

For Remembrance and Reconciliation: What Chinatown's Gentrification Crisis Means for  
Vancouver's Chinese Culture

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Since the 1850s, many Chinese have called Canada home. Coming by boat to Canada, many found themselves on the coastal sections of British Columbia, in search of a better life for themselves and their families that they left behind in China. This lay the foundation for the Chinese population that live in British Columbia today. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 432,680 ethnic Chinese live in Vancouver<sup>1</sup> accounting for 18.7% of the population<sup>2</sup>, a number that surely has increased 5 years later in 2016. Many of the younger Chinese families currently live in neighbourhoods all throughout the Lower Mainland, while many of the senior population live in Vancouver's Chinatown. For those that call Chinatown home, shared language, cultural norms, and experience brings the community together. This community has been a constant source of welcome and support for the Chinese, especially during a time of oppression, and continues to serve the Chinese community in the modern age.

However, Vancouver's Chinatown is currently undergoing the process of gentrification, or renovating to conform to the mainstream culture. To make way for new condominiums, high rises and businesses, parts of Chinatown are being rezoned and torn down, forcing its residents to move further away from their community. Worse still, some residents may not be able to afford the new and expensive rent, some to the point of being evicted and living on the streets. This paper will look at the historical relations between the Chinese and white Canadians during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the importance of Vancouver's Chinatown for Chinese-Canadians, and why gentrification can hurt the Chinese-Canadian community and culture in Vancouver.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables (Vancouver), 99-010-X2011028, last modified January 7, 2016, accessed online at <https://goo.gl/LPtfx9> on November 27, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "Proportion of Total Population of Major Asian Ethnic Groups by Selected Metropolitan Areas," *Population*, accessed online at <https://www.asiapacific.ca/statistics/population/population-2011-census/proportion-total-population-major-asian-ethnic-groups-0> on November 27, 2016.

## In Search of a “Better Life”: The Dominant Attitudes Towards the Chinese Before World War II

The late 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw the beginnings of Chinese immigration to Canada as a result of the discovery of gold in British Columbia in 1858, which was still a British colony at the time.<sup>3</sup> British Columbia later joined the Canadian Confederation in 1871, on the condition that a railroad be built to link themselves with the rest of Canada.<sup>4</sup> As part of John A. Macdonald’s National Policy campaign, the Canadian Pacific Railway project was approved by the government in 1880,<sup>5</sup> which would connect coast to coast and enable immigrants to one day travel on the new Iron Ribbon out to Western Canada to begin populating the new country.

Of course, a railroad first had to be built and thus required manpower. In order to keep costs as low as possible, Prime Minister Macdonald insisted on employing Chinese labourers, who were paid “only one-fifth of what...white workers [were paid] for the same work.”<sup>6</sup> Once the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1885, many Chinese left to go back to China, but the remaining that stayed resided in British Columbia,<sup>7</sup> with many finding work as gold miners or farmers in the Fraser Valley area, or in fish canneries along the North Coast.<sup>8</sup> By finding jobs in their new home, the Chinese immigrants saw this as a fresh start.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth M. Holland, “A History of Chinese Immigration in the United States and Canada,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 37(2007): 150, accessed November 27, 2016, doi: 10.1080/02722010709481851.

<sup>4</sup> Holland, “A History of Chinese Immigration,” 151.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Conrad, Alvin Finkel, and Donald Fyson, *History of the Canadian Peoples, Volume 2: 1867 to the Present* (Toronto: Pearson, 2015), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth M. Holland, “A History of Chinese Immigration in the United States and Canada,” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 37(2007): 151, accessed November 27, 2016, doi: 10.1080/02722010709481851.

<sup>7</sup> Imogene L. Lim, “Here and There: Re/Collecting Chinese Canadian History,” *Canadian Issues* (2006): 62, accessed November 10, 2016,

<http://proxy.lib.sfu.ca/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/docview/208683910?accountid=13800>.

<sup>8</sup> David C. Lai, “From Downtown Slums to Suburban Malls: Chinese Migration and Settlement in Canada,” in *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility and Identity*, eds. Laurence J. C. Ma & Carolyn Cartier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 313.

