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天安

Medicine Street Seeks Prescription for Survival

Rents to surge in Ko Shing Street due to the opening of MTR West Island Line

By Cindy Gu, Jayce Lai & Joey Kwan

SASHI HOKKAIDO
1W 20KG

Ko Shing Street is especially lively during the run-up to Chinese New Year when households are preparing festive banquets.



It is a regular weekday morning in Ko Shing Street and porters are busy transporting large sacks of herbs and dried seafood from trucks to various traditional Chinese medicine shops that line the street. Inside most of the shops, members of staff are chit-chatting with patrons while weighing and packing Chinese herbal medicine for them.

Located in Sai Ying Pun, Ko Shing Street, also known as “Chinese Medicine Street”, has been a hub for wholesalers of herbal remedies in Hong Kong since the early 19th century. The street’s reputation for high-quality products attracts many local Chinese medical clinics who order ingredients from the wholesale companies there.

“I lived just across the street when I was little,” says 60-year-old Tse Woon-sun, the assistant manager of Wing Sang Wholesale Limited. Established in 1958, Wing Sang Wholesale mainly sold herbs to local herbal tea shops in the early years. Today it also

offers dried seafood and tonics, such as ginseng, velvet antler and bird’s nest.

Tse recalls that when he first started working here in 1968, there were only six large wholesale companies operating on Ko Shing Street. As the street’s fame grew, many wholesale companies and retailers specialising in Chinese herbs moved in. Tse says customers from Sha Tin or even Tuen Mun will come all the way to Ko Shing Street because of its reputable brands.

In Tse’s eyes, the street is a place filled with fond memories and friendships that he cherishes deeply. “It is my home ... I leave this street only when I go travelling,” Tse says. Having lived and worked on Ko Shing Street for nearly 50 years, Tse has established strong ties with workers on the street, as well as patrons of his company. “We are like old friends. I have known some of them for over 20 years.”

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However, not all the memories are rosy. In 2012, the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong announced a tightening of licence rules that meant new licences would not be issued to Chinese medicines practitioners and wholesalers operating in non-commercial buildings. The owners of around 10 wholesale shops, who were elderly, could not afford to move and were forced to close their shops. Now the shop owners on Ko Shing Street are facing another challenge, an expected hike in rents due to the opening of the MTR West Island Line.

The extension of the MTR's Island Line which connects Sheung Wan and Kennedy Town opened on December 28, last year. Sai Ying Pun, an intermediate station of the West Island Line has been hampered by construction delays but it is expected to open this quarter. Instead of being happy about increased convenience, many shop owners are at best ambivalent about the new station. The first thing that comes to mind for many of them is "how much will the rent increase by?"

According to a branch of Centaline Property Agency in Sheung Wan, the rental price of a 400 to 500 square-foot store on Ko Shing Street is around HK\$80,000 per month. The agency says that shop rents on the street have shot up by 15 to 20 per cent since the Island line extension became operational. Agents predict a further 10 per cent increase when Sai Ying Pun station opens.

Workers on Ko Shing Street are concerned about the effect the West Island Line may have. "I've heard that some shops had to move because of the rising rents. Some shops may move upstairs, while some old shop owners may choose to retire," says 50-year-old Wong Ngan-fung, who works as a clerk at Wong Chak Kee, a traditional Chinese medicines wholesale shop.

Wong is the daughter of Wong Chak Kee's shop founder. The wholesale shop has been in Ko Shing Street for 40 years, witnessing the changes of the street and its neighbourhood over the years. Wong says that the street scene of Sheung Wan has changed a lot. With the appearance of more high-end restaurants and art galleries, Sheung Wan attracts many foreign tourists. But gentrification has also resulted in higher rents in the district.

Wong feels powerless in the face of economic forces. "Only the government can help us," she says. She is referring to plans set out in 1998 by then Tung Chee-hwa to establish a "Chinese Medicine Port" aimed at making Hong Kong a hub for the development of traditional Chinese medicine. Tung never made good on the promise and in 2012, current Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying announced the government would put more effort into advancing the development of Chinese medicines. Wong hopes there will be more than just words this time and that the government will take real action to support local Chinese medicine industry.



Meanwhile, some shop owners are rather optimistic about the opening of the West Island Line. So Choi-kiu, manager of Sam Hing Hong, a wholesale traditional Chinese herbal shop, expects the opening of Sai Ying Pun station will bring more customers to his business. “The opening of the MTR [extension] will bring more people to this area. In the past, they might not know how to get here by bus. With the new MTR line, it’s more convenient for them,” So says.

So, who inherited the herbal wholesale business from his father, has worked on Ko Shing Street for 15 years. He has seen a number of Chinese medicine shops on the Street being squeezed out by high rents. However, he thinks such a phenomenon is inevitable in every district in Hong Kong, where shop rents keep going up.

But even he concedes it is difficult for traditional Chinese medicine shops to move their businesses to other districts, as Sheung Wan is the centre of the local Chinese medicine trade. “If the rent becomes too expensive, we will move to another place. I hope we can continue our business in Sheung Wan as it is the base of [Chinese medicine] industry.”

Edited by Yan Li

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