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**Kay J. Anderson**

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# **The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category**

**Kay Anderson**

Department of Geography and Oceanography, University College, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra

## **Abstract**

Racial categories are cultural ascriptions whose construction and transmission cannot be taken for granted. I focus here on the process by which racial categories are themselves constructed; in particular, I examine the presence of place and the role of state in the making of one such category, the “Chinese,” in a British settler society from the 1880s to the 1920s. I argue that “Chinatown,” like race, is an idea that belongs to the “white” European cultural tradition. The significance of government is that it has granted legitimacy to the ideas of Chinese and Chinatown, inscribing social definitions of identity and place in institutional practice and space. Indeed Chinatown has been a critical nexus through which the race definition process was structured. I examine this process in Vancouver, British Columbia, where the municipal authorities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sanctioned the intellectual milieu of race. They did this, I argue, as part of the historical exercise of white European cultural domination. In short, I wish to uncover the dynamic between place, racial discourse, power, and institutional practice by way of contributing to the recent rediscovery of place in human geography.

**Keywords:** race, place, state, ideology, representation, racial classification, cultural hegemony

They come from southern China . . . with customs, habits and modes of life fixed and unalterable, resulting from an ancient and effete civilization. They form, on their arrival, a community within a community, separate and apart, a foreign substance within but not of our body politic, with no love for our laws or institutions; a people that cannot assimilate and become an integral part of our race and nation. With their habits of overcrowding, and an utter disregard for all sanitary laws, they are a continual menace to health. From a moral and social point of view, living as they do without home life, schools or churches, and so nearly approaching a servile class, their effect upon the rest of the community is bad. . . . Upon this point there was entire unanimity (Canada, 1902: 278).

It would be easy to interpret the words of Royal Commissioners Clute, Munn, and Foley in 1902 as further evidence, if more were needed, of the weight of racial discrimination in British Columbia during the stern years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many other official utterances at the turn of the century, their words strengthen the claim that the Chinese, because of their distinctiveness,

were subjected to many forms of victimization at the hands of a vigorously nativistic white community. Largely in response to that prejudice, overseas Chinese formed Chinatowns, or so a tradition of liberal discrimination studies has held. Chinatown has been a victimized colony of the East in the West.

Neighborhoods of Chinese settlement in Western societies have been extensively studied throughout the twentieth century. Subjected to hostile receptions, Chinatowns serve as commentaries on the attitudes and behavior of their host societies (e.g., Barth, 1964; Lyman, 1974; Palmer, 1982; Price, 1974; Roy, 1980a; Ward, 1978). They have also been an entry point to many research questions in sociology and anthropology about cultural transfer overseas and the dynamics of social organization and community stratification in new environments (e.g., Crissman, 1967; Hoe, 1976; Nee and Nee, 1974; Weiss, 1974; Wickberg et al., 1982; Wong, 1982). A recent history of Toronto's Chinatown, for example, examines the transformation from "the homogeneous population of the traditional period" to "the diverse heterogeneous Chinese population today" (Thompson, 1979: 361). In social geography, Chinatown has been conceptualized as a launching point in the assimilation of Chinese immigrants, as an urban village pitted against encroaching land uses, as a product of segregation on the basis of race or ethnicity, and as a Chinese architectural form (e.g., Cho and Leigh, 1972; Cybriwsb, 1986; Lai, 1973; Salter, 1978). Chinatown has been viewed as either a ghettoized, minority community or as an "ethnic" community. One geographer summarizes the common social science conceptualization in his words: "Chinatown in North America is characterized by a concentration of Chinese people and economic activities in one or more city blocks which forms a unique component of the urban fabric. It is basically an idiosyncratic oriental community amidst an occidental urban environment" (Lai, 1973: 101).

It is possible, however, to adopt a different point of departure to the study of Chinatown, one that does not rely upon a discrete "Chineseness" as an implicit explanatory principle. "Chinatown" is not "Chinatown" only because the "Chinese," whether by choice or constraint live there. Rather, one might argue that Chinatown is a social construction with a cultural history and a tradition of imagery and institutional practice that has given it a cognitive and material reality in and for the West. It is, as Ley (1977) describes the elements of human apprehension, an object for a subject. For if we do not assume that the term "Chinese" expresses an unproblematic relationship to biological or cultural constants but is in one sense a classification, it becomes apparent that the study of the Chinese and their turf is also a study of our categories, our practices, and our interests. Only secondarily is the study about host society attitudes; primarily it concerns the ideology that shaped the attitudes contained in the opening quotation. This step beyond "white" attitudes is critical because it is not prejudice that has explanatory value but the racial ideology that informs it. Such an argument is not unimportant for the conceptualization of Chinatown. Indeed it requires a more fundamental epistemological critique of the twin ideas of "Chinese" and "Chinatown," of race and place.

It is not possible to investigate in one brief article the process of the classification of identity and place in the numerous contexts where the race idea has been institutionalized. Rather, my aim here is to argue the case for a new conceptualization of Chinatown as a white European idea with reference to one context, that of Vancouver, British Columbia. There, one of the largest Chinatowns in North America

stands to this day, in part as an expression of the cultural abstractions of those who have been in command of “the power of definition,” to use Western’s (1981: 8) valuable phrase. But the thrust of the paper is not limited to the study of ideas. Indeed the significance of “Chinatown” is not simply that it has been a representation perceived in certain ways, but that it has been, like race, an idea with remarkable social force and material effect – one that for more than a century has shaped and justified the practices of powerful institutions toward it and toward people of Chinese origin.

The brevity of a paper also precludes attention to the century-long workings of the race definition process in Vancouver. Such a process has operated from the time Chinatown was reviled as Vancouver’s public nuisance, promoted in the mid-1930s as its “Little Corner of the Far East,” reconstructed in the 1950s and 1960s as a “slum,” and finally under the aegis of multiculturalism courted by the state in the 1970s precisely for its perceived “Chineseness” (Anderson, 1986). I thus confine the historical focus to Vancouver’s Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when its social definition was sweeping in both cause and effect. I thereby attempt to uncover the broader relationship between place, power, racial discourse, and institutional practice in one British settler society. Such an interpretation of Chinatown might be equally relevant to the making of other racial categories in Vancouver, to “Chinese” and “Chinatowns” in other settings, and to other racially defined people in other settings.

I begin by providing a brief outline of the geographical site of the subject of this paper. Following that sketch, I discuss the conceptualization of Chinatown as a Western landscape type and then present empirical material from the Vancouver example.

### **A Sketch of the Settlement at Dupont Street, 1886-1900**

By the time the City of Vancouver was incorporated in 1886, Chinese settlement in the city was severely proscribed. The senior levels of state had already intervened in the “Chinese question” and ensured that by the mid-1880s, there would be limits on the participation of Chinese-origin people in political life,<sup>1</sup> their access to Crown land,<sup>2</sup> and their employment on public works.<sup>3</sup> In 1885, after the completion of the trans-Canada railway, the federal government in Ottawa took a decisive step by imposing a head tax on Chinese entrants, and in 1903 Wilfrid Laurier’s administration raised it to an almost prohibitive level of \$500. Thus by the time of Vancouver’s first municipal election in May 1886, when 60 Chinese-origin men were chased from the polls and denied the vote (Morley, 1961: 73), a culture of race was fully respected in separate statutory provisions for “Chinese” by the provincial and federal administrations.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1875, the jurisdictional competence of the Province to deny the franchise to people of Chinese origin was affirmed (British Columbia, *Statutes*, 35 Vict., 1875: ch. 26, s. 22).