However, the federal government did not reciprocate these same feelings for their new residents. The federal government also began to take action and tighten immigration laws (e.g. the Chinese Head Tax of 1885, 1900, and 1903; the Chinese Immigration Act/Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923) in response to the fear that the Chinese would take land and jobs away from white Canadians. The idea behind the Chinese Head Tax was to create a financial burden for the Chinese and further deter them from coming to Canada, though many Chinese youth still found it to be advantageous to leave China.<sup>9</sup> Across the country, British Columbia arguably had the most laws set in place against the Chinese.<sup>10</sup> The government of British Columbia passed various provincial legislations that were designed to make living in the province more challenging for the Chinese (e.g. the Act to Prevent Chinese from Acquiring Crown Lands, 1884; the Act to regulate the Chinese population of BC, 1884; the Act to amend The Qualification and Registration of Voters Act, 1872).<sup>11</sup> It is through these laws as well as racial stereotyping and bias that the Chinese were unwanted in Canada.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, the racial intolerance and hostility towards the Chinese continued to grow, and many whites tended to show their intolerance through destructive and violent means without fear of retribution. In 1907, a big display of this hostility occurred when white men and boys stormed through Vancouver's Chinatown, smashing the windows of Chinese stores and businesses.<sup>12</sup> There were also less violent, though still disturbing, examples of

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<sup>9</sup> David C. Lai, "From Downtown Slums to Suburban Malls: Chinese Migration and Settlement in Canada," in *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility and Identity*, eds. Laurence J. C. Ma & Carolyn Cartier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 315.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Roy, "The Effects of the War on the Chinese," in *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-67* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 148.

<sup>11</sup> "Acknowledging Past Wrongs," last modified November 2016, <http://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/pathways/chinese-historical-wrongs/read/>.

<sup>12</sup> "The Early Chinese Canadians 1858-1847," accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/chinese-canadians/021022-1400-e.html>.

outright racism towards the Chinese. Similar to the experience of African-Americans in the United States, the Chinese experienced segregation in public places such as schools, theatres and public pools.<sup>13</sup> Even after volunteering to fight on behalf of Canada in World War I, many Chinese returned to Canada facing more racial intolerance and unemployment. The final blow to relations between the Chinese and white Canadians was the passing of the Chinese Immigration Act about 4 years after World War I ended. This law prevented any more Chinese from immigrating to Canada,<sup>14</sup> and prevented the unification of Chinese families indefinitely.

### **Chinatown as a Space for Improvement and Civil Activism**

Many white Canadians subscribed to the idea that the Chinese were inferior, as seen through the passing of various legislation and the violence and oppression against them. In response to this, the Chinese were forced lived together in close quarters in what we now call “Chinatowns”. The term “Chinatown” in itself is a European concept used to “represent an undesirable neighbourhood festering in unsanitary conditions...and populated by an inferior race.”<sup>15</sup> For Chinatowns in various parts of the world, they served as a ‘home away from home’ for people who experienced similar struggles and had similar beliefs, creating a self-sustaining community. These Chinatowns would grow to incorporate residential, institutional and commercial arrangements such as businesses, community associations, churches, and schools among many others.<sup>16</sup>

In the time before World War II, the majority of Chinese took a generally submissive approach in attempt to fit in with their new environment, accepting that various factors such as

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<sup>13</sup> “The Early Chinese Canadians 1858-1847,” accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/chinese-canadians/021022-1400-e.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “Chinese Canadian History,” accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.ccmms.ca/chinese-canadian-history/>.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Li and Eva X. Li, “Vancouver Chinatown in Transition,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7(2011), 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> Li and Li, “Vancouver Chinatown in Transition,” 9.

institutionalized racism, individual language barriers, and social exclusion were unfortunately a part of the transition process into their new home.<sup>17</sup> With so many forces oppressing the Chinese immigrant community, many decided to just go on with their daily lives, ensuring that they stay out of the way of their white counterparts, and work on their own improvement within their community. As such, Chinatown became their own space to live, work, and share ideas and culture with one another.

