

World Confederation of Institutes and Libraries in Chinese Overseas Studies
5th International Conference
UBC Library and Ohio University Libraries

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From Chinatown to Ethnoburb: The Chinese in Toronto
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Introduction

The definition, face, and location of Chinatowns have changed significantly as Chinese communities establish themselves inside and beyond their boundaries. This paper demonstrates that both the older and contemporary Chinatowns in the Greater Toronto Area have developed in response to patterns of Chinese migration relative to the socio-economic, political, and cultural status of the Chinese in Canadian society. The opinions of politicians, media, and the public not only determined the immigration laws and policies but also shaped settlement patterns in Toronto.

Data and Methods

The historical data is collected from archival documents from legislative debates, Royal Commissions, city records, and census data. Secondary sources include academic papers, works of historians, and newspaper and magazine reports. Recollections from personal papers, interviews, autobiographies, and memoirs make up the balance of the data.

Chinese Immigration

The gold rush and the labour shortage for the construction of a national railway were the pull factors for peasants and labourers, primarily from the southern province of Guangdong (Lai, 1988; Con, 1982; Li, 1988; Chan, 1983). Although emigration from China was a capital crime, these immigrants were pushed out of their homeland by civil wars, a corrupt government, famine, poverty, natural disasters, and high taxation. The first major wave arrived to chase the elusive dream of making a fortune in Gold Mountain. The Fraser Gold Rush (1858-60) and the Cariboo Gold Rush (1860-63) attracted 1,000s of Chinese, who were singled out for harsh treatment and discrimination. The most dissimilar and highly conspicuous in appearance and culture from other immigrant gold rushers, they were relegated to rework abandoned claims to avoid beatings and robberies.

The second major wave of Chinese immigrants left China to provide much needed labour for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The country's economic development hinged upon cheap labour, handily provided by over 10,000 impoverished peasants from south China. This national railway was promised to British Columbia for

the colony's acceptance as the sixth province in the Dominion of Canada, so key to growing the infant country from coast to coast. Populating the West was another crucial building block and the promise of free land was advertised widely; however, the Chinese were exempt with claims that the Chinese were "sojourners" whose sole intent was to return to China as wealthy retirees. This controversial and disputable claim was forwarded by political and public minds to discourage permanent Chinese settlement and to deny the Chinese from acceptance into white Canadian society (Siu, 1952).

The Chinese provided the labour that fulfilled the national dream of uniting Canada from the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans. Despite this contribution, the Canadian government implemented a series of laws to discourage their further immigration and permanent settlement. Upon the completion of the railway in 1885, Canada's first steps to limiting Chinese entry were the enactment of progressively more punitive head taxes from 1885 through to 1923. The desired national identity was a white society drawn from European immigrants. A head tax of \$50 was levied on every Chinese landing in Canada. This tax was notorious because the Chinese were the only group ever assessed such a fee that was based purely on race. It ranked among the most anti-Chinese legislation, institutional racism at its worst. In 1900, the head tax increased to \$100, then to \$500 in 1903. The arrival of wives and families was virtually impossible.

The Development of Chinatown

Did the early Chinese settle voluntarily in segregated areas or were they forced into isolation by a hostile mainstream society? During the Gold Rush and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Chinese were clustered in tent camps pitched beside gold mines and railroad tracks, and, later, in housing occupying the poorer parts of towns. White landlords would not sell or rent properties to the Chinese unless these were on the fringe of town or in the cheapest districts with low-class saloons and brothels as neighbours (Lai, 1988). This early segregation fostered the stereotype that the Chinese were undesirable foreigners, who lived in unsanitary neighborhoods rife with social vices, like gambling and prostitution. The term, Chinatown, became associated with a full range of negative connotations, used by politicians and journalists to fuel their anti-Chinese sentiment and opinions in speeches, newspapers, and legislation (Anderson, 1991).

Chinatowns did serve the needs of their community and the influx of Chinese workers brought consumer demand. They developed as safe places from the hostile and racist host society that surrounded them to live and find Chinese goods and services. Just as the home villages in China provided identity and belonging, so did the Chinatowns of the New World serve a similar function. The hubs and gathering places desperately needed by a society lacking in women and children, they became the heart and soul of Chinese Canada. As new immigrants arrived, they tended to live in Chinatown with their sponsors. While this arrangement provided comfort for newcomers, their confinement in Chinatown perpetuated cultural exclusiveness and the isolation of the Chinese.

