

## **An Empirical Study of Recent Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver**

Li Yu

Volume 19, Number 2, 2008

“Migration, Place, and Identity”  
Migration, lieu et identité

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037753ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/037753ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)  
1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Yu, L. (2008). An Empirical Study of Recent Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 19(2), 180–196. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037753ar>

Article abstract

One of the major changes in the last decade in the character of Chinese migration to Vancouver and to Canada as a whole is that mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest source of Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada. In Vancouver, mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest group within the Chinese Canadian community. This paper explains the historical background for the change and analyzes the motivations behind mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver and British Columbia. It points out that most recent migrants from mainland China have come from a middle class background. Poverty, family union, and political dissent are no longer major driving forces in peoples' decisions to migrate. In the 1990s and 2000s, mainland migrants have sought to better their natural and social environments, and to achieve a higher quality of life for themselves and their children. Prospective migrants to Canada view the existence of a large Chinese community in Vancouver as an important attraction, providing new immigrants with certain conveniences in everyday life and various job opportunities.

# An Empirical Study of Recent Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver\*

LI YU

## *Abstract*

*One of the major changes in the last decade in the character of Chinese migration to Vancouver and to Canada as a whole is that mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest source of Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada. In Vancouver, mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest group within the Chinese Canadian community. This paper explains the historical background for the change and analyzes the motivations behind mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver and British Columbia. It points out that most recent migrants from mainland China have come from a middle class background. Poverty, family union, and political dissent are no longer major driving forces in peoples' decisions to migrate. In the 1990s and 2000s, mainland migrants have sought to better their natural and social environments, and to achieve a higher quality of life for themselves and their children. Prospective migrants to Canada view the existence of a large Chinese community in Vancouver as an important attraction, providing new immigrants with certain conveniences in everyday life and various job opportunities.*

## *Résumé*

*Au cours de la dernière décennie, une des principales transformations dans la nature de la migration chinoise à Vancouver et au Canada en général tient au fait que la majorité des immigrants chinois au Canada viennent désormais de la Chine continentale. À Vancouver, les migrants de la Chine continentale constituent maintenant le groupe le plus important au sein de la communauté canado-chinoise. Le présent article explique les fondements historiques de ce changement et analyse les motifs de la migration chinoise continentale à Vancouver et en Colombie-Britannique. Il en ressort que la majorité des migrants récents proviennent de milieux bourgeois. La pauvreté, les liens familiaux et la dissidence politique ne sont plus les éléments moteurs de l'émigration. Au cours des années 1990 et 2000, les migrants de la Chine continentale ont cherché à*

---

\* I owe thanks to Steven Lee of the History Department at UBC for his valuable help in reading and refining the last draft of the paper.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

*améliorer leurs conditions de vie naturelles et sociales, autant au niveau familial qu'individuel. Les migrants potentiels à destination du Canada voient l'existence d'une importante collectivité chinoise à Vancouver comme une force d'attraction apportant aux nouveaux immigrants certaines commodités de la vie et des occasions d'emplois.*

Chinese Canadians are the largest non-Caucasian ethnic group in Canada, with a total population of over 1,000,000 people, according to the 2006 census. Over the last decade, the Chinese Canadian population has grown at a much higher rate than that of the Canadian population as a whole. Between 1996 and 2001, for example, the Chinese Canadian population increased nearly 20 percent while the growth rate of the Canadian population was about four percent. These numbers are consistent with broader trends in Canadian society which has seen an increase in the country's minority population from about five percent in the early 1980s to over 16 percent by 2006. People from Chinese and South Asian backgrounds have played a leading role in these changes. Ontario, with about 644,000 Chinese Canadians in 2006, had the largest Chinese community of all Canadian provinces. British Columbia, with nearly 432,000 Chinese Canadians, ranked second.<sup>1</sup> Most live in urban areas, and of those who claim Chinese ethnicity in British Columbia, more than 90 percent reside in Vancouver.<sup>2</sup>

The growth of the Chinese population in Canada has been due more to the continuous arrival of new immigrants than to the natural growth of the local Chinese Canadian community. Statistics, however, can hide as much or more than they reveal. In particular, the census term "Chinese" encompasses a tremendous diversity of the Chinese-Canadian experience. Today, people of Chinese ethnicity may be descendants of Chinese migrants who arrived in Canada more than a century ago, who do not speak Chinese, and who identify themselves as belonging to a Canadian ethnicity. Additionally, especially since the 1960s, the term "Chinese" has failed to distinguish migrants who arrived from a wide range of countries and territories, including Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, the Bahamas, Mauritius, South Africa, and Western Europe. This paper will explore the recent history of Chinese migration from

---

1 Statistics Canada: "2006 Census, Ethnocultural Portrait of Canada Highlight Tables," <<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/highlights/ethnic/SelectGeo.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&Table=2>>, (viewed April 2009).

