BEYOND THE RED LIGHT

GEYLANG AND ITS STORIED LORONGS

Geylang and its infamous side lanes have a rich history that is often overshadowed by its reputation as a red-light district.

By Andrea Kee

Bustling Geylang Road with its shophouses, eateries and vibrant nightlife, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

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Mention Geylang today and images of seedy back lanes hosting shady vice activities come to mind. At the same time, it is also a magnet for foodies, drawn to iconic Geylang dishes like fresh frog porridge and beef *kway teow.*

Situated at the city fringe, Geylang is bound by Guillemard Road, Sims Avenue, Lorong 1 Geylang and Paya Lebar Road, and was developed into a commercial and residential district at the turn of the 20th century. The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) gazetted it as a conservation area in October 1991, recognising the shophouses constructed between the 1910s and 1950s for their architectural and cultural value, the low-rise bungalows with Malay, European and Chinese influences, and the compound houses with their eclectic designs.[1]

Beyond its colourful built heritage and relatively recent seedy reputation, bustling Geylang Road and its lorongs – a series of lanes branching off from both sides of Geylang Road – are replete with lesser-known stories about Singapore's earliest inhabitants, kampong life on stilts, crime-infested swamps and community ties that bind.

Becoming Geylang

One of the earliest written records of Geylang appears in Captain James Franklin and Lieutenant Philip Jackson's "Plan of the British Settlement of Singapore", first published in 1828. The map marked out a river, "R. Gilang", which when transposed onto modern maps, coincides with the location of Geylang River.[2]

The origin of the placename is unclear. Some sources suggest that it came from the Orang Kallang, an indigenous seafaring tribe (*orang laut*) that settled on houseboats in Kallang Basin formed from the confluence of the Kallang, Geylang and Rochor rivers.[3] Interestingly, the Kallang River is also said to be named after these inhabitants.[4] Another possible origin is the Malay word *kilang*, meaning "press", "mill" or "factory" – a reference to the coconut plantations and agricultural processing works that once covered the area.[5]

The sandy soil here proved suitable for the cultivation of coconut trees. From the early 1820s, European planters such as Francis Bernard, brother-in-law of the first Resident of Singapore William

A police post in Geylang, late 19th century. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*

Farquhar, ventured eastward, purchasing land from Siglap Road to the Geylang River and from Geylang Road to the southern shore to establish plantations. By the 1840s, coconut trees covered most land between the Kallang and Geylang rivers. During this period, the British also constructed Geylang Road, setting the scene for further development.[6]

At the turn of the 20th century, two distinct parts of Geylang began to emerge. The eastern part was occupied mainly by the Malay communities who farmed the land. This section of Geylang would eventually develop into present-day Geylang Serai. Chinese immigrants settled in the western part and established small businesses in the lorongs.[7]

This period also saw a building boom with shophouses, terrace houses and bungalows appearing along Geylang Road and its side lanes. New means of motorised transport – such as the electric tramway and trolley bus service – and municipal support enabled middle-class Chinese and Eurasian communities to leave the congested urban centre and build homes in Geylang.[8] By the 1920s and 1930s, the area had become a city-fringe residential suburb.[9]

Life in the Lorongs and Its Boundaries

While most residents living in shophouses along Geylang Road and in houses lining the side lanes lived in relative comfort, life at the northern boundaries, where squatter colonies and kampongs existed, was starkly different. A 1959–1960 survey by Maris Stella Vocational School students found at least a hundred families living door-to-door in attap huts between Lorongs 27 and 29A. This part of Geylang was considered a slum and had no running electricity, gas or water supply.[10]

In September 1950, a police manhunt for two Chinese gunmen in the area bordered by Aljunied Road and Sims Avenue, likely at the end of Geylang Lorong 25, uncovered a squatter colony that the *Singapore Free Press* described as "a rabbit's warren of hovels unparallelled anywhere else in the Colony". A reporter and his cameraman, who had accompanied the police, got lost in the maze of attap huts and had to be rescued.[11]

Before the reclamation of Kallang Basin in the 1960s,[12] some of these side roads stretched beyond the confines of solid land into the swamps and streams of the Kallang River. Here, attap huts clustered together, some raised on stilts to avoid the rising tides of the swampy terrain.