The City of Toronto is comprised of six former municipalities (Toronto, North York, Scarborough, East York, York, and Etobicoke) that were amalgamated in 1998 into one

mega-city. Adjacent to the new City of Toronto in the Greater Toronto Area are the neighbouring municipalities that include Markham, Richmond Hill, and Mississauga. The development of early Chinatown occurred in the downtown core of the former City of Toronto. The first Chinese resident recorded in the city directory of 1878 was Sam Ching, the owner of a hand laundry. By 1881, there were ten Chinese who all lived close to the city's train station (Watson, 2000). The population growth was slow, insufficient in numbers to constitute a defined community. This rate of growth changed, however, when the railway was completed in 1885 and the Chinese moved eastwards to escape British Columbia's racism and discrimination.

By 1910, there were two clusters of Chinese businesses in small, yet identifiable Chinese sections. One petered out in 1911 while the other began to flourish with businesses and homes on and around York Street (Lai, 1988). As redevelopment occurred, the Chinese were forced to move to Queen Street, then north up Elizabeth Street towards Dundas Street. The Chinese made up less than one percent of the city's population (Census, 1911).

Although Chinatown grew into a bustling commercial and residential centre, the Chinese remained isolated, socially and residentially, and retreated into their own circles. An intricate network of clan, district, community, and political associations developed to provide social, cultural and welfare support. One of their most critical functions was the banking system. Because Chinese were denied loans from Canadian banks, the only way of securing money for opening a business, purchasing land or funding other financial needs was through their associations.

The successively punitive head tax (\$50, \$100, \$500) proved ineffectual in deterring Chinese immigrants. With ever-mounting anti-Chinese sentiment from citizens, politicians, labour unions, and the media, the federal government succumbed to public pressure. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, known also as the Chinese Exclusion Act, achieved the ultimate goal of halting entry. For the next twenty-four years, the door remained closed to the Chinese, the only people Canada ever excluded explicitly on the basis of race.

With the Chinese Exclusion Act in place, a new phase of life unfolded in Chinatown. Suspended in a state of limbo, the Chinese lived in Toronto, not accepted by mainstream society and not financially able or willing to return to China. Typically, men lived alone like bachelors. Only a few of the married men had the financial means to travel to China to visit their wives and families. Other men remained single for there were so few Chinese women and mixed marriages were discouraged. The gender imbalance was staggering with a ratio of 1,240 men to 100 women in 1931. As a comparison to the rest of Canada, the ratio was 107 men to 100 women (Census, 1931). As a group, the Chinese community aged without families and replenishment from new immigration. Only the most established Chinese, like merchants, were among the privileged few with wives and children. The Exclusion Act took its toll on Chinatown. At its onset in 1923, there were 471 laundries, 202 restaurants and other businesses. By 1947, only 258 laundries, 19

restaurants, 29 grocery stores, 4 drug stores, 4 insurance agencies, and a handful of other businesses survived the years of exclusion (Lee, 1984; Thompson, 1989).

The Second World War (1939-45) changed attitudes towards the Chinese when Canada declared war on Japan in 1941. Canada and China now shared a common enemy. The Chinese worked with Canadian fund drives that allowed the Chinese and non-Chinese to work together, such as in the Red Cross and war industries. During the Victory Loan Drive, they raised more than any other group in Canada on a per capita basis. All of these efforts resulted in favourable publicity and lessening hostility towards the Chinese (Con, 1982). An even more significant impact of the Second World War was having an estimated 600 Chinese in Canadian uniform.

After the war, the Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947; however, severe immigration restrictions prevented family reunification. Only Chinese with Canadian citizenship, less than six percent of the Chinese (Census, 1941), could apply to bring over their families. Other restrictions stipulated that children had to be under the age of eighteen years and parents under the age of sixty-five. The racial bias in the immigration laws was apparent; Canada had no such limiting rules for post-war groups from Europe. Circumventing the immigration laws became prevalent and a system of illegal entry with false identities was devised, referred by the Chinese as "buying papers."

The dismantling of Canada's "whites-only" immigration policy occurred in 1962, when "country of origin" was removed from the selection criteria. Despite this change, a distinction still remained for immigrants from Asia from sponsoring all but the closest relatives. Not until 1967 were the discriminatory immigration policies put to rest to grant Chinese immigrants equal footing with other applicants for the first time since 1885. Regardless of skin colour or national origin, points were assessed on numerous criteria, thus beginning a radical shift in Canada's immigrants from European to non-European.

