

From Chinatown to Ethnoburb: The Chinese in Toronto

Arlene Chan

Retired librarian, Toronto Public Library

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 history of the Chinese in Canada has been examined in many historical works, such as by Morton (1973), Con (1982), and Lai (1988). On the narrower subject of the Chinese in Toronto, academic research is extensive on a variety of topics reflecting the complexity and diversity of the Chinese communities, including the landmark papers of the early Chinese community by Mah (1977; 1978). The transition out of the downtown core into the suburbs has been studied, as by Lo 1997; however, only one book, *Toronto's Chinatown*, has been published (Thompson, 1989) and this one focuses on its social organizations.

My paper draws upon the qualitative findings of a literature search and interviews with descendants of the early Chinatown residents and business owners, as well as my own first-hand experiences. Having grown up in what-is-now-called Old Chinatown, I identified and interpreted the myriad and confluence of factors that has affected the settlement patterns of the Chinese in Toronto.

The early Chinese, like others in urban centres across Canada, sequestered themselves largely in Chinatown as they faced the racism and discrimination of a white host society. The head taxes and subsequent exclusion laws of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fueled the anti-Chinese sentiment of society, labour organizations, newspapers, and public officials. From among a predominantly homogeneous group of immigrants with common roots in villages of Guangdong province, merchants and businessmen assumed leadership positions within the clan, district, and political organizations that gave direction to Chinatown, the centre for commerce, culture, and community life of a bachelor society. After the Second World War, immigration laws were eased for family reunification and the ensuing influx of Chinese immigrants was fostered by a government policy of multiculturalism and a business incentive program.

Rising out of the ashes of Old Chinatown, two-thirds of which was demolished for Toronto's new City Hall, was Chinatown West, to the west, then Chinatown East, to the east. While these three inner-city Chinatowns remain significant centres of Chinese stores, services, and restaurants for locals and tourists alike, the middle-class dream for less congested neighbourhoods and more spacious homes attracted settlement in the suburbs of North York and Scarborough by the late 1970s. As coined by American

professor, Wei Li, these “ethnoburbs” or new suburban Chinese neighbourhoods further expanded into the adjacent municipalities of Mississauga, Richmond Hill, and Markham. Unlike the traditional Chinatowns in crowded downtown locations, the ethnoburbs are attracting the more affluent, skilled, and educated newcomers. Both Markham and Richmond Hill are among the fastest growing municipalities in Canada where the largest visible minority group is Chinese.

Second, third, and fourth generation Chinese Canadians have integrated into the broader community. New immigrants, now arriving from all provinces in China, the second largest source country for newcomers to Toronto, as well as from Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, are establishing themselves in the traditional Chinatowns and in the newer ethnoburbs. The settlement patterns of the Chinese reflect the diversity of the Chinese diaspora in the Greater Toronto Area, home to Canada’s largest population of Chinese. No longer are Chinatowns viewed as the urban plights of days gone by, rather as healthy signposts of neighbourhoods where the Chinese are at liberty to retain their culture and traditions in a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual society.

Bibliography

Con, Harry et al. *From China to Canada: From China to Canada: a History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982.

Lai, David Chuenyan. *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988.

Lo, Lucia. “Settlement Patterns of Toronto’s Chinese Immigrants.” *Canadian Journal of Regional Science* 20 (Spring-Summer 1997).

Mah, Valerie A. *The Bachelor Society: A Look at Toronto’s Early Chinese Community from 1878-1924*. Toronto, 1978.

———. *An Indepth Look at Toronto's Early Chinatown, 1913-1933*. Master’s thesis, University of Toronto, 1977.

Morton, James W. *In the Sea of Sterile Mountains: the Chinese in British Columbia*. Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1973.

Thompson, Richard H. *Toronto’s Chinatown: the Changing Social Organization of an Ethnic Community*. New York: AMS Press, 1989.