One main settlement in the area was Kampong Kuchai (also known as Kampong Koo Chye or Kampong Koo Chuan[13]), a village on stilts situated at the end of Lorong 3 where present-day Boon Keng is located. This predominantly Malay village housed some descendants of the *orang laut* who were originally settled in Tanjong Rhu until the Second World War. Over time, a sizable Chinese population also began to call the kampong home, with only a muddy creek separating the two communities.[14]

Chia Soon Ann, the manager of Garrick Theatre and South-East Asia Film Company (which were owned and established by his brother-in-law Lim Chong Pang, a prominent businessman), grew up in a house built over a river in Kallang Basin, near the head of the Kallang River where Lorong 3 and Lorong 17 intersected. He recalled that living over water made it challenging for him to stay out late to play with friends. "[O]ur means of access [home] was by calling for a boat which usually came through my father or one of my brothers or sisters. And one day when I was returning from school after playing football, I was late. When I called for the boat, the boat refused to come because my mother wanted to teach me a lesson for coming home late, so I had to put my books on my head and [swim] across the river."[15]

Lorong 3 was connected to Lorong 17 via an island of sand on which stood a sago factory, tanneries, brickworks, vegetable farms and fish ponds. At Lorong 17 was Kampong Sar Kong, home to a Cantonese community that lived and worked mainly as brickmakers and bricklayers, using the mud from the tidal basin to make bricks.[16] According to Chia, "the best bricks were from that area".[17]

(Above) Having a bath using public taps in Geylang Lorong 1, 1956. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) Attap houses on stilts at Geylang Lorong 3, before 1967. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

Danger in the Lorongs

As early as the 1920s, Chinese secret societies began operating in Geylang's side lanes. Chia recalled labourers from the nearby factories joining these gangs for protection. "They think that… the law and order cannot control, cannot help them…. so they joined the secret society [sic] to protect themselves… when they have trouble, they will seek out the leader of the gang to talk terms with the other side."[18]

With the increase in secret societies, opium dens and even violent crimes became commonplace. The murky tidal basin proved conducive for dumping dead bodies when gang fights turned deadly. Chia's family experienced this firsthand at their prawn pond one day. "When we open[ed] the mill to catch prawns, we found a body in the net… we threw everything away… [the police] couldn't catch the murderer." According to Chia, people were silenced by the intimidation of the triads and gangsters. "[They would say] 'If you tell the police, we will murder you, or some trouble will befall your family'."[19]

A February 1970 *Straits Times* article described Kallang Basin as a "smuggler's creek, a home of gang

(Above) Residents of Kampong Koo Chye hosing down an attap house in flames, 1958. *Source: The Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.*

(Left) A fire post lookout tower at Geylang Lorong 29 used by volunteers to spot the first signs of fire in their neighbourhood. *Image reproduced from Joan Hon, 100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service (Singapore: Times Books International, 1988), 76. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 363.378095957 HON).*

chieftains, moonshiners and farmers who eked out a living rearing pigs and poultry in attap colonies on stilts". Opium was smuggled into Singapore through the swamps, and drums of *samsu*, a type of illegally home-brewed rice wine, were buried in the mud to evade detection by authorities.[20]

So fearsome was its reputation that even police officers feared venturing into the kampongs and squatter huts over the waters. Eric Charles Pemberton Paglar, a census officer in the 1950s, recalled the notoriety of Kampong Minyak in Lorong 1: "[W]hen you go in there, sometimes people don't come out. That was the reputation that place had… I remember once they had to bring the Gurkhas in there before [the police] could enter."[21]

Another layer of danger that Geylang's kampong dwellers faced was the ever-looming threat of fires, which could quickly raze through the closely packed attap houses. As a precaution, like in other urban kampongs, residents of densely populated Lorong 23 formed their own 45-member firefighting unit who all underwent training with the Singapore Fire Brigade. Villagers also pooled resources to build a fire watch tower in their kampong.[22]

The Happy School building at No. 67 and 69 Geylang Lorong 14. *Image reproduced from王振春 Wang Zhenchun, 根的系列之二 [The Roots Series II] (新加坡: 胜友书局, 1990), 145. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RCLOS 959.57 WZC).*

Kampong residents had good reason for caution. In the panic of escaping a fire that broke out in July 1953 at Geylang Lorong 3, widow Lim Kui Chan "instinctively grabbed her iron first and waded through the knee-high mud with her children to safety." As a washer woman, the clothes iron was her only thought, but in the chaos she left behind her lifesavings. In another heartbreaking story, grandmother Sim Guat had to choose between saving her four-year-old grandson or $2,000 worth of jewellery. "What else could I do but save my grandson. He is my treasure, and I had first to get him out of the house," she said.[23]