2 BC Stats, "Chinese Canadians," *Infoline*, (30 March 2007), <<http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/releases/info2007/in0713.pdf>>, (viewed September 2008); Statistics Canada, "2006 Census: Ethnic origin, visible minorities, place of work and mode of transportation," *The Daily* (2 April 2008), <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080402/dq080402a-eng.htm>>, (viewed September 2008).

mainland China to Canada. Until recently, most of the Chinese who came to Canada arrived from Hong Kong, but one of the notable facts associated with Chinese migration to Canada in the last decade is that most of the immigrants arrived from mainland China, itself a diverse multicultural society. Taking 2006 as an example, the number of immigrants from mainland China to Canada was 33,662. By contrast, the numbers from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the two other major sources of Chinese immigrants to Canada, were 2,823 and 1,498 respectively. In British Columbia, the number of immigrants from mainland China to Vancouver in 2006 was 10,302, while those from Taiwan and Hong Kong were 1,778 and 540 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the arrival in Canada of a large number of Chinese immigrants from the People's Republic, the Chinese community in Canada is undergoing profound changes in population structure in relation to its geographical origins. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of Chinese Canadians today were born outside Canada; a plurality of these came from mainland China (45 percent), while 30 percent were born in Hong Kong and ten percent in Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> Though Chinese from the People's Republic have become the largest group within the Canadian Chinese community, they have been somewhat neglected by the government of Canada, especially compared with the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong migrants. This neglect can be observed in the government's communications with the community. For example, in British Columbia, on Chinese New Year's day, the leaders of the municipal, provincial, and federal governments send greetings, *gongxi facai*, through local Chinese television channels only in Cantonese. Additionally, no mainland Chinese migrants serve on the Advisory Committee for Chinese-Canadian Community. The Canadian government, in dealing with issues in the Chinese community, still largely operates through Cantonese-speaking Chinese associations; government funds targeted for the community also mainly go to the Cantonese-speaking Chinese associations.

Chinese migrating from mainland China deserve more attention, not only because they are the largest group of Chinese Canadians, but also because they will likely continue to be one of the main sources of Canadian immigrants for some years to come. The Chinese from mainland China encompass a diverse range of regional cultures and languages, but their attitudes, values, and mentality have also been shaped to an important extent by a common experience of living in the People's Republic. Many questions can be asked about migrants from mainland China. This paper will raise and answer several basic issues: why mainland Chinese in the last decade have sought to come to Canada, espe-

---

3 BC Stats, "BC Immigration by Area of Last Permanent Residence: 2006", <<http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/mig/imm06t1a.pdf>>, (viewed September 2008).

4 BC Stats *infoline*, "Chinese Canadians".

cially Vancouver, and how the socio-economic background of these migrants has shaped their migration experience. Answers to these questions offer a supply-side story of Chinese migration to Canada, and improve our understanding of the broader patterns of Chinese migration to Vancouver as well as to the country as a whole.

### **A Brief Survey of Chinese Migration to Canada Since 1949**

Mainland Chinese migration to Canada has a long history. It started in the late nineteenth century, but declined significantly in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of restrictions and the Canadian government's response to the Great Depression. From 1949 until 1970, when China and Canada were in opposing camps in the Cold War, few mainland Chinese could migrate to Canada. Some went to Canada indirectly through third territories, such as Hong Kong or Taiwan, the two main sources of Chinese immigrants to Canada. After Pierre Trudeau became Prime Minister in 1968, the Canadian government began to normalize its relations with China. In 1970, Canada established official diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, becoming only the second country in the Americas to have recognized communist China.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese and Canadian governments signed an immigration agreement in 1973, which allowed mainland Chinese to join their relatives who had migrated to Canada before 1949. This agreement started a new stage of Chinese migration to Canada. Within one year of the agreement, about 6,000 Chinese Canadians submitted applications to bring about 15,000 of their relatives in China.<sup>6</sup> Though the door opened, the total number of mainland migrants, compared to that of Hong Kong, was still small throughout the 1970s since the majority of mainland Chinese immigrants came under the family reunification agreement. In the ten years following the agreement, from 1973 to 1982, 20,734 mainland Chinese migrated to Canada. By contrast, the number of Chinese migrating from Hong Kong in the same period was 85,602, more than four times larger.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s, family reunions continued to be the main reason for Chinese migration to Canada. A total of about 33,000 Chinese migrated from mainland China to Canada in the decade; over 92 percent of them were in the family

---

5 In 1960, Cuba was the first country in the Americas to establish formal ties with Beijing.

6 Peter Li, "The Rise and fall of Chinese Immigrants to Canada: New Comers from Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China and Mainland China 1980–2000," *International Migration*, 43, no. 3 (2005): 14.