These more equitable immigration laws were bolstered in 1971 with a national policy on multiculturalism. Canada was the first country in the world to adopt such a policy that affirmed the value and dignity of its citizens, regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, language, or religious affiliation. The Immigration Act of 1976 ushered in a new era of immigration when four new classes were introduced: refugees; families for family reunification; assisted relatives; and, independent immigrants.

Chinese Immigrants

Toronto was the choice destination for the resulting waves of Chinese newcomers. The city provided a wealth of employment, particularly in the textile trades and hotel and restaurant services for the many semi-skilled and unskilled immigrants. Entrepreneurs were confident in investing their money in a city that was transforming into Canada's major financial and commercial centre. They also eyed Toronto's rapidly developing tourist industry as an incentive for investment.

The largest number of postwar newcomers came from Hong Kong. The push factors were significant. Decades of political turmoil and Japanese occupation in China flooded Hong

Kong with thousands of refugees. When the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, fugitives fled from the rule of a communist government. The 1967 anti-colonial riots, instigated by communist supporters, prompted more to leave the city. In 1984, Britain and China signed a joint declaration to return sovereignty of the British colony to China in 1997. This planned handover elevated the level of anxiety and resulted in a mass exodus of professionals and entrepreneurs lured to Canada by the new and timely entrepreneur business program of 1986.

The immigrants from this cosmopolitan city were completely different from the relatively homogeneous group of the earlier Chinese, born in villages, poorly educated, and lacking in English language skills. They tended to be well-educated, English-speaking people with a wide variety of skills and experience. Coming from a bustling British colony, they were accustomed to Anglo-Saxon traditions that allowed for a relatively easy adaptation that their predecessors could only have dreamed to realize.

The second wave of immigrants arrived from mainland China. After Canada officially recognized the People’s Republic of China in 1970, a family reunification agreement was signed by Prime Minister Trudeau and Premier Zhou Enlai. Outlined in the terms were conditions that allowed Chinese Canadians to sponsor relatives. Family life in the Chinese community became a reality. In a three-year period from 1971 to 1973, the number of relatives arriving from China increased dramatically (table 1). As early as 1971, 83 percent of Chinese in Canada lived in a nuclear family, a sharp contrast to the bachelor society of the exclusionary period.

TABLE 1: Immigrants from China, 1971-1973

| Year | Immigrants from China |
|-------------|------------------------------|
| 1971 | 2,000 |
| 1972 | 21,000 |
| 1973 | 55,000 |

Source: Data from *Globe and Mail*, 18 February 1974.

The number of arrivals was soon to be eclipsed. In 1985, China opened its doors for migration and thousands who were affluent or highly educated met the qualifications to come to Canada. Added to this influx were 4,500 Chinese students who were allowed to apply for landed immigrant status after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. By 2001, China took over the lead from Hong Kong as the largest source country of new immigrants to Canada (table 2).

TABLE 2: Immigrants from Hong Kong and China, 1986-2001

| Year | Hong Kong | China |
|-------------|------------------|--------------|
|-------------|------------------|--------------|

| | | |
|-----------|---------|---------|
| 1986-1990 | 74,905 | 42,320 |
| 1991-1996 | 130,790 | 107,420 |
| 1996-2001 | 54,655 | 184,780 |

Source: Data from Statistics Canada, 2005.

The third major wave of immigrants arrived after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Not only did thousands from Vietnam seek refuge but also thousands from Cambodia and Laos, once part of Indochina. Over the next decade, one million Indochinese fled their countries by boat, despite the perilous risks, and became known as the Boat People. At the height of the refugee crisis in 1979, Canada opened its door to thousands of refugees, more than half of whom were sponsored by 7,000 private groups, churches, and communities (Li, 1988).

The fourth wave of immigrants arrived from Taiwan, in large part due to the political anxiety caused by the one-China policy. In 1972, the United Nations expelled the Republic of China and recognized the People's Republic of China. After President Richard Nixon's visit to China, the United States normalized relations with Beijing. In 1979, it broke off long-standing diplomatic ties with Taiwan to officially recognize the People's Republic of China. Despite close economic ties to mainland China, the issue of sovereignty over Taiwan and the cross strait tension has pushed many to leave the island.

