

Chinese Vancouver: A decade of change

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HONG KONG — Remember "Hongcouver?" You don't hear that word much anymore in the polite society of Vancouver, a city that has grown into Canada's — and North America's — most effortlessly Asian metropolis.

But a decade or so ago you could hear the term "Hongcouver" everywhere.

It was an era's impolitic catch-phrase for the xenophobia and palpable occidental unease in Vancouver at the prospect of a profound upheaval in society. A sleepy city had suddenly found itself a magnet for one of the most significant — and wealthiest — immigration waves to ever hit Canada: the Hong Kong Chinese, who sought out Vancouver as a safe haven after the British colony returned to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997.

"The Hong Kong immigrants were really a new kind of Canadian," said Henry Yu, a history professor at the University of British Columbia. "They were educated, spoke English and middle class or wealthy. They weren't going to start out as pizza delivery men and working in Chinese laundries.

"They expected to be first-class citizens, they wanted to live in the best neighborhoods, wanted the best schools for their kids. It changed Vancouver for the better, it's made us more global, more Asian. But it wasn't always an easy process."

That's for sure.

Recall the words and debates — now rarely worth a headline — that polarized the city a decade or more ago, when Hong Kong's human tsunami began hitting Vancouver in the mid-'80s and late '90s.

There was the volatile debate over "monster houses" — the name for the large homes many Hong Kong immigrants built in such rarefied and resolutely anglo enclaves as Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale, often knocking down trees and old-style houses to do so. Non-Chinese tended to see the word monster as an apt adjective for the grand size of the new homes they thought ugly and out of place; Chinese saw the word as a racist put-down, suggesting that "monsters" lived in such new homes

designed to hold multiple generations.

Then there was the "University of a Billion Chinese" as the University of British Columbia was sometimes dubbed. The number of Chinese-Canadian students was soaring at the university, thanks in large part to the new Hong Kong immigrants who brought with them a diligence that made them academic stars and made it harder for the less competitive to gain entry to UBC.

Many non-Chinese parents, as University of Washington academic and Vancouver native Katharyne Mitchell chronicled in a paper about the Hong Kong immigration wave, complained the new arrivals were "too competitive" or "too one-track-minded" compared to their own "more balanced" children.

And don't forget the simmering tensions in Richmond, where many of the Hong Kong immigrants first gravitated, radically changing the racial mix of the community in a few short years -- not to mention its shopping habits. Malls opened up full of Chinese stores, in effect creating a new, well-heeled and modern Chinatown on Vancouver's outskirts. On hot summer nights, you could hear the exotic clicking off mah-jong tiles on Richmond's quiet streets, where half the residents were suddenly Chinese.

Then there was, of course, the unforgettable Hong-Kong effect on the local real estate market.

Billionaire Li Ka Shing started it by buying the Expo 86 lands and transformed them into a miniature version of the towering condos of his hometown Hong Kong. That accelerated a radical change to the city's skyline, with the luxury condos of Coal Harbour following, along with a profusion of downtown condo towers that have densified and energized the city's core, and made it more congested.

Predictably, real estate prices skyrocketed as the Hong Kong arrivals put their money into city property, new and old, often astounded at the houses they could get on the West Coast for the price of a two-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong.

PROPERTYLESS ANGST

Old-time Vancouverites who owned homes generally liked that consequence of the new Asian money. But even here there was a new angst that lingers on: those who didn't own property suddenly wondered how they could ever keep up with this new monied slice of Canadian society from across the Pacific.

The catalyst for all the flux was that single, momentous date: July 1, 1997.

In Canada, that was just another Canada Day. But across the Pacific, July 1, 1997 marked one of the biggest geopolitical events to take place in Southeast Asia: Great Britain would relinquish control of its colony Hong Kong to China, a transfer of power that foreshadowed China's rise as a world power in the 21st century.

More importantly, at least from Vancouver's point of view, the looming handover unnerved Hong Kong's monied classes. They figured that when the People's Liberation Army drove across the border into Hong Kong on July 1st China's Communist cadres may not be far behind, perhaps bringing with them draconian laws to crack down on Hong Kong's freewheeling capitalism. They feared Communist-mandated currency controls and Beijing's heavy-handed policy objectives on a city-state of six million people (now seven million) that had to that point been regarded as the freest economy on Earth.

So an exodus began — to places like Toronto and New York, San Francisco and London. And to the surprise of many, Vancouver. A relative backwater compared to those cities, Vancouver was seen as a safe, sedate spot for Hong Kong families, just a 10-hour flight across the Pacific and isolated from the worst of Canada's cold winters.

"They brought sudden change and that was difficult for Vancouver," said Yu, also a professor at UCLA, whose family came to Vancouver more than two generations ago. "But what's amazing to me is how quickly the city has gotten over all the monster home stuff. We've moved on."

In retrospect, July 1, 1997, is arguably the event that breathed life into Vancouver's oft-repeated claim

as Canada's Asia-Pacific gateway.

