



VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN

Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980

Kay J. Anderson

*Vancouver's
Chinatown*

Racial Discourse
in Canada, 1875–1980

KAY J. ANDERSON

McGill-Queen's University Press
Montreal & Kingston • London • Buffalo

© McGill-Queen's University Press 1991
ISBN 0-7735-0844-9 (cloth)
ISBN 0-7735-1329-9 (paper)

Legal deposit fourth quarter 1991
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

First paperback edition 1995

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper

This book was first published
with the help of a grant from the
Social Science Federation of Canada,
using funds provided by the
Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada.

McGill-Queen's University Press is grateful to the
Canada Council for support of its publishing
program.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Anderson, Kay, 1958–
Vancouver's Chinatown
(McGill-Queen's studies in ethnic history; 10)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7735-0844-9 (bnd)
ISBN 0-7735-1329-9 (pbk)

1. Chinese Canadians – British Columbia – Vancouver – History.
 2. Chinatown (Vancouver, B.C.) – History.
 3. Race.
- I. Title. II. Series.

FC3847.9.C5A63 1991 305.895'1071 C91-090223-2
F1089.5.V22A63 1991

Typeset in Palatino 10/12 by Caractéra inc.,
Quebec City

Popular wisdom maintains that the colourful Chinese quarters of Canadian, American, and Australian cities owe their existence to the generations of Chinese immigrants who have made their lives there. The restaurants, pagodas, and neon lights are seen as intrinsically connected to the Chinese and their immigrant experience in the West. Kay Anderson argues, however, that "Chinatown" is a Western construction, illustrative of a process of cultural domination that gave European settlers in North America and Australia the power to define and shape the district according to their own images and interests.

Anderson clearly rejects the concept of "race" as a means of distinguishing between groups of human beings. She argues that race is a set of discursive practices that structure struggles over identity and place. Anderson applies this fresh approach toward the concept of race to a critical examination of popular, media, and academic treatments of the Chinatown in Vancouver.

Vancouver's Chinatown offers an exciting interpretation of a locality, the significance of which extends far beyond the boundaries of Chinatown into the contemporary public affairs of any society in the Western world that receives immigrants. The book will be of special interest to social scientists and students looking for an empirical study of racism, place and multiculturalism that is firmly grounded in social theory.

KAY J. ANDERSON is senior lecturer in geography,
University College, University of New South Wales.

MCGILL-QUEEN'S STUDIES IN ETHNIC HISTORY
Donald Harman Akenson, Editor

- 1 Irish Migrants in the Canadas
A New Approach
Bruce S. Elliott
- 2 Critical Years in Immigration
Canada and Australia Compared
Freda Hawkins
- 3 Italians in Toronto
Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935
John Zucchi
- 4 Linguistics and Poetics of Latvian Folk Songs
Essays in Honour of the Sesquicentennial of
the Birth of Kr. Barons
Vaira Vikis-Freibergs
- 5 Johan Schrøder's Travels in Canada, 1863
Orm Øverland
- 6 Class, Ethnicity, and Social Inequality
Christopher McAll
- 7 The Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict
The Maori, the British, and the New Zealand Wars
James Belich
- 8 White Canada Forever
Popular Attitudes and Public Policy toward
Orientals in British Columbia
W. Peter Ward
- 9 The People of Glengarry
Highlanders in Transition, 1745-1820
Marianne McLean
- 10 Vancouver's Chinatown
Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980
Kay J. Anderson
- 11 Best Left as Indians
Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory,
1840-1973
Ken Coates
- 12 Such Hardworking People
Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto
Franca Iacovetta
- 13 The Little Slaves of the Harp
Italian Child Street Musicians in Nineteenth-
Century Paris, London, and New York
John E. Zucchi