In April 1958, another large fire – noted by the *Straits Times* as "Singapore's worst since the war" – razed Kampong Koo Chye in Lorong 3, leaving 2,050 people homeless and at least five dead.[24] In the aftermath of the fire, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) acquired seven acres of the Lorong 3 fire site and began construction of 192 low-cost terrace houses for the homeless. The houses were eventually completed by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in 1960, with 196 out of 329 affected families applying for the new houses.[25]

Some families had earlier opted to be settled in SIT flats in Kallang and Queenstown, while others chose cash relief in lieu of housing. In 2020, these terrace houses became the first residential units to be returned to the government due to the expiration of their leases.[26]

The fires in Geylang, along with others in Singapore's overcrowded kampongs (most notably in Bukit Ho Swee in May 1961), underscored the need for new public housing across the island. In the 1960s, Kallang Basin underwent land reclamation to convert the swampy areas into land that could support new flats, industries and businesses.[27] Geylang's kampong residents were resettled in new housing estates nearby and around Singapore.

Community Spirit

Community ties sometimes strengthen under the pressures of such disasters. After just one year, the volunteers' fire station in Lorong 27, set up in 1961, had evolved into a communal meeting place and a Mutual Benefit Association formed under the same roof. They later became known as the Geylang Villagers' Association. The association supported residents with funeral arrangements and even settled family disputes. It also formed its own Teochew opera troupe, which staged a series of charity shows at the Victoria Theatre in 1980 to raise funds for the Geylang East Home for the Aged and the Kuan In Welfare Society in Telok Kurau.[28]

Geylang's kampong residents also set up schools for less well-off families. At Lorong 17's Kampong Sar Kong, the Mun San Fook Tuck Chee temple was not only a place of worship but also the kampong's social centre. Besides a volunteer firefighting squad, it established a vigilante corps, the Sar Kong Athletic Association and the Mong Yang Chinese School. The small school operated from a room on the right side of the temple with fees kept low to be affordable. In 1962, the school was renovated with donations from kampong residents and alumni totalling over $4,300.[29]

The Happy Charity School was another Chinese-medium school for impoverished children with a unique origin story that students themselves did not know. "I always thought that the school was named 'Happy School' due to its proximity to Happy World. I never knew it was due to the cabaret girls from Happy World," said former student Tan Chwee Thiam.[30]

The school was founded in 1946 by cabaret dancers from the nearby Happy World Amusement Park, led by He Yan Na, chairperson of the Happy World Dance Troupe, and fellow dancer Xu Qian Hong. Concerned that children were roaming Geylang's streets when they should have been in school, He rallied her fellow cabaret girls to raise money to set up a free school.[31]

It first operated out of a rented shophouse in Geylang Lorong 14 before moving to two shophouses along the same lane. Tan recalled that the school did not look like the other schools near his home, which had fields, as it only had five classrooms. But his parents were of the view that "even though the school's premises were simple in comparison to other government schools of the time…, the teachers and principal were good".[32]

As operating costs rose, the school imposed school fees by 1950, which were kept low at a monthly fee between $2.50 and $3.50, and was renamed "Happy School". With the growing emphasis on English education in the 1960s and 1970s, enrolment numbers at Happy School and other Chinese-medium schools began to dwindle. In 1979, Happy School closed its doors and donated approximately $400,000 earned from the sale of the school building to 11 schools and grassroots organisations, including the Geylang West Senior Citizens' Recreation Centre.[33]

Becoming a Red-light District

Geylang and its lorongs were not known for vice activities until 1959 – ironically due to anti-vice raids in existing red-light districts concentrated in the city area.[34]

In August 1959, the government launched an island-wide campaign to "stamp out organised prostitution". Frequent raids took place in known red-light districts such as Desker Road and Johore Road. Vice operators then dispersed to the "thickly-populated residential areas in the suburbs" of Serangoon, Tiong Bahru, Katong and Geylang. By November that year, the authorities found that approximately 100 residential homes in Geylang and Katong had been converted into brothels. To avoid detection, operators moved into these houses posing as husband and wife and claimed that the sex workers moving in with them were their daughters. Pirate taxi drivers solicited customers and ferried them to the brothels.[35]

Despite crackdowns, the use of Geylang's private homes as brothels persisted into the 1990s, and by 1998, Geylang was noted as a Designated Red-Light Area.[36] The late-night activities of the sex trade raised concerns among residents.