In fact, the Hong Kong wave — as well as the other Chinese who came from Taiwan and mainland China at the same time — have irrevocably altered Vancouver's landscape, its culture, made us more cosmopolitan and, most important of all, more global in mindset.

In 1986, during Expo 86, Vancouverites lined up by the thousands for the rare chance to touch a brick from the Great Wall of China, airlifted in for the exposition's China pavilion. For most it was the closest they had come to China aside from the occasional trip to Chinatown.

Twenty years later, China's influence seems to be everywhere and people often take it for granted. Vancouver's streets are full of Chinese and Asian restaurants in numbers that often surprise outsiders. About one in three of the city's residents are of Asian descent, primarily Chinese. Young interracial couples are a common sight. Our mayor speaks Cantonese. The new police chief is of Chinese descent.

Some of the city's most impressive amenities are from these rich new residents, too, as the new Chinese immigrants took up former lieutenant-governor David Lam's call to the Hong Kong tycoons to make philanthropic contributions to their new home. Some gifts of note, but hardly all, can be found on the UBC campus: the Chan Centre for Performing Arts, the Sing Tao Building, the Choi Building.

"Vancouver is clearly an Asia Pacific city now," said pollster Angus Reid, a Vancouver resident who notes that surveys consistently show British Columbians are far more likely to see them selves as an Asia-Pacific city than Torontonians.

"It's not even a debate anymore. The days of 'Hongcouver' are history. People are embracing Asia now."

Vancouverites have also been given a taste of the global lifestyle that is common in Hong Kong, where people know that a key to making money is not to view the place you make money as necessarily the same place you live. It used to be that the so-called "astronauts" — the Hong Kong breadwinners who spent much of their time aloft commuting back and forth between Vancouver and Hong Kong, — were seen as oddities. Today its seen as a way of life for any Canadian who wants to tap into Asia's boom.

"Vancouver is now a global city that is one stop within the Pacific world, with two-thirds of male Canadians of Hong Kong origin between the ages of 25 and 40 living and working outside Canada," says Yu in a briefing note of his research. "And large numbers of Vancouver residents with multiple homes throughout the world, creating great demand for real estate in Vancouver, but also leaving many condominiums unused for portions of the year. Like Switzerland for Europe, Vancouver is considered a safe place to store money (not in banks, but in real estate) and a good place to send children to school."

Where the most fundamental change of all has taken place, however, is in the city's neighbourhoods and schools. While Chinese in Toronto and Los Angeles tend to congregate in certain areas, says Yu, it is clear that every neighbourhood and school district in Vancouver has a large contingent of Chinese. It is now the norm.

'INTEGRATED' CITY

"We are now the most integrated Asian city in North America," says Yu, who said it was that fact that helped convince him to return to Vancouver from UCLA, where he also teaches. "In a lot of cities Chinese are in certain areas only. But in Vancouver, you can't go to a neighbourhood now where Chinese aren't living in significant numbers. It's incredible."

But that doesn't mean that Vancouver — and Canada — has gone nearly far enough on capitalizing on the possibilities presented by the Hong Kong immigration wave. A decade after the Chinese took back Hong Kong, the exodus has reversed as some of the best and brightest of the Chinese community head back to Asia to use their talents and make their fortunes.

In part, that is due to the simple, inescapable reality that even with its booming economy, British Columbia can hardly compete with the job prospects in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore or the red-hot economy of China.

But there is also, warns Senator Vivienne Poy, another, a more troubling reason for the Chinese brain drain.

"Our son told me, a few years back, that there was no chance that someone like him would ever make it to the top of a Canadian corporation," Poy, who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong in 1959, told the Vancouver Club in a recent speech. "It has nothing to do with intelligence, education and language skills. It's to do with his surname, and his ethnicity.

"On the one hand, there is a lack of opportunities in Canada, partly due to systemic racism and partly because mainstream Canada is like a small club and slow in accepting outsiders," she added.

"On the other hand, globally, Canada's economic opportunities are slipping away."

Yes, Vancouver — and Canada — have undeniably strengthened their ties to Asia thanks to the Hong Kong handover and the human exodus it sparked. Now the trick, says Poy, is to create a hiring environment in corporate Canada that keeps the talent at home, or at least eventually coming back to Canada to work in the national interest.

At the moment, there are anywhere from 240,000 to 300,000 Canadian passport holders in Hong Kong.

Ironically, that means that today the real "Hongcouver" is on the other side of the Pacific, a massive talent pool of Canadians that Canada should not forget.

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9 WAYS THE HONG KONG HANDOVER CHANGED VANCOUVER FOR GOOD

A recent study by the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia singled out a number of topics that depict how the 1997 handover affected B.C. and Canada. The society singled out these changes in defining the impact of the migration wave:

1. Arrival of the 'New Chinese'

The "New Chinese" now live in every part of Vancouver and have transformed its society in almost every way. New waves of Chinese migrants from Hong Kong began 40 years ago after the 1967 Immigration Act created a points-based system that rewarded family reunification as well as education and professional status. Anticipation of the 1997 Hong Kong handover led to even greater numbers of Hong Kong Chinese coming in the 1980s and 1990s, under both the points system and new Business Migrant and Entrepreneur and Investor immigration programs.