Today, newcomers come not only from China, Hong Kong, Indochina, and Taiwan. They also arrive from Africa, North and South America, Europe, and other parts of Asia. Their faces are Chinese but they speak with varying languages, accents, and dialects from around the world. Taishanese, the language of the earliest generations, changed to Cantonese, the language of Hong Kong. Mandarin, Hakka, Fujianese and Shanghainese are becoming more prevalent. The Chinese diaspora includes artists, chefs, filmmakers, intellectuals, journalists, physicians, social workers, and writers. Added to this heterogeneous mix are Canadian-born Chinese, the old and the young, the working class, and the entrepreneurs.

Old Chinatown, Chinatown West, and Chinatown East

There are three distinct Chinatowns in the city of Toronto proper: Old Chinatown; Chinatown West; and, Chinatown East. Old Chinatown, a ghost of its former self, occupies a few blocks around Dundas and Elizabeth streets. Dwarfed by modern high-rise office buildings and a hotel, the remaining restaurants and stores cater to tourists and office workers. Once a thriving community, this Chinatown was almost levelled to the ground. After the war and without any consultation with the Chinatown residents and business owners, funding was approved for the construction of a new City Hall. By 1958, two-thirds of Chinatown was expropriated. In 1965, even after the city's new City Hall and public square were officially opened, the one-third of Chinatown that was spared from expropriation was threatened by further development. This time, however, the Chinese community rallied with support from reform politicians. Despite these efforts, Chinese residents and businesses had already re-located westwards along Dundas Street

towards Spadina Avenue, less than one kilometre away, to a neighbourhood with more affordable housing, employment opportunities, and space. It was the influx of Chinese immigrants, many entrepreneurs with money to invest, that resulted in the development of Chinatown West. By 1971, 44 percent of the houses there were occupied by Chinese. Within seven years, the percentage of Chinese increased to nearly 90 percent (Thompson, 1989).

Another significant group of newcomers was comprised of students and professionals with educational, financial, and savvy know-how. When Chinatown West was threatened by development, they fought back. When the Chinese garment workers in the Spadina district were found to be abused in sweatshop working conditions or underpaid as home workers, they fought back. These community activists, many of whom were social service workers, spawned a new and younger generation of civic engagement in the Chinese community.

The influx of immigrants from China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Hong Kong boosted the economic health of Chinatown West in the 1980s and early 1990s. From the late 1990s, large numbers of Fujianese arrived from China. They added a complexity to the existing Chinese community with their language, incomprehensible to Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, as they were absorbed into the underground economy as cheap labour.

With the steady flow of Chinese newcomers, a third Chinatown arose as early as the 1960s but more substantially in the 1970s. This one is located in the east end of the city at Broadview Avenue and Gerrard Street. This area that soon became known as Chinatown East was an old working-class district where house prices and rents were significantly lower than in Old Chinatown and Chinatown West. By 1973, there were an estimated 4,000 Chinese, a 400 percent increase over the 1968 population (Thompson, 1989). During the 1970s, Hong Kong immigrants established their businesses during the early years of Chinatown East. Later, newcomers from Vietnam, who were predominantly ethnic Chinese, moved in to the extent that this Chinatown is nicknamed “Little Saigon.”

Ethnoburbs

Up until 1971, the majority of the Chinese lived in the inner city; however, the move away from downtown Toronto began in the 1970s and resulted in new pockets of Chinese settlement. The Chinese newcomers decentralized, first to the suburbs of Toronto, then later to the adjacent municipalities. The first suburb of choice was North York that became populated with 10 percent of the Chinese population. The second was Scarborough and it was the 1984 opening of the Dragon Centre, the first Chinese-themed mall in North America that ushered in a new pattern of Chinese businesses and residences. It became the hub of what geographer Wei Li coined as an ethnoburb, a new form of ethnic cluster in large North American cities, like Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Unlike traditional Chinatowns that were established as a result of socio-economic and cultural marginalization, the ethnoburbs are the result of economic strength and buying power. Other key differences are summarized in table 3:

TABLE 3: Ethnoburb Compared to Chinatown

| | Ethnoburb | Chinatown |
|-----------------------|------------------|---|
| Location | Suburbs | Inner city |
| Economic structure | White collar | Blue Collar |
| Socio-economic Status | Higher | Lower |
| Age | Younger | Older |
| Ethnicity | Multi-ethnic | Homogeneous |
| Immigration | Recent | Older |
| Economic Links | Global | Local and self-sustaining |
| Spatialization | Car dominated | Self-contained for walking And public transportation |

Source: Data from Li 1998.