7 Ronald D'Costa, "Asia Immigrants to Canada, 1968–1982: Characteristics of Immigrants from South, Southeast, and East Asia" in *Asian Canadians Aspects of Social Change*, Symposium VI, eds. K. Victor Ujimoto and Josepine Naidoo (Guelph, Ont.: University of Guelph, 6-8 June 1984), 36.

class.<sup>8</sup> Besides immigrants for family union, however, there were an increasing number of students who travelled to Canada to attend university. By the end of the decade, over 10,000 mainland Chinese were studying in Canada.<sup>9</sup> Many of them obtained permanent residence status in the wake of the Tiananmen Incident of 1989. In spite of the increase in mainland Chinese migration to Canada, Hong Kong remained the major source of Chinese immigrants to Canada until the early 1990s. Indeed, the annual number of Hong Kong immigrants increased from less than 10,000 in the early 1980s to about 40,000 in the mid-1990s. It peaked in 1994 when 44,000 people from the colony migrated to Canada. Afterwards, the numbers of migrants from the territory began to decline.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s, immigrants from mainland China never surpassed 5,000 per year. The situation began to change in 1986 when the Chinese government issued the Law for Chinese Citizens Migrating Abroad, which eased restrictions on Chinese citizens' migrating to foreign countries. The numbers of mainland Chinese migrants to Canada increased from less than 5,000 in the 1980s to more than 10,000 in the early 1990s. More dramatic change, however, did not take place until mid-1990s. In July 1994, the Chinese government issued detailed rules for implementing the 1986 law and allowed its citizens to migrate to foreign countries for the purpose of work. This initiative allowed large numbers of highly-skilled Chinese workers to migrate abroad, including to Canada. In the following years, the number of mainland Chinese immigrants to Canada became ever larger, reaching nearly 20,000 in 1998, and surpassing Hong Kong as the major source of Chinese immigrants to Canada.<sup>11</sup>

By the early twenty-first century, Chinese economic development and the growth of a middle class facilitated the migration of more people to Canada, especially as immigrants in the economic class: skilled workers, professionals, self-employed persons, entrepreneurs, and investors. Since 2001, the annual number of mainland Chinese immigrants to Canada has remained between 30,000 and 40,000. The large numbers of Chinese skilled workers' coming to Canada not only has helped to keep China as the largest source of immigrants

---

8 Shuguang Wang and Lucia Lo, "Chinese Immigrants in Canada: Their Changing Composition and Economic Performance," Table 2, 28, research paper presented at Conference on Sub-Ethnicity in the Chinese Diaspora, University of Toronto, 12–13 September 2003. <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~salaff/conference/papers/ChineseImmigrantsInCanada-Wang-and-Lo.pdf>>, (viewed September 2008).

9 Michael B. Frolic, "Canada and the People's Republic of China: Twenty Years of a Bilateral Relationship, 1979–1990," in *Canada and the growing presence of Asia: papers presented at a meeting of the Royal Society of Canada, Academy II Symposium*, ed. Frank Langdon (Victoria: University of Victoria, 4 June 1990), 59.

10 Li, 14.

11 CIC, *Canada – Permanent Residents by Top Source Countries*, 2006, <<http://www.cic.gc.ca/English/resources/statistics/facts2007/permanent/12.asp>>, (viewed September 2008).

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

to Canada, but also has profoundly changed the character of the Chinese immigrant community in the country. In the 1980s, as mentioned above, most of the mainland Chinese migrated to Canada for the purpose of family reunion; mainlanders in the economic class of migrants made up less than ten percent of the total. In the 1990s, however, the proportion of mainland immigrants who came from the economic class increased to 55 percent.<sup>12</sup> Between 2001 and 2005, the percentage of economic immigrants increased to about seventy percent of the total Chinese migration to Canada, and about twenty percent of all the country's economic migrants.<sup>13</sup>

The immigrants who came to Canada in the last ten years have been different from those of earlier decades in another respect: they have tended to be better educated than previous migrants from China. For example, in the 1980s when most of the Chinese immigrants came to Canada in the family class, only seven percent of these in British Columbia had more than 13 years of education. Between 2000 and 2003, about 60 percent of Chinese immigrants to the province had more than 13 years of education.<sup>14</sup> There is a very high percentage of Ph.D. holders among the more recent Chinese immigrants. According to Statistics Canada, Ph.D. holders among the Chinese immigrants in Canada increased from two percent in the 1971 to 1980 period to 25 percent between 1991 and 2000.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the Chinese immigrants to Canada chose to live in British Columbia, especially Vancouver. Historically, Vancouver has been the gateway to Canada for Asian immigrants. It was in British Columbia that the first Chinese immigrants landed in 1858, and it was not until the construction of the Canada Pacific Railway in the 1880s that the early Chinese immigrants began to move to eastwards. As late as the 1950s, most of the Chinese in Canada lived in British Columbia.<sup>16</sup> Even though an ever larger number of Chinese immigrants chose to live in other provinces in recent decades, British Columbia, especially Vancouver, has remained one of the most favoured places for Chinese immigrants. For example, in 2006, of the total of 33,062 mainland

---

12 Shuguang Wang and Lucia Lo, "Chinese Immigrants in Canada," Tables 2 and 28.

13 CIC, "2005 Immigration Overview," *The Monitor*, 2(2006), <<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/monitor/issue13/05-overview.asp>>, (viewed September 2008).