<sup>2</sup> Clause 122 of the Land Act deemed it unlawful “for a commissioner to issue a preemption record of any Crown land, or to sell any portion thereof to any Chinese” (British Columbia, *Statutes*, 51 Vict., 1884: ch. 16).

<sup>3</sup> By 1900, an anti-Chinese clause was introduced in government contracts that refused provincial aid to public works contractors who employed “Orientals” (British Columbia, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 1900: vol. 29, p. 125).

From the late 1850s, when gold was first discovered in British Columbia, people from China lived and worked on Burrard Inlet. Most were men employed in unskilled jobs at the Hastings and Moodyville sawmills, but a minority opened stores to service the mill employees. By 1884, the population of Chinese on the inlet was 114 (Morton, 1977: 144) and a number of settlements had been established. One of these was built in the vicinity of Dupont Street where woods and a rocky outcrop afforded protection (Yip, 1936: 11) and where nearby industries on False Creek offered employment opportunities (see Fig. 1). Other small settlements of Chinese pioneers existed on the road to New Westminster, in Stanley Park, and the West End.

One such camp on the Brighthouse Estate in the West End was particularly provocative to Vancouver's early European residents. Resentment was intense against the laborers who cleared land there at low cost, and on the night of February 24, 1887 some 300 rioters decided to escalate their intimidation strategies. Unimpeded by local police, they raided and destroyed the camps of Chinese laborers; they then attacked the washhouses, stores, shacks, and other structures in the vicinity of Dupont Street ("Outbreak against the Chinese" 1887). The day after, some 90 Chinese from that area were moved to New Westminster ("The Chinese leaving" 1887). So lax were the local authorities in controlling the violence that the Smithe administration in Victoria, hardly known for its sympathy to Chinese, annulled Vancouver's judicial powers and dispatched special constables to take charge of what the attorney general described as Vancouver's decline into "mob rule" (Roy, 1976; "Their drastic measures", 1887; "The Robson regime", 1887).

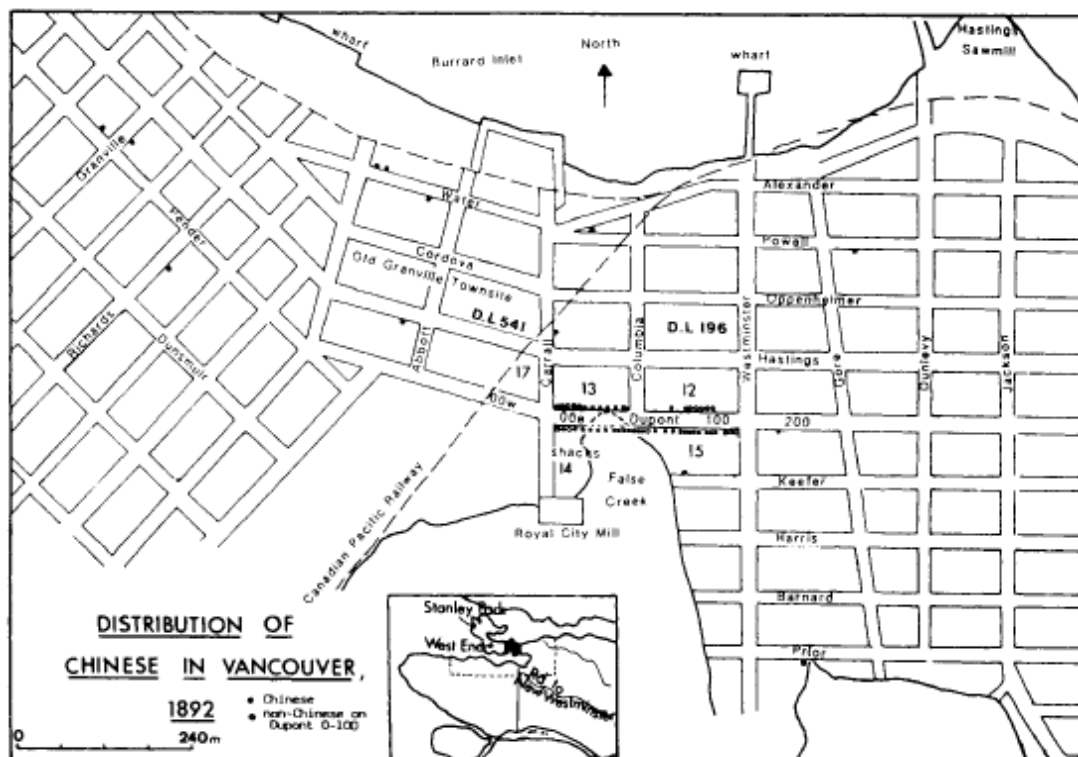


Figure 1. "Chinese" Residence in Vancouver, 1892. Based on Williams's Directory (1892).

In the context of such hostility the Chinese returned to Vancouver and re-established a highly concentrated pattern of residence. Most of those who had fled returned directly

to the original Dupont Street settlement, which also attracted many of the West End laborers after they completed the Brighthouse Estate contract. It was a swampy district, with an adverse physical quality that paralleled the peripheral legal, political, social, and economic status of the pioneers it housed. Some lived more comfortably than others, however. Laborers mostly resided in wooden shacks, in conditions a Chinese statesman found “distressed and cramped” on his visit in 1903 (Ma, 1983: 34), but merchants usually lived in elevated brick structures on the north and south sides of Dupont Street.

By the turn of the century, the total population of the settlement was 2,053 men (of whom 143 were merchants and the rest workers), 27 women (16 of whom were wives of merchants), and 26 children (Canada, 1902: 13). Family life was the preserve of a small economic and political elite, some members of which established a property base in the area from the 1890s (see Yee, 1984). As W. A. Cumyow, a British Columbia-born court interpreter testified in 1901, “a large proportion of them would bring their families here were it not for the unfriendly reception . . . which creates an unsettled feeling” (Canada, 1902: 236). Such was the marginal turf from which the Chinese launched their contested claim to Canadian life in the twentieth century.

### **Chinatown as a Western Landscape Type**

How was it that the streets of Dupont, Carrall, and Columbia in Vancouver became apprehended as “Chinatown”? Whose term, indeed in one sense whose place was this? No corresponding term – “Anglo town” – existed in local parlance, nor were the residents of the likes of Vancouver’s West End known as “Occidentals.” Why then was the home of the pioneers known and intelligible as “Chinatown”? Consistent with the prevailing conceptualization of Chinatown as an “ethnic neighborhood,” we might anticipate the response that Chinese people – a racially visible and culturally distinct minority – settled and made their lives there through some combination of push and pull forces. One view, then, might be that the East lives on in the West and Chinatown expresses the values and experiences of its residents.

That people of Chinese origin, like other pioneers to North America, brought with them particular traditions that shaped their activities and choices in the new setting can hardly be disputed. Indeed an important tradition of scholarship has outlined the significance of such traditions for North American Chinatowns as overseas Chinese colonies. Needless to say, Chinese residents were active agents in their own “place making” as were the British-origin residents in Vancouver’s Shaughnessy. My decision not to give primary attention to the residents’ sense of place then is not to deny them an active role in building their neighbourhood nor of any consciousness they may have had as Chinese. Some merchants from China might have even been eager to limit contact with non-Chinese, just as China had obviated contact with Western “barbarians” over the centuries. Others, given a choice, might have quickly assimilated.