However, this is not to say that Chinese immigrants were passive. When Canada entered into World War II, the Chinese debated among themselves whether or not they should wait to be conscripted, or to step up and volunteer to fight in the war. Those that wanted to volunteer argued that this would be an opportunity to show their loyalty to Canada, while those that opted to wait argued that they should not have to risk their lives for a country that did not care for them.<sup>18</sup> This is a pertinent example of the Chinese taking an active role in bettering their opportunities and their status among Canadians. It can be argued that by volunteering and ultimately risking their lives, Chinese-Canadians played a part in helping the Allied forces win the war. This victory sparked a series of changes that gave the Chinese the right to vote, which set in motion the opportunity for them become trained in professional jobs such as doctors, lawyers and engineers,<sup>19</sup> opening up more opportunities for themselves and future generations.

An example given in Li and Li's 2011 article entitled "Vancouver Chinatown in Transition" chronicles the actions taken by the Chinese Benevolent Association to improve their status among white Canadians. The group created a "Self-Improvement Committee" to improve its public image in 1921 following negative media publicity about Vancouver's Chinatown as

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>18</sup> "Chinese Canadian History," accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.ccmms.ca/chinese-canadian-history/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Chinese Canadian History," accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.ccmms.ca/chinese-canadian-history/>.

being a “drug infested and unhealthy neighbourhood”.<sup>20</sup> The Chinese worked towards not only improving their overall image, but also finding ways to “meet the expectations of a prevailing white ideology”<sup>21</sup> that was dominant in their new homes and neighbourhoods. Another example of an active approach that was taken by the Chinese occurred during the Great Depression when Chinese workers in service industries were under stress. The Chinese Benevolent Association, again, took action by petitioning for better relief treatment, presenting 520 Chinatown resident signatures to Vancouver City Council.<sup>22</sup> These three examples show the submissive and yet active approach that the Chinese took in finding ways to relate themselves to the greater community, sticking closely within their own communities and acting in a civil manner when operating outside of their communities. The Chinese also fought peacefully for the betterment of their own people, fighting for their civil rights and showing that they were also worthy of being called Canadian.

Having a Chinatown in Vancouver shows the rich cultural history that aided in the creation of our city, as well as recognizing the hardships that these immigrants had to endure in the past. Without a place to call their own that was separate from the mainstream white Canadian ideals, the Chinese would have very limited mobility in fighting for their own rights. But beyond mobility and self-improvement, Vancouver’s Chinatown served as a home for immigrants and a community for those who did not belong in the mainstream environment who had nowhere else to turn. However, even as the civil rights of the Chinese began to improve during the 1950s and 1960s, their new homes were beginning to be targeted for redevelopment. In the same way that Chinese were seen at one point to be uncivilized and vile, the 1950s saw various buildings in

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Li and Eva X. Li, “Vancouver Chinatown in Transition,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7(2011), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Li and Li, “Vancouver Chinatown in Transition,” 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Chinatown being torn down in favour of modern buildings that reflected “rationalization”,<sup>23</sup> resulting in gentrification, something that will be discussed in a later section.

### **The War Brings Change: World War II and Beyond**

After World War II, the situation slowly began to improve for Chinese-Canadians. A vote conducted among the Chinese community decided that the Chinese would fight in the war as a gesture of loyalty to their new homeland. This enabled the Chinese to join other Canadians in fighting in the war as they were deployed in the army, navy, and the air force and even seconded to the British forces, sacrificing their lives for a country that did not value them months before.<sup>24</sup> Aside from showing their loyalty, the Chinese were also motivated to fight against the Japanese forces, who invaded China during the Sino-Japanese Wars.<sup>25</sup> The growing sympathy for the Chinese due to the effects of the Sino-Japanese War and the eventual triumph for the Allied forces over the Japanese drastically improved the social acceptance of the Chinese in Canada. Victory in Japan (V-J) day saw many whites and Chinese alike celebrating the end of the war together,<sup>26</sup> a sight that would have been impossible to see 40 years prior. This act of united celebration shows the shift in attitudes towards the Chinese as the world moved out of the World War II era.

As Canada began to rebuild its economy and re-integrate returning soldiers into society after the war, there was also the need to fix the broken relationships that existed between the Chinese community and the rest of Canada, particularly in British Columbia.<sup>27</sup> One of the first

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<sup>23</sup> Katharyne Mitchell, “Global Diasporas and Traditional Towns: Chinese Transnational Migration and the Redevelopment of Vancouver’s Chinatown,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 11(2000), 10.