- 14 The Light of Nature and the Law of God
Antislavery in Ontario, 1833-1877
Allen P. Stouffer
- 15 Drum Songs
Glimpses of Dene History
Kerry Abel
- 16 Louis Rosenberg
Canada's Jews
(Reprint of 1939 original)
Edited by Morton Weinfeld
- 17 A New Lease on Life
Landlords, Tenants, and Immigrants
in Ireland and Canada
Catharine Anne Wilson
- 18 In Search of Paradise
The Odyssey of an Italian Family
Susan Gabori
- 19 Ethnicity in the Mainstream
Three Studies of English Canadian Culture
in Ontario
Pauline Greenhill
- 20 Patriots and Proletarians
The Politicization of Hungarian Immigrants
in Canada, 1923-1939
Carmela Patrias
- 21 The Four Quarters of the Night
The Life-Journey of an Emigrant Sikh
Tara Singh Bains and Hugh Johnston
- 22 Resistance and Pluralism
A Cultural History of Guyana, 1838-1900
Brian L. Moore
- 23 Search Out the Land
The Jews and the Growth of Equality in British
Colonial America, 1740-1867
Sheldon J. Godfrey and Judith C. Godfrey

Acknowledgments

Establishing the design behind the data of our experience is easier with respect to books than it is with life. Looking back on the making of this book, I return as far as 1978, when as a third-year geography student at Adelaide University I began to feel uneasy about the field of research known as "ethnic studies." I recall asking my cultural geography lecturer if, instead of writing an essay on the Greeks in Melbourne, or the Germans in Adelaide, or the Vietnamese in Sydney, I might examine some aspect of "our" culture, perhaps the rural retreat movement. Professor Fay Gale agreed and encouraged me on to bigger things.

I carried that reservation about ethnic studies with me to Vancouver, Canada, where, with the assistance of a Commonwealth Scholarship, I wrote the PhD thesis on which this book is based. Reading and discussing widely, I began to confront the deeper humanistic issues concerning "us" and "them" that I could only sense as an undergraduate. Somewhat rattled by the epistemological direction in which those issues seemed to point, I made my fitful way through the tangle of threads to "Chinatown."

While I cannot thank individually all the people who gave me thoughtful assistance on the thesis and manuscript, I do want to acknowledge colleagues at the University of British Columbia. In particular, I would like to thank staff and students of the Geography Department, including David Ley and Trevor Barnes, for helping to create the intellectually heightening environment out of which the thesis came. Also helpful was Edgar Wickberg of the History Department who allowed me access to material in the Chinese-Canadian project at the Special Collections division of the main library.

Thanks are due to Peter Goheen of McGill-Queen's University Press for his encouragement throughout the manuscript's review, to two

helpful referees, and of course to the Social Science Federation of Canada for the grant that enabled this manuscript to be published.

In Canberra, where this thesis has been converted to a book, I owe thanks to my head of department, Roger McLean, for allowing me time in 1988 to begin the task. I am also grateful to Julie Kesby for her proofreading and assistance with referencing and indexing, to Paul Ballard for his cartographic expertise, and to the University of New South Wales for a small grant that enabled me to use editorial advice, especially on footnoting, from Bill Goff. In Toronto, John Parry did a most professional job of copy-editing.

Thanks, finally, to my parents for instilling in me a steely sense of purpose which sustained me through the long and often difficult writing process. The product, I hope, is some contribution toward a future in which the colour line is neutralized in both theory and practice.

Kay Anderson
Canberra
November 1990

Contents

Illustrative Material	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	3
1 Race, Place, and the Power of Definition	8
2 Creating Outsiders, 1875–1903	34
3 Constructing Race through Place and Practice, 1886–1920	73
4 Marginalizing Chinatown, 1920–1935	106
5 New Allies, New Perceptions, 1935–1949	144
6 “Slum Clearance,” 1950–1969	178
7 Chinatown Re-oriented, 1970–1980	211
8 The End of a Fiction?	245
Notes	253
Bibliography	293
Index	311

Illustrative Material

FIGURES

- 1 "East" Is "West": The Historical Geography of a Racial Category 32
- 2 "The Unanswerable Argument" 87
- 3 "Vancouver Must Keep This Team" 93
- 4 "The Foreign Mission Field in Vancouver" 98
- 5 "The Opium Fiend at Home in Vancouver's Chinatown" 100
- 6 "Trouble in Chinatown" 102
- 7 "Liberal Candidates Are Pledged to a White British Columbia" 115
- 8 "Message to the People of Vancouver" 117
- 9 "50,000 Orientals in B.C." 154
- 10 "Dismissed Girls Parade to City Hall" 163

MAPS

- 1 Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver, 1892 69
- 2 Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver, 1910 76

