 months of field research for my doctorate in this house. I am aware that the 16 informants do not constitute a representative sample. For a detailed report of the investigation, see Lainez (2011, 2013). I thank Su-Ann Oh, Ian White, Johan Lindquist and Ashley Carruthers for their comments and help, and Alliance Anti-Traffic Vietnam

for the funding that allowed me to conduct fieldwork in both Vietnam and Singapore.

[2] The fixed rate for a quick service is \$100 in Joo Chiat, whereas streetwalkers sell the same services for as low as \$25 in Geylang. See Lainez 2011 for details.

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