<sup>24</sup> “Chinese Canadian History,” accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.ccmms.ca/chinese-canadian-history/>.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Roy, “The Effects of the War on the Chinese,” in *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-67* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Roy, “The Effects of the War on the Chinese,” 148.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

steps towards this acceptance and equality was Canada's part in helping to establish the United Nations in 1945.<sup>28</sup> Seeing the victims of the Holocaust under Nazi Germany helped Canada turn inward to reflect on the injustices that were occurring within their own country. In response, many newspapers, labour unions and other leaders called on the government to "treat its Chinese citizens as equals" by reviewing its anti-Chinese laws.<sup>29</sup> The 1923 Chinese Immigration Act was finally repealed in 1947 after World War II came to an end, which also enfranchised the Chinese. This gave Chinese the right to vote, and further propelled them into various professional opportunities.

Canada has since experienced great success in overcoming the racial barriers that were put in place during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though the Chinese still experienced some difficulties shortly after the repeal of the 1923 law that made it hard for Chinese to find work or rise to positions of authority outside of their communities.<sup>30</sup> Over time, relations between the Chinese and the whites have improved, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there certainly a level of acceptance that had not existed 150 years prior. The Chinese in Vancouver are able to live harmoniously with the whites, staying in Chinatown among people that shared common language and culture as well as branching out to other parts of the Lower Mainland.

### **Gentrification: A Growing Debate and Problem for Vancouver's Chinatown**

One of the main problems that residents of Vancouver's Chinatown are currently facing is ongoing gentrification. As one of the neighbourhoods that makes up Vancouver's Downtown

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<sup>28</sup> "The Early Chinese Canadians 1858-1847," accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/chinese-canadians/021022-1400-e.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "The Early Chinese Canadians 1858-1847," accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/chinese-canadians/021022-1400-e.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Conrad, Alvin Finkel, and Donald Fyson, *History of the Canadian Peoples, Volume 2: 1867 to the Present* (Toronto: Pearson, 2015), 306.

Eastside, Chinatown risks having its heritage buildings and low-income housing torn down in favour of expensive condominiums, high rises and expensive shops and restaurants. Over the past 50 years, residents of Chinatown had greatly resisted the ongoing change and urban redevelopments in their neighbourhood, as it would result the displacing of thousands of Chinese homeowners and business owners. Particularly, the idea was resisted by the community, social workers, professors and architects and even recent and well-educated immigrants Hong Kong.<sup>31</sup>

However, it should be noted that some people within Chinatown greatly welcomed the change, as it would serve as a revitalization for what many outside of the community saw as a “dying neighbourhood.”<sup>32</sup> The revitalization would make the neighbourhood more welcoming, and be positive for business owners who wanted to welcome more clients from Chinatown and beyond. As well as welcoming change, the 1950s also saw the number of Chinatown’s residents decline. Many that were Canadian-born Chinese after the 1950s were more educated and financially well-off than the previous generation, and they moved out of Chinatown to other neighbourhoods to establish themselves since they could afford a higher cost of living.<sup>33</sup> The elderly population that is left behind is now vulnerable to gentrification, with language and cultural norms further impeding on their ability to save their neighbourhood.

Chinatown’s Chinese population is currently made up of Chinese businesses and associations to maintain the culture of Chinatown<sup>34</sup> as well as many seniors who had grown up in Chinatown since the 1920s and 1930s. However, many seniors may be forced to move away

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<sup>31</sup> Mitchell, “Global Diasporas and Traditional Towns,” 17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> David C. Lai, “From Downtown Slums to Suburban Malls: Chinese Migration and Settlement in Canada,” in *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility and Identity*, eds. Laurence J. C. Ma & Carolyn Cartier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 315.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Li and Eva X. Li, “Vancouver Chinatown in Transition,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7(2011), 15.

from Chinatown – a place that has been convenient for them in terms of accessibility, language and cultural norms – due to the rising cost of living and rezoning of current low income housing and grocers. This is the issue highlighted in the short film *No Stone Unturned* by Vancouver filmmakers Eliot Galan and Chanel Ly, which was featured in an article in the Vancouver-based online news publication *The Tyee*.<sup>35</sup> A proposal by Beedie Development Group intended for the City to fund the building of 127 market condos and only 25 seniors' living units, which will more than likely be quite expensive and therefore out of reach for the seniors that currently reside in Chinatown.<sup>36</sup> This would result in many having to move and live elsewhere. If these Chinese seniors have family living in the Lower Mainland, they could potentially move to a new neighbourhood to live with their children; however, those that have no family in the Lower Mainland risk becoming homeless.