But the multiple reality of place invites another equally important but neglected viewpoint. The phenomenon of “John Chinaman’s” overseas home was well-known to late nineteenth-century North Americans of European origin, whatever definitions of place the residents themselves might have held. Regardless of how each of the residents of such settlements defined themselves and each other – whether by class,

occupation, ethnicity, region of origin in China, surname, generation, gender, or place of birth – the settlement was apprehended and targeted by European society through that society's cognitive categories. Without needing the acknowledgement or acceptance of the residents, Chinatown's representers constructed in their own minds a boundary between "their" territory and "our" territory.

In his important discussion of "imaginative geographies" such as Europe's "Orient," Edward Said (1978: 55) argued that this distinction is one that "helps the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close and what is far away." This process suggests the argument that although North America's Chinese settlements have often been deliberately isolated, "Chinatown" has been an arbitrary classification of space, a regionalization that has belonged to European society. Like race, Chinatown has been a historically specific idea, a social space that has been rooted in the language and ethos of its representers and conferred upon the likes of Vancouver's Dupont Street settlement.

The word "arbitrary" is not unimportant here. "Chinese" have been residentially segregated and socially apprehended in North America on capricious grounds. Such a claim rests on the view that any classification of the world's populations into so-called "races" is arbitrary and imperfect. Despite the biological fact that systematic differences in gene frequencies exist among geographically or culturally isolated inbreeding populations, most contemporary biologists agree that genetic variability between the populations of Asia, Europe, and Africa is considerably less than that within those populations (e.g., Farish, 1978; Lewontin, Rose and Kamin, 1984; Montagu, 1964). Apart from the visible characteristics of skin, hair, and bone by which we have been socialized to "see" what is popularly called a difference of "race," there are, as Appiah (1985: 22) notes, "few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or China." The important point is that because genetic variation is continuous, "racial" difference cannot be conceptualized as absolute. "Racial categories form a continuum of gradual change, not a set of sharply demarcated types" (Marger, 1985: 12), a point that leads biologists Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin (1984: 127) to argue: "Any use of 'racial' categories must take its justification from some other source than biology."

A growing literature in ethnic studies would also suggest that categorizations such as "black," "white," "Oriental," or "Hispanic" are not rooted in an unproblematic difference of ancestral culture or ethnicity either. Fredrick Barth (1969: 14) began the critique in anthropology over 20 years ago when he claimed "we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences." There is by now a convincing critique of the tradition of cultural relativism in North American ethnic studies, where ethnicity was accepted as an innate property of culture-bearing groups (e.g., Jackson, 1981; Peach, 1984; Perrin, 1983; Steinberg, 1981; Watson, 1981). According to the more recent argument, ethnic groups are created socially by internal rules of exclusion and inclusion around idioms of actual or perceived common descent such as language and religion. Territory may also be a symbol and resource around which ethnic boundaries are negotiated (Suttles, 1968).

Clearly, there is a distancing in such a perspective from a reified notion of ancestral culture as an external system of values and practices. "Chineseness" is not an entity

that is imbibed across generation and context by a person of Chinese origin in Hong Kong, a third generation Chinese-origin resident of Malaysia, a Chinese in mainland China, a person of Chinese descent in South Africa, and a fourth generation “Chinese-Canadian” of Vancouver. Of course a subjective sense of ethnic identity can be strong in the absence of binding cultural traditions, but the important point here is that an analytical distinction must be drawn between self (or emic) definitions of identity and those etic classifications that are conferred from without. The former are predicated upon subjective or inclusive processes, whereas the latter are based upon exclusive processes (Banton, 1983: 104; Cohen, 1978).

Clearly, I do not assume that race and racial categories are discretely given facts with their own descriptive and analytical utility. In itself, “race,” and the prejudice it is often ipso facto assumed to inspire, explains nothing. For the purposes of social science, the concept of race must be located strictly in the realm of ideology. Of course other social scientists, including Western (1981) in geography, have recognized race as problematic, but there have been few attempts to confront the epistemological implications of this in substantive research.<sup>4</sup> Almost no attention has been given to the process by which racial categories are themselves constructed, institutionalized, and transmitted over time and space. Banton (1977: 19) suggests as much in his statement: “Though much has been said about the evils associated with racial classification, there has been little systematic study of the process.”

Chinatown has not been incidental to the structuring of this process in the example of the classification “Chinese” or “Oriental.” Indeed by situating one such place “in process, in time” (Abrams, 1982), it is possible to demonstrate that as a Western idea and a concrete form Chinatown has been a critical nexus through which a system of racial classification has been continuously constructed. Racial ideology has been materially embedded in space (as we have seen in the earlier sketch) and it is through “place” that it has been given a local referent, become a social fact, and aided its own reproduction.

In itself, the idea of Chinatown would not be so important or enduring but for the fact it has been legitimized by government agents who make cognitive categories stand as the official definition of a people and place. In the Vancouver case, “Chinatown” accrued a certain field of meaning that became the justification for recurring rounds of government practice in the ongoing construction of both the place and the racial category. Indeed the state has played a particularly pivotal role in the making of a symbolic (and material) order around the idiom of race in Western societies. By sanctioning the arbitrary boundaries of insider and outsider and the idea of mainstream society as “white,” the levels of the state have both “enforced” and “propagated” a white European hegemony.<sup>5</sup> Such links of the polity to the cultural realm have not been sufficiently explored in the recent literature on the state in capitalist societies (e.g., Clark and Dear, 1984; Saunders, 1979: Ch. 4). A theoretical

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<sup>4</sup> One edited volume by Husband (1982) addresses aspects of the culture of race in contemporary Britain. See also Note 18. The literature on labelling may be relevant here. For original statements on mental illness, see Goffman (1963) and on crime, see Matza (1969).

<sup>5</sup> The words “enforced” and “propagated” are borrowed from MacLaughlin and Agnew’s (1986) discussion of the state and socially based hegemonies. On the state’s role in South Africa, see Pine (1984) and Western (1981).



discussion of the state and racial ideology is beyond the scope of this paper, however (see Anderson, 1986: Ch. 1). I wish instead to pursue the theme of the concept of place and to investigate the manner in which one arm of white European hegemony – the civic authorities of Vancouver – sanctioned the racial and spatial categories of the dominant culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### **“Chinatown” in Intellectual Context: The Age of the Race Idea**

Since classical times, Europeans have shared with other cultural traditions a tendency to generalize about the world’s different populations.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, for one, referred to his own “Hellenic race” around 300 B.C. as “high spirited and intelligent,” while “Asiatics” were “inventive” but “wanting in spirit” (March, 1974: 23-24). Indeed, well before the birth of capitalism and colonialism, a European worldview made evaluative distinctions of “East” and “West,” Christian and heathen, civilized and uncivilized. There was also a classical color sensitivity that became heightened during the spread of Christianity from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries (Bastide, 1967). In subsequent centuries, European explorers relied upon, reinforced, and extended this early cognitive package. The Portuguese slave traffic in Africa in the fifteenth century (Boxer, 1963) and, by 1650, slavery in the American colonies (Jordan, 1968) sealed the outlook with the stamp of phenotype, and British imperialism from the late eighteenth century consolidated all of the we/they distinctions into an ideological structure of formidable rigidity.