- 3 Chinatown Area, 1910 77
- 4 Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver,
1920 124
- 5 Chinatown Area, 1920 125
- 6 Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver
Schools, 1937 148
- 7 Land Use in Chinatown, 1943 149
- 8 Redevelopment Project, Strathcona:
Stages 1 and 2 190
- 9 Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver,
1961 191
- 10 HA-1 Historic Area Zone and Chinatown
Streetscape Project 226

T A B L E S

- 1 Birthplaces of Members of BC Legislature,
1871–1900 45
- 2 Licences Issued to Chinese in Vancouver,
1920, 1922, 1924, 1926 120–1

Vancouver's Chinatown

Introduction

Popular wisdom has it that the colourful Chinese quarters of Canadian, American, and Australian cities owe their existence to the generations of Chinese immigrants who have made their lives in the cities of the West. The restaurants, pagodas, neon lights, and recessed balconies – the Oriental streetscapes – seem to exist through a natural connection between the Chinese and their immigrant experience in the West. In this book I take a fresh, more critical look at Chinatown than that which has appeared in previous popular, media, and academic treatments of the district. In contrast to such portrayals, I examine the evolution of Chinatown from a western perspective rather than as an extension of an innate “Chineseness.”

The argument is written in such a way as to reach a range of policy advisers and commentators on society, including social scientists, journalists, and professionals working in ethnic relations, immigration, and human rights. Using a Canadian case study, it breaks with the conceptualization of so-called “ethnic” settlements that features in media, policy, and lay circles. For social scientists – many of whom are now familiar with recent conceptual advances in thinking about “race” – the book attempts to demonstrate empirically the workings of the racialization processes about which theorists have written. It brings micro- and macro-scales of analysis, historical and sociological perspectives, and social and spatial dimensions to the constructivist challenge against essentialist views of race.

The study is based on my PhD dissertation (“East Is West”) begun in Vancouver in 1983 (see Bibliography). At the time, the majority of Canadian race-relations research had been conducted at the provincial and national scales, and in the case of British Columbia the subject of “Orientals” had been comprehensively examined. No local history had been written, however, of the relationship between Van-

couver's Chinese and European communities. There existed a gap in the empirical literature on overseas Chinese communities in Canada. Moreover, as shall be clear from chapter 1, there seemed strong conceptual reasons for examining the local organization of European assumptions about a Chinese race. From the late 1880s, the enclave of Chinese settlement at Vancouver's Pender Street was an important site through which white society's concepts about the Chinese were constituted and reproduced. A study which examined the local (urban and neighbourhood) scale therefore seemed warranted on both empirical and theoretical grounds. The result is a study that is at once sensitive to the contingencies introduced by the Vancouver setting and applicable to other racial categories and racially defined enclaves in other contexts.

The study of localities brings into simultaneous view a range of forces, only some of which are local in origin and scope. In the case of Vancouver's Chinatown, the influences range near and far. Especially decisive, we shall see, were the practices of all three levels of Canadian government, each influenced by a structure of domination that affected a number of "white" settler societies from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The study of Chinatown's construction opens windows onto this global field of European domination and its domestic extension – national, provincial, and local.

In the absence of adequate secondary material at the local level of Vancouver, and given that my conceptual emphasis here departs widely from previous research at the provincial and national scales, this study relies on primary sources collected at all three levels of Canadian government. The most important government sources consulted for different periods over the century-long time-span were as follows: Vancouver city council's Minutes (1886–1950), the city clerk's Incoming Correspondence (1886–1939), and the Chinatown files of the city's Planning Department (1970–80); the *Journals of the Legislature of British Columbia* (1872–1950) and the relevant *BC Sessional Papers and Statutes*; and the *Debates* of the Canadian House of Commons (1879–1980) and the relevant *Canada Sessional Papers and Statutes*. I also studied Vancouver's daily newspapers and other publications, including the *Chinatown News* (1958–80) and English translations of the *Chinese Times* (1914–37). Some selectivity in recording events has been necessary, but the aim has been to use historical material with a view to presenting a sociological argument rather than providing a conventionally conceived history of the Chinese in Vancouver.

Canada is an interesting setting in which to examine the process of race definition. For one thing, there is something of a gap in sensibility between the popular rhetoric of a "tolerant" past and a harmonious "multicultural" present, and the reality of a cultural his-

tory in which race has been an enduring motif. Furthermore, the management strategies adopted by the Canadian state toward out-groups have been relatively veiled by comparison to the Australian colonies before federation and, of course, the United States and South Africa.