The ethnoburb in Scarborough was not made up of street level shops and sidewalks for pedestrian traffic. Rather, office buildings, stores, banks, and restaurants with Chinese signs clearly indicated an Asian commercial district that catered to suburban drivers and their automobiles. As the area filled with Chinese residents and businesses, the neighbourhood came to be known as Agincourt Chinatown, Scarborough Chinatown, and Asiancourt. By the 1981 census, 60 percent of Toronto's population of 12,000 Chinese lived in Scarborough.

TABLE 4: Chinese Population by Large Municipalities, 2006

| Municipality | Total Population | Chinese Population | Percentage |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Toronto | 2,503,281 | 283,075 | 11 |
| Markham | 261,573 | 89,300 | 34 |
| Mississauga | 668,549 | 46,120 | 7 |
| Richmond Hill | 162,704 | 34,615 | 21 |
| Other | 1,517,042 | 33,220 | 2 |
| Toronto CMA | 5,113,149 | 486,330 | 10 |

Source: Compiled from Statistics Canada, *Census 2006*.

To the west of Toronto, the city of Mississauga became another area that added to the drain from the Toronto core. A small Chinese commercial hub developed in plazas but this was soon eclipsed in 1987 after the opening of the Mississauga Chinese Centre. This municipality, close to the Pearson International Airport, attracted the transnational business people who commuted regularly between Toronto and the Far East. By 2006, there were 46,120 Chinese (table 4).

Another neighbourhood of choice for settlement has been Richmond Hill, located north of Toronto and also part of the Greater Toronto Area. As one of the top six Canadian cities for newcomers, the Chinese have been drawn by the auspicious “Rich” in Richmond Hill and the spacious homes with large lots. There are 34,615 residents of Chinese origin, the largest visible minority group in a town of 162,704 (table 4).

Markham, the largest town in Canada, is also located north of Toronto and within the Greater Toronto Area. Like neighbouring Richmond Hill, Markham is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Canada. Although there has been a backlash by long-term residents regarding the invasion of “foreigners,” the largest visible minority is the Chinese. And this group is growing. The 89,300 Chinese comprise 34 percent of the town’s population and 52 percent of its visible minorities (table 4).

TABLE 5: Place of Birth, 2006

| Country of Birth | Chinese in Canada |
|------------------|-------------------|
| China | 466,940 |
| Hong Kong | 215,430 |
| Vietnam | 160,170 |
| Taiwan | 65,205 |
| Macau | 6,000 |

Source: Statistics Canada, *Census* 2006.

A snapshot of Toronto’s Chinese community in the twenty-first century contrasts sharply with the one inhabited by the first recorded Chinese in 1878. The top three birthplaces of the Chinese in Canada are China, Hong Kong and Vietnam (table 5). Twenty-five (25) percent are Canadian-born (Census, 2006). The proportion of Chinese living in the Greater Toronto Area has increased to 486,330, that is, 40 percent of all Chinese in Canada. Thirty-four (34) percent of Markham’s population are Chinese, 21 percent in Richmond Hill, 11 percent in Toronto, and 7 percent in Mississauga (table 4).

Conclusion

The settlement of the Chinese in Toronto has been shaped by migratory patterns and their status in Canadian society at the time of arrival. Early disenfranchisement barred civic engagement and a political voice. Severe immigration laws restricted family life. Post-war immigration policies gradually eased family reunification. Up until this time, most newcomers settled in and near the inner-city’s Old Chinatown. Not until 1967 with the new point system has the Chinese community been able to re-build and flourish again.

Chinatown West and Chinatown East are the destinations of choice for newcomers from Vietnam and mainland China, especially those with more limited economic resources. Decentralization to the suburbs and neighbouring municipalities began with the arrival of

entrepreneurs and professionals from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Not only were the traditional service businesses, like restaurants and retail stores, revitalized with the influx of consumers, new industrial businesses developed in a full range of scale and size. No longer tied to residential areas, these became fully integrated with non-Chinese businesses across the Toronto area. Unlike the forced segregation of Old Chinatown, the ethnoburbs in Agincourt, Mississauga, Markham, and Richmond Hill attract newcomers with financial clout to choose where they want to live, work, and set up businesses. The instability of economic and political life in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China continues to provide an ongoing influx of newcomers seeking a safe haven for their investments and a brighter future for their families.

The City of Toronto is considered one of the most multicultural cities in the world. In the broader Greater Toronto Area, Chinatown no longer means the Chinese community. The spread from the inner city into the ethnoburbs has changed the meaning and significance of contemporary Chinese communities. Once an urban space that looked so familiar with its traditional restaurants, stores, and laundries, Chinatown continues to evolve and grow with the times.

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