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Unwelcomed lull: Chinatown in Petaling Street, Kuala Lumpur looks deserted on the weekend. — LOW LAY PHON/The Star

Shadows over Chinatown

Traders in usually bustling Petaling Street feeling the pinch as pandemic keeps customers away, making them reluctant to stock up on goods for Chinese New Year

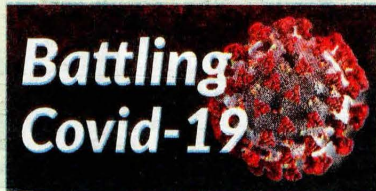
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THE empty streets, with only a handful of customers shopping at Petaling Street's Chinatown in Kuala Lumpur, are a reminder of how this tourism hotspot is reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

To compound matters, the conditional movement control order (MCO) from Oct 14 to Dec 6 has left the area almost deserted.

Stall owners there said they would be happy if they could sell anything at all, given the dwindling crowd as most people were avoiding public areas due to fears of Covid-19 infections.

Despite growing concerns about the rise



in cases in Kuala Lumpur, some stall owners are still open for business as they need to make ends meet.

"On weekends, I usually am able to sell two pairs of spectacles but on weekdays, I will be lucky to sell even one," said a spectacles stall owner near one of the entrances to Chinatown.

"There are really not many people in Chinatown these days and it is difficult for

us to do business," he said.

Herbal tea seller Chan Pooi Chee, 46, said business had dropped and he was only making 20% to 30% of his usual sales.

"We used to run out of our *luo han guo* (herbal tea) every day but it is a different story now.

"There are not many people here and by 6pm, we still have a lot left.

"Even if I were to give away the drinks, no one would be here to take it," he said.

Plight of traders

Kuala Lumpur and Petty Traders Association chairman Datuk Ang Say Tee said the second conditional MCO and the loan moratorium, which ended on Sept 30,

were a double whammy for stall owners and even customers.

"There was a decent-size crowd in Chinatown during the recovery MCO.

"So despite the significant reduction in visitors, stall owners could still make money.

"But ever since the conditional MCO started, we get fewer customers.

"Coupled with the end of the loan moratorium in September, people are spending more cautiously and that affects stall owners' business because they too have to service their loans," he told *StarMetro*.

Chinatown in Petaling Street reopened for business on July 12 during the recovery MCO period.



Some stalls in Petaling Street remain closed during the conditional MCO.

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Traders fear DBKL may revoke licences

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Originally, there were 770 stalls but now, only about 100 stalls are open.

“Some stalls decided not to open for business due to fewer visitors here, while others could not find workers to manage their stalls after the crackdown on foreign workers by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL).

“Some elderly stall owners decided to stay shut because they are from the high-risk group.

“This leads to another problem where stall owners may risk having their licence revoked if they are found not to be operating for a month or two,” said Ang.

Incentives needed

Ang said the association had highlighted this issue to Federal Territories Minister Tan Sri Annuar Musa when he visited the area and found that 160 stall owners had not been operating for some time.

“We appealed on behalf of the stall owners and asked that their licence not be revoked because of this.

“The association has also requested DBKL to waive, for at least the next three months, the RM200 monthly service and cleaning fee that stall owners have to pay for maintenance of the area,” he said.

Ang said the association wanted the stall owners to be able to operate in a sustainable manner.

“The ending of the loan moratorium and the implementation of the conditional MCO hit us hard.

“We hope the Government can



Pooi Chee says sales has dropped during this conditional MCO period.



Melvin is worried because his century-old shop in Petaling Street is making losses.



Ang hopes the Government can give more incentives to Petaling Street traders.

consider another one-off incentive for traders.

“We need to make sure that traders are able to overcome this together.

“The association places traders’ health and business viability as a priority, so we do not force any trader to operate during this period.

“Once the curve is flattened and tourists are allowed to come into the state and the country, I am optimistic that Chinatown can regain its former vibrancy,” he added.

Uncertainties ahead

Petaling Street’s Chinatown is the go-to place to shop for Chinese New Year goodies.

Usually around this time of the year, traders will be stocking up on goods in preparation for Chinese New Year celebrations. In 2021, the festival falls on Feb 12 and 13.

Fung Wong Biscuit’s fourth-generation owner Melvin Chan said the century-old family business was running at a loss.

“Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival are very important to us as we have a special programme for the community where we give away food to the needy.

“Also, more customers would buy from us during these occasions.

“When the first conditional MCO was announced in May, half of our customers chose to have their orders delivered to them.

“But we were badly hit when the second conditional MCO was implemented.

“Many who ordered wedding biscuits from us had to cancel as they were forced to postpone their ceremonies,” he said.

“We are very cautious now about making our products, such

as egg rolls and Chinese New Year biscuits, as we need to see the market sentiment.

“There are still a lot of uncertainties as to when the pandemic will be over,” said Melvin.

Sweet potato ball seller Wong Yock Ang, 38, said he was focusing on daily orders and not looking too far ahead to Chinese New Year’s.

“We sell these products every year but now we are not sure what business will be like next year.

“It is unlikely that we can make a good profit.

“For now, we are just hoping to survive.

“We still do not know what the market will be like in the months to come.

“But we are thankful to the association for ensuring the standard operating procedures are implemented in Petaling Street so that visitors can still come here to shop safely,” he said.



Wong with Chinese New Year cookies at his stall is not thinking about profit, only the survival of his business.



A fruit seller at Chinatown waiting for customers.