During the nineteenth century a transformation from ethnocentrism to a radical biological determinism took place, facilitated by a major theoretical effort in the new biological sciences. Certainly by the time immigrants from China arrived in British Columbia, the leap from color to a fundamental difference of “race” had been solidly made by the scientific community of Britain, North America, and Western Europe. Environmental explanations for human variation had been abandoned, and the focus of scientific attention had become fixed upon discrete types. Skull sizes and shapes were outward signs of innate biological and cultural differences, and a generation of physical anthropologists measured them despite the nagging problem that features such as skin color, facial angle, and cranial shape did not covary in a systematic way (Stepan, 1982; Gould, 1981). Nor did Charles Darwin’s evolutionary and environmental theory prompt people to question their beliefs about absolute differences.<sup>7</sup> Indeed biologists, social scientists, and the populace at large made their own interpretation of *The Descent of Man*, taking it as confirmation that discrete races of variable “fitness” were governed by impersonal laws and engaged in an inexorable struggle (see Jones, 1980).

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<sup>6</sup> See Tuan’s (1974: 38) figure of traditional Chinese worldviews with zones of increasing barbarism away from the Chinese court. On the universality of the categorization process, see also Berger and Luckmann (1966).

<sup>7</sup> In geography, Griffith Taylor’s (1927) “migration-zone theory” of cultural evolution challenged the assumptions of the day, arguing that environmental pressures were more critical than were biological constants in shaping human destiny. Like Darwin himself, however, Taylor remained locked within the old race science because he assumed that the racial type was the unit upon which evolutionary processes operated. Only by the 1940s, did a new theory of heredity enable scientists to integrate Darwin’s work into a view of human evolution that emphasized genotypic variation of populations rather than the anatomy of immutable types.

The early nineteenth-century discovery of the vast stretch of geologic time seemed to confirm the European view that human history was a kind of natural progression from barbarism to civilization. Like the transformation of the earth, the evolution of humanity was a formidably slow process in which savages might become “Caucasians,” but the latter were thousands of years “ahead” of the other races (Harris, 1972: 266). For all contemporary purposes, the races were immutably separate. “John Chinaman,” for example, possessed properties that permitted him to achieve only a semicivilized, despotic state. His race was so retarded, claimed Judge J. Gray of the British Columbia Supreme Court, that he could see no reason why “the strong, broad shouldered superior race, superior physically and mentally, sprung from the highest types of the old world and the new world, [should be] expressing a fear of competition with a diminutive, inferior, and comparatively speaking, feminine race” (Canada, 1885: 69). More often, however, the evolutionary doctrine was taken as a warning that the higher “races” were vulnerable to contamination from immigration and “hybridization” with those who would pass along their deficiencies.

According to this nineteenth-century worldview, Vancouver’s Dupont Street settlement would be a generically “Chinese” or “Oriental” phenomenon. It would be their home, their evil - evidence, in itself, of a different capacity for achieving civilization. Even before a “Chinatown” had been identified as such in Vancouver, Secretary of State Chapleau conveyed the connotation of the term: “Their custom of living in quarters of their own - in Chinatowns - is attended with evils, such as the depreciation of property, and owing to their habits of lodging crowded quarters and accumulating filth, is offensive if not likely to breed disease” (Canada, 1885: 130). Clearly, “Chinatown” would be an evaluative classification. Chapleau had formed his opinion from an investigation in California in 1884 when many witnesses referred to Chinatown and told British Columbians what to expect. “The Chinaman seems to be the same everywhere,” Chapleau concluded (Canada, 1885: 128); and his Chinatown was “an ulcer lodged like a piece of wood in the tissues of the human body, which unless treated must cause disease in the places around it and ultimately to the whole body” (Canada, House of Commons, Debates, July 2, 1885: 3010).

With this diagnosis, how did respective Vancouver officials confront the district of pioneers from China? How did they justify the idea of Chinatown and invest it with the authority of some “natural” truth? The rest of the paper is devoted to answering that question and is divided into two sections; the first concerns the image of Chinatown as an unsanitary sink, and the second deals with the perception of Chinatown as a morally aberrant community. These components of the Chinatown idea in Vancouver converged in a public nuisance definition, which, I shall argue, became both a context and justification for the making of the racial category, “Chinese.”

### **The “Celestial Cesspool”: Sanitary Dimensions of the Chinatown Idea, 1886-1920**

Shortly before the anti-Chinese riot of 1887, a reporter for the Vancouver News wrote: “The China Town where the Celestials congregate is an eyesore to civilization” and if the City could be “aroused to the necessity of checking the abuse of sanitary laws which is invariably a concomitant of the Chinese, [it] will help materially in

preventing the Mongolian settlement from becoming permanent” (“Progress of the agitation” 1887). Four months later, a row of “hateful haunts” on Carrall Street was specifically singled out for the attention of Council. There, warned the News, “in the nucleus of the pest-producing Chinese quarter . . . strict surveillance by the City will be necessary to prevent the spread of this curse” (“Slave labor”, 1887). True to Chapleau’s image of the “ulcer,” it was the “ordinary Chinese washhouse scattered over the city” (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 6, July 4, 1893: 5275) that was an early target of civic concern. For a “race” so dirty, there was certainly plenty of work in the business of cleanliness, and by 1889 as many as 10 of the 13 laundries owned by merchants from China were located outside Dupont Street (Henderson’s 1889, 426). One medical health officer found the spread so fearful as to condemn the washhouse “an unmixed evil, an unmitigated nuisance” (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 17, November 26, 1900: 13301) and from the late nineteenth century, Council sought means of keeping the “Chinese” laundry in its proper place.

Important judicial limits hampered the City of Vancouver, however. For one, Vancouver’s municipal charter (and ultimately the British North America Act of 1864) did not grant legal competence to Council to deny business licenses to “particular nationalities or individuals.”<sup>8</sup> The city’s challenge was to circumvent such legal restrictions on its political will, and in the case of the “Chinese” laundry, numerous indirect strategies were devised. One alderman, for example, arrived at an artful solution. According to his 1893 bylaw, no washhouse or laundry in Vancouver could be erected outside specified spatial limits, “that is to say beyond Dupont Street and 120 feet on Columbia Avenue and Carrall Street, southerly from Hastings” (CVA, *Bylaws*, 1893).

During the late nineteenth century, an equally vigorous assault was launched in the name of sanitary reform on the wooden shacks of the Dupont Street settlement. In 1890, fear of cholera gripped the city and the local press demanded the city take action against “the people of Dupont Street” given that “in Chinese style . . . they will not fall into line for the purpose of maintaining cleanliness” (“Preserve the public health”, 1890). Fear of contamination from “the degraded humanity from the Orient” (McDonald, 1893) was widespread in Vancouver society, and it was customary for letters to the editor to argue that although the “white” race was superior, “Oriental” afflictions would eventually subvert it.

The city fully shared this twist of Darwinist logic and in the mid-1890s – in a significant act of neighborhood definition – Council formally designated “Chinatown” an official entity in the medical health officer rounds and health committee reports (see CVA, *Health Committee Minutes*, 1899-1906). Along with water, sewerage, scavenging, infectious disease, slaughter houses, and pig ranches, Chinatown was listed as a separate category and appointed “a special officer to supervise [it] under the bylaws” (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 17, November 26, 1900: 13292). One officer reported the following impressions in 1895:

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<sup>8</sup> There were other legal limits on the ability of agents within the divided Canadian polity to implement their will. At the provincial level, anti-Chinese legislation that contravened the division of powers laid down by the British North America Act was routinely disallowed by Ottawa (see La Forest 1955). At the municipal level, an important precedent was set in 1888 when M. Fee of Victoria successfully appealed to the Supreme Court of B.C. the refusal of the City of Victoria to renew his pawnbroker’s license (Regina v. Corporation of Ectoria, [1888] B.C.R. 331).

observed any improvement in the cleanliness of the dwellings and surroundings. The former are becoming increasingly dilapidated and filthy and the latter, together with the shores of False Creek, are more and more saturated with manurial refuse and garbage. . . . All the cabins on the foreshore should be condemned and destroyed. In no other way is it possible to abate the nuisance arising from the constant deposition of filth and refuse by the occupants. At present they cannot be other than a standing menace to public health (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 17, November 26, 1900: 13291).