2. Desegregation of the city

Chinese people now live in every part of Vancouver. The Hong Kong Chinese helped with this desegregation, continuing a trend that had been begun by the waves of Hong Kong Chinese that came in the 1970s after the 1967 immigration reform. The maps on page A1 by researchers Andrew Yan of SFU depict the changing distribution of Chinese in Vancouver since the 1970s. David Ley of UBC's geography department has studied the "monster house" uproar and the reactions to Hong Kong Chinese moving into neighbourhoods such as Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy that had previously been overwhelmingly white.

3. Hong Kong Chinese changed the real estate market and transformed the city

One look at the Vancouver skyline reveals the enormous effects that Hong Kong developers had in providing capital and shaping the development of Yaletown/False Creek and Coal Harbour, initiating the "Hong Kong High Rise" boom in downtown Vancouver. Less visible is how ownership of property throughout the city and the dominance of Chinese Canadian real estate brokers and agents has also

transformed the real estate business of the city.

4. Richmond is now 50-per-cent Chinese and a unique product of the Hong Kong Chinese

From farmland and almost no Chinese, the city of Richmond now has one of the greatest urban concentrations of ethnic Chinese in North America. Chinese developers pioneered a unique style of strata mall and transformed Richmond into the new commercial hub of Chinese commerce in the Lower Mainland. A unique amalgam of older Hong Kong-style malls such as Parker Place and the North American strip mall, Richmond's commercial development was greatly shaped by Canada's Immigrant Entrepreneur and Business Migrant programs of the 1980s.

5. Debut of 'astronaut' families and the safe, stable 'Switzerland of the Pacific'

Vancouver is now a global city that is one stop within the Pacific world. Two thirds of male Canadians of Hong Kong origin between the ages of 25 and 40 live and work outside Canada. Large numbers of Vancouver residents have multiple homes throughout the world, creating great demand for real estate in Vancouver, but also leaving many condominiums unused for portions of the year. Like Switzerland for Europe, Vancouver is considered a safe place for storing money (not in banks, but in real estate) and a good place to send children to school.

6. Best Chinese food in the world

Because a number of high level chefs came from Hong Kong, combined with the abundance of fresh seafood, Vancouver has acquired a reputation as the home of the best Chinese food in the world. Because of the variety of migrants to the City and because Hong Kong had originally been a diverse magnet for so many different kinds of Chinese, Vancouver has developed a diversity of Chinese food cuisines (Hong Kong style, Teochew, Shanghai), making it more like SE Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore in terms of variety, which is unique in North America.

Thirty years ago if someone needed Chinese groceries or wanted to eat Chinese food, he or she would have to go to Chinatown, but now every neighborhood has Chinese groceries and Chinese food. This includes the growth of new concentrations such as 41st and Victoria, and the spread of T&T Supermarkets, along with Chinese restaurant owners and customers in unlikely parts of the city.

7. Higher education has been transformed

Vancouver has become an international educational hub, with SFU, UBC, and a host of community colleges that attract students from all around the Asia Pacific. The role of the Hong Kong Chinese in this transformation was critical, being the first major wave of foreign students to B.C. in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Hong Kong Chinese transformed the class structure of the city, beginning in the 1970s after the 1967 Immigration Act's point system encouraged educated migrants to Canada, but spurred the most by the influx of professionals from Hong Kong who left in anticipation of the 1997 Handover, and resulting in a boom in university educated migrants whose children have filled Vancouver's colleges and universities.

In particular realms such as higher education, the impact of Hong Kong Chinese donors has been enormous. Both UBC and SFU have had Chinese Canadians who were born in Canada as Chancellors, but walking around the campus at UBC quickly reveals the impact of Hong Kong Chinese donors -- the Chan Centre for Performing Arts, the Sing Tao Building, the Choi Building at UBC -- but also donations such as airline tickets from Cathay Pacific to help university students travel and become more globally aware.

8. 'White' collar professional labour force transformed

Chinese migrants have shifted in a single generation a white collar labour force that was truly "white" to one that is now increasingly Chinese. There are so many who entered professions in the 1970s who were the "first" Chinese in a company or in their workplace, a fact that is easy to forget now that there are so many Chinese in every field.

9. Chinese give back to the city

Although the Hong Kong Chinese have only been in Vancouver for several decades, they have made an enormous impact on the landscape of charitable giving and philanthropy, from organizations and institutions close to home such as S.U.C.C.E.S.S. and Mount St. Joseph Hospital to mainstream institutions and organizations. The crucial role of Dr. David Lam, former Lieutenant-Governor of B.C., in promoting this engagement of newly arrived Hong Kong Chinese, built a long lasting foundation for philanthropy.