While second and third generation Chinese see great potential for improvements in the Downtown Eastside to “clean up” Vancouver’s most vulnerable neighbourhoods, gentrification could bring with it many social problems, particularly homelessness among its residents who can no longer afford to live in that neighbourhood. Walking through Vancouver’s Chinatown in the present, many traditional buildings and Chinese grocers and businesses still exist, though now side by side with modern and expensive looking condominiums, cafes and restaurants. But beyond being just a place to live and stay, Vancouver’s Chinatown cannot thrive without its residents, and as many are beginning to move away due to lack of accessibility and high cost of

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<sup>35</sup> Eliot Galan and Chanel Ly, *No Stone Unturned* (video), featured on “In Vancouver’s Changing Chinatown, Youth Join Gentrification Debate,” *The Tyee*, (December 29, 2015), accessed December 6, 2016 at <http://thetyee.ca/Video/2015/12/29/No-Stone-Unturned/>.

<sup>36</sup> Joanne Lee-Young, “A new generation defends Vancouver’s Chinatown traditions,” *The Vancouver Sun*, December 30, 2015, accessed December 7, 2016 at <http://www.vancouversun.com/business/generation+defends+vancouver+chinatown+traditions/11620208/story.html>

living. Gentrification and turning low-income housing into expensive luxury living can result in Vancouver losing a major part of its history, one that cannot afford to be overlooked or forgotten.

**Conclusion: Vancouver's Chinatown is Vital for Ongoing Remembrance and Reconciliation**

Regardless of location, Chinatowns have always been a symbol of racial ideology against the Chinese as well as the site of sheltered protection and limited economic opportunities for those that lived within them.<sup>37</sup> All throughout the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Chinese first immigrated to Canada to the 1960s when Chinese-Canadian civil rights were fully restored, Vancouver's Chinatown remained a social constant for Chinese immigrants as a place of community and culture. It also serves as a constant reminder to populations outside of this cultural group of the racial injustices that existed at one point in history.

The current gentrification crisis that Vancouver's Chinatown (and more broadly, the Downtown Eastside) is facing threatens to push those that live in the Chinatown out of their homes and community to either outside communities that they may not relate as well too, or potentially to living on the streets due to not being able to afford the cost of living. Gentrification also threatens to eradicate a piece of Vancouver's history. Though it is an ugly piece, it is an important piece to reflect on so as to ensure that racial oppression and injustice of any kind should never happen again toward any ethnic group. Failure to protect Vancouver's Chinatown is essentially a failure to recognize and apologize for the injustices that had taken place during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Li and Eva X. Li, "Vancouver Chinatown in Transition," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 7(2011), 20.

While many Chinese-Canadians report living outside of Chinatown in areas such as Richmond and Vancouver West,<sup>38</sup> Chinatown will continue to remain an integral place for Chinese-Canadians in Vancouver that cannot be replaced by neighbourhoods elsewhere. Chinatown served as the original site of living, community building, and civil activism for the benefit of future generations of Chinese-Canadians. As highlighted in Galan and Ly's short film, many Chinese-Canadian youth are recognizing the importance of Vancouver's Chinatown, and are coming together to fight for affordable seniors' living units and traditional community sites.<sup>39</sup> By actively fighting for Chinatown to be kept affordable for its current residents, it allows for a piece of Vancouver's cultural history to be passed on from one generation to the next.

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<sup>38</sup> Li and Li, "Vancouver Chinatown in Transition," 20.

<sup>39</sup> Eliot Galan and Chanel Ly, *No Stone Unturned* (video), featured on "In Vancouver's Changing Chinatown, Youth Join Gentrification Debate," *The Tyee*, (December 29, 2015), accessed December 6, 2016 at <http://thetyee.ca/Video/2015/12/29/No-Stone-Unturned/>.

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