In response to this and similar descriptions, four rows of shacks and cottages were destroyed by the city in the latter part of the decade (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 10, August 15, 1896: 8522). In 1897, Medical Health Officer Thomas recommended the destruction of more shacks on Dupont Street because “they are dangerous to the health of the city” (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 11, March 9, 1897: 9296), and two years later, Health Inspector Marrion served notices under the newly enacted Boarding House Bylaw after a visit by a number of City officials, including Mayor Garden (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 14, December 10, 1899: 10696). The bylaw had been passed, without being so framed, as another attempt “to secure better regulation and supervision in the case of Chinese dwelling places” (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 17, November 26, 1900: 13299).

Marrion adopted a firm stance toward Chinatown from the time of his appointment in 1893. “The Chinese method of living is totally different to that of white people,” he claimed in 1902. “The Japs try to obey the laws, but the Chinese are always on the lookout to evade them” (“Chinese defy city by-laws” 1902). The living conditions the health inspector perceived along Dupont Street therefore had little to do with constraints on Chinese family settlement, job and pay discrimination, or the physical condition of the industrial inlet. Rather they were a product of “the difficulty to get Chinese people to adopt sanitary methods. . . . Even where every convenience is provided . . . Chinese are generally dirtier than whites” (Canada 1902, 14). Though blunt, Marrion’s statements were entirely conformist for his day; he spoke not out of irrational prejudice but rather in the accepted vocabulary for discovering and characterizing the district that housed these pioneers to Vancouver. Identity and place were inextricably conflated, and the process of racial classification was corroborated with every official expedition (Fig. 2).

Given this nearly universal scheme by which “Chinatown” was comprehended,<sup>9</sup> it was remarkable for a non-Chinese to argue: “It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, even in the worst Chinese quarter, to parallel the state of affairs revealed amongst some white men in our city not so long ago in some of the cabins behind the Imperial Opera House” (CYMRA, 1893). Other evidence reveals that the bias of the municipal authorities’ attention to sanitary matters in Dupont Street stemmed from their respect for the race idea. For example, the “Chinese” disease-bearing capacity

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<sup>9</sup> There are difficulties with reducing majority perceptions to the constant of a singular “white” European viewpoint. The ideas of race and Chinatown enjoyed a popularity, however, that overrode any idiosyncrasies that might have existed in the British, American, and Canadian perceptions. Although no origin classifications are available from the 1891 or 1901 census, early Vancouver society was made up of predominantly British immigrants and their Canadian-born descendents (Roy, 1980b: 28).

was never borne out by actual disease or epidemic outbreaks recorded in the health inspector's reports or in the local press."<sup>10</sup>



Figure 2: "The Unanswerable Argument", 1907

At the same time, a number of Chinese-origin merchants made known their willingness to establish an amenable environment for business and residence. At odds with the typifications projected on the area, some merchants complained to Council about the poor condition of Dupont Street and its sidewalks (CVA, *Council Minutes*, Vol. 7, January 20, 1896: 4); in 1899, 24 firms requested Dupont Street be sprinkled twice daily in the summer and back lanes be repaired (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 14, June 14, 1899: 10433); and in 1905, a group of businessmen asked the Board of Works to pave Shanghai Alley (CVA, *Council Minutes*, Vol. 13, May 22, 1905: 395). Far from passive victims steeped in some fixed standard of living, or for that matter, hapless victims of "white" prejudice, the entrepreneurial sector of Chinatown effectively used its understanding of civic politics to try to elevate the physical condition and social profile of the neighborhood. The Lim Dat Company was so dissatisfied with the City's refuse collection in the area that in 1906 it applied for a license to conduct its own street cleaning operation ("To do their own work", 1906).

The local unit of knowledge called "Chinatown" was carried forward in government practice and rhetoric well into the new century. In the same month as the riot of 1907 in Chinatown, Inspector Marrion could describe the neighborhood in no more original terms than its "fowls, refuse, filth, dead dogs, and offal" ("Dirty Chinese are fined",

<sup>10</sup> The solicitor for the Chinese Board of Trade, A. Taylor, told the commissioners in 1901: "NO instance is given of the origin of any contagious disease in the Chinatown of either city [Vancouver or Victoria]." Using City statistics, he submitted "there is no evidence that the presence of the Chinese is in any way a menace to health" (Canada, 1902: 297).

1907). Whether or not the image of Chinatown as unsanitary was accurate, the perceptions of image makers intent on characterizing the area as alien were the ones that continued to have consequences.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the city was not prepared to compromise its idea of some essentially “Chinese” Chinatown in the face of challenges to its authority from the courts. Such obstructions served only to provoke new strategies, so assured were city officials of the integrity of their mission. By 1910, for example, a circle of city officials including Mayor Telford and Chief of Police Chamberlain, sought to achieve “full control of conditions in Chinatown.” They hoped to “reform” the area with wider powers of bylaw enforcement that would stifle “Chinamen [who] manage to fight bylaws by successful applications for injunctions” (“City powers to be widened”, 1910; “Dealing with the Chinese”, 1910). Fortunately for the residents, the provincial government was not inclined to concede such powers to the city.

It was not as if other districts in Vancouver, of actual or perceived marginal sanitary status, did not exist. In 1914, Inspector Hynes visited a district in Vancouver’s East End that was home to a number of residents from Italy and found conditions “sickening in the extreme;” as “abominable” as the Chinese quarter (“Cleaning up starts. . .”, 1914). But only the Dupont (by this time Pender) Street settlement was publicly known as a social and spatial unit according to putatively immutable “racial” qualities. Even the much-disliked settlement of pioneers from Japan on Powell Street appears to have escaped the crude neighbourhood characterization that gave “Chinatown” its name in the early decades of this century. In part this can be explained by the widely held view that, although the Japanese were also a foreign “race,” their homeland was not only a world power of some import in Britain’s eyes, but the Japanese seemed to possess a conception of progress and civilization more assimilable to the European cultural tradition than was that of Japan’s more mysterious ‘Oriental’ neighbor. (Such a generous view gave way to extreme forms of discrimination by World War II however (see, e.g., Sunahara, 1981)).

The distilled vision that was Vancouver’s Chinatown was, for the city, a pressing mandate, and its actions reinforced both the vision and the reality of a neighborhood and a people apart. Almost immediately after the alleged murder of the wife of a well-known West End railway administrator by her “China-boy” in 1914 (“City acts on agitation” 1914), Council led the clamor to have Chinese removed from the schools. Based solely on the fact that the “boy” was educated in the school system, Council stated its “grave apprehension” at

the prevailing practise of the School Board in permitting children and young men of Oriental race to attend our public schools. . . . By being indiscriminately thrown into contact with Orientals . . . our children are wantonly exposed to Oriental vices at an age when revolting incidents may be indelibly stamped upon their minds. Furthermore the health of our children is endangered by such close association with Oriental children, many of whom hail from habitations where reasonable sanitation and cleanliness are not only despised but utterly disregarded. In some cases, these Orientals come into our public school classrooms with their apparel polluted with the fumes of noxious drugs and

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault has said that “the problem is not one of drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but with seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true or false” (cited in Rabinow, 1984: 60).

germs of loathesome diseases on their persons (CVA, *Council Minutes*, Vol. 20, April 8, 1914: 122).