This comparison points to a crucial sub-theme alluded to in chapter 1, which considers generally the idea of race. In Canada, the division of the state, as laid out by the British North America Act (now the Constitution Act) of 1867, into three relatively autonomous levels of jurisdiction set considerable judicial limits on the exercise of European cultural domination (or "hegemony") in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Municipal and provincial strategies were constrained by the country's constitutional framework in ways that did not impede the separately governed Australian colonies of Victoria and Queensland, for example. Ottawa's power of disallowance restrained the excesses of an anti-Chinese provincial legislature, just as at other times the state afforded some of Vancouver's Chinese merchants the means to contest successfully encroachments on their life chances.

These constitutional arrangements framed roughly a century of discourse – at the local, provincial, and national levels – on "racial" matters. Chapters 2–7 look at the various players and phases of the discourse as they shaped and were shaped by Vancouver's Chinatown. Chapter 2 examines how, between 1875 and 1903, a racial category "Chinese" was constituted by the BC legislative assembly in Victoria and by the dominion parliament in Ottawa. The intellectual context for these measures is identified, including a brief history of the race idea in Western thought. Nation-building and province-building in their symbolic dimension will be seen to focus on construction of a white European society, though within limits set by Canada's judicial framework; at the local level, territorial boundaries in Vancouver confirmed the broader cultural and political ones distinguishing "Chineseness."

Chapter 3 looks at the concept of "Chinatown" – the term by which local whites and municipal officials came to know and manage the area around Dupont Street. The chapter investigates the moral and sanitary dimensions of the Chinatown idea, showing how, with the imprimatur of the state, the area was represented through the filter of European imagining. Successive local administrations between the mid-1880s and about 1920 took their justification from and gave fresh effect to the idea of a (vice-ridden) Chinese race and place.

The 1920s saw the most feverish exploitation of the race idea in British Columbia, and chapter 4 explores the implications of this for government practices, some already in place in the 1910s. Certain

measures, including the dominion's Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, were extreme forms of sanction for the idea of a Chinese race, while others directed at resident Chinese were constrained by judicial limits. Within such bounds, the three levels of government strengthened the isolation and stigma of Vancouver's Chinatown in the post-First World War era.

The levelling years of the Depression brought Chinatown its first real allies and the earliest signs of change in European attitudes – as well as some equally fanatical anti-Chinese advocates. Chapter 5 describes events that captured Chinatown's enduring stigma and those that distinguished its emerging definition as Vancouver's "Little Corner of the Far East." The social construction of Chinatown has not always or necessarily been a unilaterally imposed process, however, as indicated by strategies of both accommodation and resistance on the part of Chinatown merchants.

By the late 1950s, when "race" was being dismantled by Canadian policy-makers, the area became the target of the post-war ideology of progress; officially, Chinatown became a "slum." In chapter 6, it is argued that the choice of Chinatown for some major public projects bluntly exposed the power relation that had always underpinned the race-definition process. The efforts of some Chinese groups to use the tourist definition of the district as leverage against the plans for urban renewal and a freeway show how they attempted to manipulate European projections of difference. By the late 1960s, these efforts and pressure by liberal reformists, academics, and architects led to withdrawal of the remaining stages of the public projects in Chinatown, which was now heralded as an "ethnic neighbourhood."

Chapter 7 examines the radically new form of neighbourhood targeting that took place in the 1970s. Ottawa announced a policy of "multiculturalism" to recognize Canada's "ethnic groups," and Chinatown became courted by all three levels of government precisely for the perceived "Chineseness" that for so long had separated it. It will be argued that through all the seemingly "enlightened" rhetoric of multiculturalism and local beautification and zoning schemes, the classification "Chinese" (i.e. non-white) continued. And, as long as the racial frame of reference itself persisted, cultural relativism could easily give way – as it did in Vancouver in the late 1970s – to negative and seemingly more enduring forms of racialization.

The transformative potential of European hegemony underlines the point that the process of racialization is situated in history and society, not biology and nature. It does not take a fixed course whose form for all Western settings can be predicted in advance or "read off" from abstract system needs. It is also a contradictory process, with different