The Transformation of Vancouver’s Chinatown as a Site for Tourism, Leisure and Consumption

Presented by:
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Methodology

- Primary research (directories, newspapers, landscapes, etc)
- Focus on the different actors involved in the process:
  - Producers (ethnic entrepreneurs, etc)
  - Consumers (tourists, extra-communal clientele, etc)
  - Members of Zukin’s critical infrastructure (critics, commentators, etc)
  - Various levels of government (especially the municipal government)
1860-1900: The Emergence of an Ethnic Residential Enclave

- Early Chinese Immigration to BC
  - Linked to gold rush and to other economic opportunities (Canadian Pacific Railways);
    - Small settlement centered around Dupont Street.
  - Discrimination against Chinese migrants
    - Head tax, riots
      - Residential concentration
  - 1900: Area contained 2,100 Chinese migrants, and 143 commercial establishments, including 15 greengrocers, 3 rice millers, 8 manufacturing clothiers, as well as a number of tailors, lodging-house owners, general retailers, barbers, and others (Anderson, 1991)
1900-1935: Growth and Exclusion

• At the turn of the last Century, Chinatown was perceived as a place of vice and destitution
  – Prostitution, opium-smoking dens
    • 1924 - BC government passed the “Women’s and Girl’s Protection Act”, which prohibited any white women or girl from living in, working, or frequenting any restaurant, laundry, or place of business or amusement that was not “in the interest of the morals of such women and girls.”
    • Statement by a women in a BC court: “I wish to state that I know for certain that if I had not gone to work in a Chinatown café I would not be a prostitute now... The conditions in these cafés are such that if a girl wants to hold her job she can not be anything else but immoral.”
  – In 1911, there were 236 Chinese businesses in Chinatown, and in 1931, over 13,000 Chinese individuals lived in the area, a number that was to decline to 7,000 in the subsequent decade
announce its position as favoring any fair, unassisted immigr-
ation, but as being emphatically averse to proposed immi-
rion in accordance with the contract entered into between
the Salvation Army and the provincial Government; also

A Warren on Carrall Street
infested by 2000 Chinese

THE UNANSWERABLE ARGUMENT.

No fair-minded man can take exception to the position
of the Council in the importation of strike-breakers and Jap-
nans. In regard to contract labor, that is illegal un-
der the law; the constitution has been made wide enough to admit to membership all men who hold that British Columbia
should be a white man's country, irrespective of what their
opinions on any other political subject may be. At a public
meeting to be held in the Labor Hall next Monday evening
a number of speakers will deliver addresses on the subject

Source: Saturday Sunset, 10 August 1907
1935-1970: Redirecting Chinatown (1)

- **1936: Jubilee Celebrations**
  - Chinatown was to be put on display
  - Chinese merchants played a key role in the project
    - $40,000 towards the ‘Chinese Carnival Village’ project - with the dual aims of promoting Chinatown to outsiders of the district, and re-fashioning the area to suit mainstream tastes and expectations
      - Local media: ‘Come marvel at the ‘Chinese Carnival Village’, with its beautiful treasures of the Orient, its master craftsmen and ingenious performers direct from China
      - Attractions: eighty-foot bamboo arch tower, and a nine-tier pagoda
1935-1970: Redirecting Chinatown (2)

- 1940s: Unofficial streetscape improvement project is sparked by Chinese merchants
  - Example: Neon lights
- At around the same time, City Hall imposed a bylaw that forced the separation between restaurants and drinking establishments
  - Newspaper accounts began to document a new clientele patronizing Chinatown restaurants
    - New image of Chinatown as ‘affordable’ and ‘hip’
- These developments, and other ones (including economic transformations - such as the rise of the service economy) caused a sharp increase in European origin Vancouverites in the neighbourhood
  - As a result: “The restaurant industry on Pender Street blossomed, in turn encouraging the vertical expansion of grocery stores, butcher shops, and fish markets. Import outlets, bric-a-brac, and curio stores [also] prospered along the principal thoroughfares” (Anderson 1991).
1935-1970: Redirecting Chinatown (3)

• 1947: Abolishment of the Chinese Immigration Act
  – Renewed Chinese immigration

• However, City Hall has other plans for Chinatown
  – Urban redevelopment scheme
    • Supported by funds from the federal government
    • 1967: Plans for a highway, which would have cut through the heart of Chinatown, were proposed

• Widespread mobilization by Chinese community members and by a number local actors
  – In their call for preservation, those opposed to the project highlighted the symbolic and economic value of Chinatown, as a differentiated and unique part of Vancouver
    • In the process, Chinatown became a civic asset

- 1971: Introduction of Canada’s multiculturalism policy
- The same year, the province of BC, at the instigation of city planners in Vancouver, demarcated the Chinatown Historic Area
  - Aim: preserving and protecting the heritage and character of the Chinatown area, mostly by imposing strict regulations on changes in the streetscape
- 1994: Set up the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee (CHAPC) to advise the director of planning on matters relating to Chinatown
- As Ley (2004; 3) notes, “the deliberations of the CHAPC [in the years following its constitution] demonstrated a set of relations where City Hall invariably identified the priorities and the minutiae of historic designation…which may or may not have coincided with the desires of Chinatown merchants and property-owners.”
  - Example: the issue surrounding the creation of parking space
1970-2007: Official Recognition of Chinatown (2)

- Large-scale projects aiming at augmenting the tourist potential of Chinatown (through an exoticization of the area’s landscape):
  - Dr. Sun Yat-Sen garden
  - Millenium gate
- Chinatown is firmly etched on the City’s tourist trail
  - Chinatown is covered in most, if not all, guidebooks on Vancouver, and it is included in most comprehensive tours of the City
- However, Chinatown’s retail and restaurant space have diminished during the last 20 years, and the bustling crowds on Pender Street have thinned out
  - Why?
    - Numerous explanations: Growth of Richmond; social problems in the Downtown Eastside; museumized version of Chinese culture (Ley 2004)

- Gentrification of Chinatown
  - Commercial
  - Residential
    - International Village (Concord Pacific)
    - Smaller scale developments (lofts, etc)
- Soon, there may be little China left in Chinatown…