Although Council's request to Victoria for school segregation foundered on legal obstacles, the city continued to wield its own power tirelessly. In the following year, the local press described "Chinatown" as no less than "besieged." "Lined up on this side," wrote the *Sun*,

is the civic authority led by the medical health officer, the building inspector and the chairman of the health committee supported by the City aldermen. This great civic force has as its ally the law in the form of health bylaws, building regulations, police officers and penalties. Arrayed against this seemingly formidable army is the wily Oriental with his fondness for defying the civic powers. . . . Civic regulations are dust to the Chinaman ("Aldermen and Chinese . . .", 1915).

Clearly, the idea of "Chinatown" was being inherited by successive rounds of officials who adopted the conceptual schemes of their predecessors. The health committee of Council described the area as a "propagating ground for disease" in 1919, and, true to old remedies, an inspection team was set up to monitor the area despite the fact that still no concrete evidence confirmed that Chinatown was a threat to public health (CVA, *Council Minutes*, Vol. 22, May 19, 1919: 488). Within ten months, the owners of more than 20 lodgings were threatened with orders to condemn their buildings, including the Chinese Hospital at 106 Pender Street East (*Chinese Times*, January 24, 1920). Indeed, well into the 1920s the city operated assertively in the idiom of race, indiscriminately raiding Chinatown and harassing residents about bylaw compliance (e.g., *Chinese Times*, March 4, 8, April 5, 1921).

In translating racial ideology into official practice, the civic authorities of Vancouver performed an important legitimizing role in the social construction of Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chinatown was not simply an idea. It had a concrete referent in the form of a concentrated community whose physical presence propped up the vision of identity and place we have been examining. Furthermore, the circumstances of Chinese immigration to Canada probably encouraged objectively poor living conditions in many sectors of the community. In that sense, the material reality of the district justified and fulfilled the prophecy of Chapleau's "Chinatown." But it was the mutually reinforcing ideas of race and place, and their scope and influence in British Columbian culture, that gave the district its coherence as a discrete place in the social consciousness of its representers. In the eyes of successive civic officials, "Chinatown" signified no less than the encounter between "West" and "East"; it distinguished and testified to the vast asymmetry between two "races." As such, Chinatown was not a benign cultural abstraction but a political projection, through which a divisive system of racial classification was being structured and institutionalized.

### **Vice-Town: Moral Dimensions of the Chinatown Idea, 1886-1920**

Much as the "West" has defined the "Orient" (Said, 1978), Vancouver's "Chinatown" was a collection of essences that seemed to set the Chinese fundamentally apart. Above all, it was non-white, non-Christian, uncivilized, and amoral. It was something of a "counter-idea," into which were concentrated qualities thought to be in opposition to the European ingroup (see Voegelin, 1940). Matters of hygiene were only part of the vocabulary out of which this idea was being constructed. Equally

significant and perhaps more effective were moral associations. Because the “Chinese” were inveterate gamblers, “Chinatown” was lawless; as opium addicted, Chinatown was a pestilential den; as evil and inscrutable, Chinatown was a prostitution base where white women were lured as slaves. “Is there harm in the Chinaman?” Reverend Fraser asked a meeting of the Asiatic Exclusion League in 1907. “In this city,” he said, “that would be answered with one word, ‘Chinatown,’ with its wickedness unmentionable” (“Greed at bottom . . .”, 1907).

Two city hardliners, Police Magistrate Alexander and Chief of Police Chamberlain, legitimized a particular vision of Chinatown in their everyday business (see Fig. 3). As the home of the “racial other,”<sup>12</sup> Chinatown signified many impulses that Europeans feared and attempted to repress in themselves. Indeed as the cartoon suggests, only those aspects of Chinese living that conformed to the categorization “Chinese” were being filtered by members of the governing body of Vancouver, as they were by European communities throughout North America.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 3: “Vancouver Must Keep This Team”, 1908

Why did the municipal officials of Vancouver reach the conclusions they did when describing and managing Chinatown? How was it that Chamberlain and Alexander were concerned with the few elements depicted in the cartoon and not others? The relevance of this question has been obscured by the familiar prejudice framework for the study of race relations. That perspective has tended to explain away such systems of imagery and indeed racial categories themselves, in some unproblematic “white”

<sup>12</sup> See Gates (1985) and other essays in the volume. The phrase refers to the metaphorical negation of the European in Western language use and is derived from the more general notion that consciousness of the self involves distancing from the Other (Laing 1961).

<sup>13</sup> That it was more the white European view that was the “same everywhere” and less Chapleau’s “Chinaman,” see for example Light (1974), Paupst (1977), Salter (1984), Steiner (1979, Ch. 15). Some of the themes are common to descriptions of other racially defined outgroups such as “blacks” in America (e.g., Ley, 1974: Ch. 1) and “East Indians” in Canada (e.g., Ley, 1983: 268).



predisposition toward nonwhites.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the explanatory focus upon prejudice and discrimination (attitudes and behavior) has obscured the deeper process by which classifications have themselves been built around the concept of race.

Or again, economic competition was a major rallying point for anti-Chinese sentiment in British Columbia, as it was in other areas of Chinese settlement (e.g., Hill, 1973; Roy, 1979; Saxton, 1971). But it, too, has been less a primary cause of such sentiment than an outcome of the more decisive role that must be accorded collective conceptions about the “Chinese” as a category in the European cultural tradition. Of course racial ideology did not alone cause a segregated occupational order in British Columbia, and another paper might examine the relationship between racial ideology and the development of a capitalist economy in that province.<sup>15</sup> The point here is that ideological formulations have made their own powerful and distinct contribution to such structures of inequality and must be examined on their own terms (see also Prager, 1982). Were it not for ideas about “race” – myths that were readily exploited by owners of capital in British Columbia (see the testimony of capitalists in the Royal Commission of 1885) and by the Dominion Government during the construction of the trans-Canada railway (see, e.g., Chan, 1983) – so-called “coolie” labor might not have been so cheap; nor might the entry of labor from China have been considered anything but “natural.” Certainly there would have been no logical basis on which to charge and penalize the Chinese as a category with collectively undermining the standard of living and the bargaining power of the “white” worker.

What then were the features of the language, imagery, and rhetoric with which the “West” interpreted China in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What notions of China (in conjunction with the race idea) prepared the likes of Chamberlain and Alexander to confront Vancouver’s Chinatown “intelligently” rather than “blindly” (Geertz, 1973: Ch. 8)? This is a question that I can address only briefly here.

### **“The Heathen Chinees”**

The desire of Westerners to measure China against an idealized vision of themselves dates as far back as the thirteenth century when travelers, imbued with the Greek dualisms of “Europe” and “Asia,” “East” and “West,” “Orientis” and “Occidentis,” out to uncover the unknown (March, 1974). Consistent with the Greek conception of “Asia” as the oldest, richest, and most populous of civilizations, medieval travelers such as Marco Polo were captivated by China’s opulent ruler, the abundance of silks, rugs, and porcelains, and the splendor and size of Chinese cities. China was the vast, farthest shore of the East, the most marginal, isolated, and ipso facto most Oriental of

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<sup>14</sup> Ward (1978: 169) explains anti-Chinese sentiment in terms of “that psychological tension which inhered in the racially plural condition” (emphasis added). In reifying race as something external to the situation under investigation, he treats as an explanation that which itself must be explained. Within the white racism thesis, there are more precise analyses, such as Jordan (1968: Ch. 1) who emphasizes the culture of early English colonists to America in his account of tensions between “blacks” and “whites.”

