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CITYSPACE

Center City's Crotchety Dragon



LUCK OF THE DRAW: A woman scours housing ads written in Chinese characters to find an apartment in Chinatown. Photo By:

Michael T. Regan

Why you never see a Chinatown apartment ad isn't a big mystery anymore.

by Helen i-lin Hwang

Which Center City neighborhood is one block from Market East Station, where regional rail and subway lines come and go, steps from the Greyhound and Chinatown buses to New York, two blocks from PATCO lines to New Jersey, minutes from Walnut Street shopping, half a block from Reading Terminal, chock-full of locally owned grocers selling the freshest ingredients every day and packed with some of the most scrumptious, cheapest eats around? Chinatown, of course.

Despite its premium location, you've probably never seen an ad for an apartment rental in the neighborhood. Well, there's good reason, since even though there are hundreds of apartments available, most of them get rented through word of mouth. "A friend of a friend told me about this place" is the tale most people will tell about how they found a Chinatown *gongyu* (apartment).

Monthly rents range from \$550 to \$700 and it's common for a family of four or a group of several adults to live in one *jiali* (home). But as the housing market starts opening up to non-Asians with new condominiums being developed nearby, the rumor mill will not be the only way to find an apartment in Chinatown.

For now, landlords have few problems renting out their apartments. "There's no need to advertise," says Josephine Wang, who owns 12 apartments in addition to several restaurants. In 10 years, she's always had *fangke* (tenants), so she's never placed a single ad.

All her renters -- many are recent immigrants who speak little English and want to work hard to make a fortune, possibly carving out a little piece of suburbia -- speak Chinese. Wang prefers to deal with Chinese renters because, as she puts it, "they rarely default on their rent." There's never any talk about suing the *fangdong* (landlord) or any need to get occupants evicted. No credit checks are run but contracts are signed and three month's worth of security deposit and rent are required.

What makes it even more difficult to find a place is that even before someone vacates an apartment, they've probably already found their own replacement. As Wang puts it, "All this shows is there's a demand in Chinatown."

In the larger New York and San Francisco Chinatowns, apartment rentals are advertised in local Chinese newspapers. Not here, though. Taped on the storefront window of the Chinese Culture & Arts store are dozens of small, white index cards, taped neatly and horizontally to accommodate the Chinese characters written traditionally from top to bottom and right to left.

About half the ads, which cost \$5 to be posted for 10 days, are for housing. (The other ads are for jobs; that is, if you're interested in the "Hire for Massage Girls" opening.) No prices are listed, only phone numbers to call.

Chinatown apartments are typically small, two bedrooms with central A/C, refrigerator, sink and small stove lined up against a living-room wall. In one flat above a Ninth Street store, the entire floor of the approximately 500-square-foot apartment is covered in drab, tan-colored vinyl tile. A window, which lights up the main room, has an enviable view of City Hall, the two Liberty Towers and a look out at another Chinatown building decorated with a curious array of cheerful lime green, dark blue, purple and pink window shades.

The lack of price information also enables landlords to hedge their way into higher rents as many handle their properties "under the table." (To avoid taxes, they don't obtain business licenses, a city requirement for rental property owners.) And since many tenants don't have Social Security Numbers, this underground system benefits every party involved. Well, except for the government.

Still, there are some Chinatown realty agencies that can help. When I walked into P.C. First Realty on Race Street and told the realtor I wanted to talk to her about apartment rentals in Chinatown, she said she didn't know if there were



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and she could check. She immediately got on the phone and spoke
up, she informed me there would be an apartment available next
and based on her networking -- much simpler than scouring ads.

prominent hotels being converted into condos (Clarion Suites Hotel is now
TENTEN Race and Hawthorne Suites Hotel at 11th and Vine streets will become Grandview Condos), there's a huge
potential for investors or individual owners to rent out the units.

Lance Silver, the developer at TENTEN Race who was offended at being placed in the racial category "white" and
preferred to be called an Occidental, already estimates pricey rental rates of \$900 to \$1,500 for his condo units ranging
from studios to two-bedrooms. (Chinatown workers can currently rent on a monthly basis at Hawthorne, but may get
relocated from floor to floor as the condo conversion begins.)

Many business owners, like Wang, feel that Chinatown is approaching a rental-market explosion with the addition of
330-plus living spaces for both Asian and non-Asian residents. She looks forward to the influx of diversity -- because it
means more customers for her restaurants.

Even the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, which has primarily focused on homeownership in the past,
is "strongly considering" getting into rental apartments, according to Executive Director John Chin. The nonprofit is
more concerned about keeping options open in the neighborhood for those in the low-income bracket than becoming
entrepreneurial slumlords.

"Two-bedroom apartments went for \$450 before the stadium [controversy]. Now [rental prices are] \$650. Property
owners realized land was valuable," says Chin. He sees the future of Chinatown to be "mixed-income" and
"multiethnic," a phenomenon that would be "absolutely great." The last census recorded an "official" 80-percent Asian
(mostly Chinese), 11-percent white, 5-percent black and 2-percent Hispanic population.

Within the next two years, Philly residents are very likely to see a slew of apartments advertised in Chinatown and word
of mouth will not be the only way to score a pad in one of the most convenient, soon-to-be-desirable locations in Center
City.



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