A letter from R. Tan to the *Straits Times*, published on 5 January 1971, implored the police to act on the excessive noise at night created by brothel customers in Lorong 24 Geylang, which was interrupting his sleep. "Nightly a continuous stream of pirate taxis and other cars come to pick up call-girls. These drivers deliberately sound their high-pitch horns several times to announce their arrival, shattering the peace of the vicinity."[37]

Residents were most alarmed when sex workers began to encroach into residential spaces. In August 1971, some residents urged the anti-vice branch of the Criminal Investigation Department to step up the frequency of raids on brothels in Lorongs 18 and 20 "in the wake of growing 'boldness' by prostitutes in soliciting their business", who were "standing in their balconies in very compromising positions". Residents also sent copies of the letter to the Prime Minister's Office, their Member of Parliament (MP), the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau as well as the *Straits Times*. Raids were subsequently conducted, resulting in the arrest of several sex workers.[38]

A similar outcry occurred in 1987, this time in Lorongs 10 and 12. Residents and visitors to the Buddhist temple, Jamiyah Islamic Centre and sports stadium in the vicinity were "irked" by sex workers publicly soliciting in the streets. An official from the Jamiyah Islamic Centre told the *Straits Times* that "it is very embarrassing because visitors to the centre were sometimes approached by callgirls". He added that their presence also "set a bad influence" on the youth visiting the centre.[39]

The issue of sex workers "spilling over" from Geylang's known red-light areas and into residential neighbourhoods persisted. In 2007 and 2008, MP for Marine Parade Fatimah Lateef came up with a plan to "ring-fence" residential areas from vice activity by installing more streetlamps.

Westerhout Road in Geylang, 2026. Prominent house numbers are a subtle form of marketing in Geylang. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

By April 2008, these were installed in the back lanes of Lorongs 24, 24A, 34 and 36, with plans for more in the lanes between Lorongs 20 and 44. After two years and 96 new streetlamps, she noted that the situation had improved. "The streetwalkers and foreign workers who used to congregate in the backlanes are gone. Even littering has been reduced," she said.[40]

An Ever-changing Urban Landscape

In the 1990s, Geylang's urban environment and identity underwent significant changes when a wave of new private property developments swept through the area. Developers acquired affordable plots of land where old houses stood, demolished them and built new condominiums and budget hotels in their place.[41]

Clan associations that had been affected by redevelopment and rising property prices at their original premises also began moving into Geylang after the URA rezoned a 50-hectare area as a "hub of growth for cultural activities by clans and other civic groups". This space now contains the largest concentration of clan associations in Singapore, including the Huang Clan Association and the 168-year-old Char Yong (Dabu) Association.[42]

A similar phenomenon happened in 2009, but this time it was Chinese temples moving into the neighbourhood. "They're popping up everywhere, like kopitiam. I have never seen so many temples

A hotel in Geylang, 2026. Some hotels in Geylang offer hourly room rates. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

here in my life," longtime Geylang resident Khoo Hiang Lee told the *Straits Times*.[43]

It might have seemed odd that places of worship were moving into a red-light district, but many temple owners and devotees told reporters that they were not bothered about sharing the neighbourhood with sex workers since most temples closed in the evenings. "We don't see them, they don't see us. It works," said Wu Ser Hock, a volunteer at the Gan Tian Da Di Temple on Lorong Bachok.[44]

In 2015, the URA rezoned the 14-hectare stretch from Lorongs 4 to 22 from residential/institution to commercial/institution use.[45] This meant that no new residential projects could be developed along this stretch, in hopes of "better manag[ing] issues that had been arising from conflicting uses in the locale".[46] The new residential projects that were approved before the change were the last tranche of residential buildings developed in the area. As a result, Geylang saw a sharp decline in new private residential project launches in the ensuing years. According to a *CNA* report, an average of 2.9 projects were launched between 2017 and 2024 – an almost 70 percent drop from the average of 10.25 projects between 2008 and 2015.[47]

However, in recent years, change has been sweeping through Geylang yet again. The stigma of a red-light district still lingers, with complaints about noise and other disturbances, but residents and shop owners have noticed fewer sex workers in the streets. Instead, high-rise condominiums surround the few old houses that still remain, and owners of old shophouses must struggle with the decision of either investing in the maintenance of their ageing buildings or selling to a growing pool of eager buyers.[48]

Just as Geylang has transformed from a riverine village to a thriving residential suburb, its urban landscape continues to evolve till now, and one day it might finally shed its reputation as a red-light district. But whether gentrification will completely change Geylang, as it did for the former red-light areas of Keong Saik Road and Bugis Street, remains to be seen. ♦

Frog porridge is a popular dish in Geylang, 2026. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*

NOTES

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