<sup>15</sup> For an attempt to locate racial ideology within the field of capitalist social relations in early British Columbia, see Creese (1984). Boswell (1986) develops the argument on the American context. Split labor market theory emphasizes the economic sources of conflict between groups distinguished by color under conditions of unequal labor costs. It is less successful in explaining why Chinese laborers were underpaid in the first place.

all of Asia, and it was this romantic view that lingered in the European consciousness for more than three centuries (Dawson, 1967).

By the late seventeenth and certainly by the early eighteenth century, Europe's emerging image of itself as imperial, industrial, enlightened, and progressive provided the benchmark for different perceptions of "the Middle Kingdom." A new construction upon China's antiquity began to be articulated that focused relationally upon its changelessness, homogeneity, and uniformity – "the despotism of Custom" – as John Stuart Mill wrote in his mid-nineteenth century essay *On Liberty* (March, 1974: 40-41). With British military power in ascendancy, the European image of China began to darken. The Chinese became "a people of eternal standstill," or as Mr. Chapleau put it: "Races change slowly but the stationariness of the Chinese seems phenomenal" (Canada, 1885: 98). In so conceiving China, and more generally "Asia" as a negative – that is, non-European – construct, scholars have argued that Europe was giving force to its own idea of itself (Dawson, 1967; Hay, 1966; Said, 1978).

Miller (1969) traces this decline in China's image from the time of its first trade with America in 1785. It was around that time that frustrated traders, diplomats, and missionaries sent home the message of China's resistance to their commercial and evangelical entreaties. From the records of 50 traders to China from 1785 to 1840, Miller identifies the following themes: China's technological and scientific backwardness; its military ineptitude, from which many traders deduced a national cowardice; the venality of the Chinese character, as revealed by their devotion to gambling and their "diabolical cunning"; and their peculiarity, for which one had only to look to their theater, music, insistence on writing up and down the page, slant eyes, and their propensity for eating birds nests.

The diplomat's memoirs and accounts – from Lord Macartney's in 1792 to the embassy sent by President Jackson in 1892 – were more important than were the traders' reports in shaping American public opinion. Despite some nostalgia for Marco Polo's Old Cathay, most memoirs were contemptuous of the backwardness and vice that China's despotism was thought to inspire. Military impotence, infanticide, depravity, and addiction to "pernicious" drugs were all construed as signs of a civilization in decline.

As opinion maker, however, it was the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries, armed with their own press, who commanded the widest audience in America. Unlike the Jesuits, who had seen valuable preparation in Confucianism for Christian teachings, Protestant missionaries to China in the nineteenth century were scathing critics. For them, there could be no more damning evidence against Confucianism than the rampant idolatry, infanticide, slavery in women, polygamy, opium obsession, noonday orgies, treachery, and endemic gambling. So puny was the record of conversions in fact, that some missionaries concluded that the wily Chinese were conscious agents of Satan who deliberately humiliated God with acts of immorality.

### **Discovering "The Heathen Chinees"**

In February 1912, a newspaper feature on Vancouver's Chinatown began:

Conditions prevailing in the cities of China are familiar topics of the returned missionary, who will dwell at length upon the awful condition of the slums, the

armies of the unwashed, and the prevalence of vice in the shape of opium smoking and gambling, in the empire across the seas. Would you believe that the same condition of affairs is in existence in the city of Vancouver in our Chinatown, which constitutes a considerable quarter on Pender street between Canton and Shanghai alleys? (“Vancouver’s Chinatown . . .”, 1912).

Yet how else, we might ask, could Pender Street be known?

The plight of the fallen woman disappearing into the clutches of procurors in segregated “Oriental” vice districts was, from the turn of the century, a pressing concern of Vancouver’s moral reform groups (Roy, 1980b: 82). Not surprisingly, therefore, anxiety was heightened in Vancouver by the location of the “restricted area” (where prostitution was tolerated by the police) right next to the Chinese quarter from the time the city was incorporated. But the reform groups’ worst fears were realized in 1906 when prostitutes moved en masse to Shanghai Alley following a Council request for their eviction from the prior location (CVA, *In Correspondence*, Vol. 22, September 1906: 17480). No police protection like that offered the residents of Mount Pleasant (the area that was expected to receive the dislodged prostitutes) was extended to Chinatown, and for some time it became the new “restricted area” for prostitution in Vancouver. Later, in the face of much local protest about the unhappy combination of prostitutes and “Chinamen” in the one location, the restricted area was moved to other areas in the East End (Nilsen, 1976: Ch. 3).

Of these various niches where prostitution enjoyed a blind eye in Vancouver, an especially evil construction was cast upon the practice only in “Chinatown.” Wrote one indignant citizen about the “almond-eyed lawbreakers” in 1908: “A regular traffic in women is conducted by the Chinese in Vancouver. The Chinese are the most persistent criminals against the person of any woman of any class in this country . . . all this goes on in a Christian community” (“In the sunset glow”, 1908). Most often, petitions to Council concerning prostitution dwelt on the risk to property values; however in Chinatown, the voice of the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary reverberated. One resident contended: “It is a disgrace to our city to have that evil in that location” (cited in Nilsen, 1976: 37).

Stamped with the weight of a typification, Chinatown was intelligible only in terms of a few (unflattering) criteria. Class distinctions paled beneath the more influential racial characterization. Indeed Council simply ignored a 1906 petition from the Chinese Board of Trade, which, in protesting the unimpeded movement of prostitutes into Shanghai Alley and Canton Street, reflected concerns not far removed from the most traditional of Christian mission ministers in Chinatown. “We the undersigned (30) merchants and others,” the Board wrote,

beg leave to respectfully call your attention to the fact that several of the women of ill repute . . . are moving into Shanghai Alley and Canton Streets. This we consider most undesirable. It is our desire to have our children grow up learning what is best in Western civilization and not to have them forced into daily contact with its worst phases (Shum Moon, 1908).

Some Chinese merchants mounted a campaign in Vancouver against another perceived vice out of which the non-Chinese concept of place was constructed. In 1908, the merchants’ anti-opium league sent a petition to Ottawa asking the federal government to “decisively exercise its authority and powers to prohibit the importation, manufacture and sale of opium into Canada so that the social, physical,

and moral condition of both Chinese and Europeans may be vastly improved” (“Seek to check opium . . .”, 1908). But try as some merchants did to counter the idea of Chinatown, the drug that Britain had introduced to China in the 1840s was now a powerful metaphor for neighborhood definition. In 1899, a newspaper reporter who accompanied Marrion on one of his tours of Chinatown’s bachelor shacks, remarked that “the luxury of smoking opium is beyond comprehension in such tight boxes” (“Unsanitary Chinese”, 1899). Another in 1908 noted the fine access that such tight quarters provided to “bargain-rate heaven” (“How Two Lung Lee goes to heaven”, 1908). And like the construction put upon “white” participation in Chinatown’s bawdy houses, the large extent of non-Chinese use of opium that the Minister for Labor, Mackenzie King, uncovered in his 1908 investigation (Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1908, No. 36b: 13) only confirmed the belief that Chinatown was a menace to civilized life. White drug use did not prejudice, but rather validated, the more comforting racial and spatial category.

Once the image of “Chinatown” as an opium den was consolidated, no amount of counter-evidence could acquit it and all manner of accusations could be adduced, especially by politicians, to support the neighborhood image. By the 1920s, when the race idea was being feverishly exploited in British Columbia, the old opium image fed and was assimilated into an image of Chinatown as a narcotics base and “Chinese” as dangerous drug distributors. In March 1920, for example, an editorial warned: “The traffic in habit-forming drugs centres in Chinatown” and “if the only way to save our children is to abolish Chinatown, then Chinatown must and will go, and quickly” (“Chinatown - or drug traffic?”, March 22, 1920).

In the context of rising anti-Chinese sentiment in the House of Commons, Consul General Yip and the Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver formed a Self Improvement Committee to try to elevate the reputation of their neighbourhood (*Chinese Times*, April 15, 1921). Cumyow (by this time president of the Chinese Benevolent Association) also spoke out against the *Sun*’s vendetta, calling attention to “the suggestion of Police Commissioner Buckworth that Chinese vendors are merely conveniently used and that the traffic is controlled by persons other than Chinese” (Cumyow, 1920). But the irrepressibly anti-Chinese Member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre, H. Stevens (also secretary of the Vancouver Moral Reform Association) was not to be deterred, and in a series of speeches in the House of Commons in the early 1920s, he transmitted these most recent charges against Vancouver’s Chinatown to the senior level of government. “The basis of the pernicious drug habit on the Pacific Coast is Asiatic,” said Stevens in 1921. “We have seen in Vancouver almost innumerable cases of clean, decent, respectable young women from some of the best homes dragged down by the dope traffic and very, very largely through the medium of the opium dens in the Chinese quarter” (Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, April 26, 1921: 2598).

A more lurid tale of Chinatown’s “snow parties” was told for Parliament in 1922 by L. Ladner of Vancouver South. Within months, the federal authorities amended the Opium and Narcotic Drug Act to provide for the deportation of aliens found guilty of any drug offense (Canada, *Statutes*, 12-13 Geo. 5, 1922: c. 35). In 1923, the language of race was conferred its most extreme official seal when Canada’s door was effectively closed to immigrants from China for 25 years (Canada, *Statutes*, 13-14 Geo. 5, 1923: c. 38). With considerable consequences, then, local definitions of place

continuously influenced rounds of legislative activity at all levels of government in the ongoing construction of this category of outsiders.

Known to police for “inveterate” gambling, the “heathen Chinese” was actively pursued by officers of the Vancouver police force from the 1890s to the late 1940s. By that time, the extent of the harassment had become embarrassingly transparent even to the city. Until then, however, it was rare to find a year that the *Chinese Times* and the local press did not report a raid on Chinatown’s gambling quarters. Cumyow saw the record as more telling of the enforcement practices of the police than of any intrinsic “Oriental” proclivity to gamble, as he told the Royal Commission in 1901:

There is proportionately a large amount of gambling among the Chinese. Some do gamble for large amounts, but more commonly, the play is for amusement only and for small sums to pass the time as this is done in the common room of the boarding house. If a police raid is made and any are caught playing, all are arrested for gambling and looking on. If the same course were pursued in relation to white men, gamblers could be caught in barrooms and of course all who were at the bar would be arrested as onlookers (Canada, 1902: 236).

Just as the opium den raids vindicated widespread assumptions about the moral laxity of the Chinese, the formidable scrutiny that Chinatown experienced from the City for gambling sprang from and confirmed popular assumptions about a generically addicted “Chinaman.” And one vice bred another, as Alderman McIntosh observed in 1915. Gambling and opium in Chinatown required constant civic vigilance he claimed, because they were associated with tuberculosis and slavery in women (“Urge enforcement . . .”, 1915).

Yet gambling was not restricted to the Pender Street area. One letter to the editor in 1900, appealing for greater control of gambling in the city, said: “Everyone knows that gambling goes on promiscuously all over Vancouver, in clubs, in hotels, in saloons, in rooms connected with saloons and in private houses” (A lover of the truth, 1900). But only in “Chinatown,” was a neighbourhood image built around both its practice and the attempts of police – confronted by “ingenious Oriental systems of spring doors and getaway rat tunnels” (“Burrows under Chinatown”, 1915) – to suppress it. So perturbed were Chinese merchants by this harassment that in 1905, the Chinese Board of Trade protested:

The members of our board are law abiding citizens. Many of them have been residents of this country for a number of years and are large holders of real estate, payers of taxes and other civic assessments. The members . . . have been constantly annoyed by what we believe to be an unjustifiable intrusion of certain members of the Vancouver Police Force . . . in the habit of going into our stores and rooms where our families live, showing no warrant whatsoever, nor do they claim any business with us. . . . We are subjected to indignities and discriminating treatment to which no other class would submit and to which your laws, we are advised, we are not required to submit (Young, 1976: 65).

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that “Chinatown” was a social construct that belonged to Vancouver’s “white” European society, who, like their contemporaries throughout North America, perceived the district of Chinese settlement according to an influential culture of race. From the vantage point of the European, Chinatown signified all those features that

seemed to set the Chinese irrevocably apart - their appearance, lack of Christian faith, opium and gambling addiction, their strange eating habits, and odd graveyard practices. That is, it embodied the white Europeans' sense of difference between immigrants from China and themselves, between the East and the West. This is not to argue that Chinatown was a fiction of the European imagination; nor can there be any denying that gambling, opium use and unsanitary conditions were present in the district where Chinese settled. The point is that "Chinatown" was a shared characterization - one constructed and distributed by and for Europeans, who, in arbitrarily conferring outsider status on these pioneers to British Columbia, were affirming their own identity and privilege. That they directed that purpose in large part through the medium of Chinatown attests to the importance of place in the making of a system of racial classification.

Studies of the social meaning of place in human geography have too rarely taken measure of the role of powerful agents, such as the state, in defining place. Yet those with the "power of definition" can, in a sense, create "place" by arbitrarily regionalizing the external world. In the example here, Chinatown further became the isolated territory and insensitive representation its beholders understood in part through the legitimizing activities of government. Perhaps not all places are as heavily laden with a cultural and political baggage as "Chinatown." But Chinatown is important in pointing up once again the more general principle that a negotiated social and historical process lies behind the apparently neutral-looking taxonomic systems of census districts.<sup>16</sup> More importantly perhaps, the manipulation of racial ideology by institutions is additional testimony to the fact that a set of power relations may underpin and keep alive our social and spatial categories.

The importance of these "imaginative geographies" cannot be underestimated because, as we have seen, they organize social action and political practices. Indeed the idea and influence of "Chinatown" is further evidence of the growing consensus in human geography that our landscape concepts, as symbolic resources, have a critical structuring role in the making of wider social processes. In the course of its evolution, Chinatown reflected the race definition process, but it also informed and institutionalized it, providing a context and justification for its reproduction. Pender Street has been the home of the overseas Chinese to be sure, but "Chinatown" is a story, which, in disclosing the categories and consequences of white European cultural hegemony, reveals more the insider than it does the outsider.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Lowman's (1986) argument that crime maps may be mental maps reflecting more the images of the city and the activities of control agents than the inherently criminogenic nature of "problem" areas. Ley (1983: 293-94) discusses the labeling practices of institutions.

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