14 Jennifer Hansen, "Special Feature: Immigrants from India and China," Population Section, BC Stats Management Service (March 2004), 2, <<http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/pubs/immig/imm034sf.pdf>>, (viewed September 2008).

15 Statistics Canada, "Study: Science and engineering doctorates, 2001," *The Daily* (16 April 2007), <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/070416/tdq070416-eng.htm>>, (viewed September 2008). Between 1991 and 2000, the share of Ph.D. holders among American immigrants decreased from 24 percent to six percent.

16 Norman Burchignani, "scoa: Science research on Asians in Canada," in Ujimoto and Naidoo, 2-3.

Chinese immigrants coming to Canada, 33.1 percent of them (10,946) chose to live in British Columbia. Of those who resided in the province, only 644 lived outside the greater Vancouver area.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, however, Chinese immigrants may have had a harder time finding satisfactory employment in Vancouver as opposed to other cities of Canada.

### **Push and Pull Factors**

Due to the decline of the Canadian birthrate and the country's aging population, Canada needs to attract immigrants from other countries to keep the population and the labour force stable; Canada has accepted over 200,000 immigrants each year over the last decade. Approximately 11 percent of these migrants have come from mainland China. We shall now discuss some of the major factors underpinning this migration.

Chinese migrants arriving in Canada before World War II tended to leave rural areas of south China to escape poverty and seek a better life. Since the changes in Canadian migration laws in the 1960s, however, Canada has sought migrants who can contribute to the economy and society either through the skills that they have acquired or the financial investment they are prepared to make. Indeed, migration to Canada has become a very expensive matter, and few low-income Chinese can afford it. Today, most mainland Chinese immigrants, especially those from coastal cities of China, are middle class persons who had a good job and a decent income in China. After arriving in Vancouver, their experience has paralleled other migrant groups across the country: it has often been difficult for them to find well-paid jobs which correspond to their skill or educational level. Their non-North American education and experience are often not valued in local job markets, and their income and standard of life might actually be lower than what they experienced in China.

The motivations of Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada has changed considerably over the last decade. Chinese migrants of the 1970s and the early 1980s came to Canada to join relatives, but since the late 1980s family reunion has ceased to be the major impetus behind Chinese migration to Canada. The percentage of mainland Chinese migrants in the family class dropped sharply from 92 percent in the 1980s to 38 percent in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> In 2005, it dropped again to 22 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the Chinese students who applied for permanent residence status in Canada in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, many of the recent mainland Chinese immigrants do not publicly express their discontent with the Chinese government. On the contrary, many of the new immigrants defend and

17 BC Stats, "BC Immigration by Area of Last Permanent Residence: 2006".

18 Shuguang Wang and Lucia Lo, "Chinese Immigrants in Canada," Table 2.

19 CIC, "2005 Immigration Overview."



AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

even support the stance of the Chinese government on such issues as the one child policy, Tibetan and Taiwanese independence, and the *Falun Gong*. Some are also impatient with those who have criticized the Chinese government for violating human rights, believing that Western states sometimes use human rights issues to take political advantage of China.

If poverty, family union, and political dissent are no longer major reasons for Chinese migration, what are the major pull and push factors for Chinese migration to Canada?<sup>20</sup> Put simply, in migrating to Canada, and especially to Vancouver, most Chinese immigrants have sought a higher quality of life and a much better natural and social environment than that which exists in China.

Many of the mainland Chinese migrants I interviewed claimed that they migrated to Canada to avoid polluted and crowded cities in China. When explaining why he decided to migrate to Vancouver, one immigrant said that he had no confidence in the quality of food in China, for even rice and meat might be polluted. Another said he very much disliked showy, dirty, and noisy cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.<sup>21</sup> To many Chinese immigrants, Vancouver is a much better city. Respondents found the city large, but felt it had fresh air and a tranquil lifestyle which in China they felt could only be found in the countryside. As one migrant argued, "if you live in cities for a long time, you will feel suffocated and want to go to the countryside for some fresh air. Vancouver is a marvelous place. Here you can enjoy all the conveniences of a city, but at the same time you feel you are living in the countryside."<sup>22</sup> Another saw a sharp difference between her Chinese home city's environment and Vancouver's environment: "I like the blue sky and white clouds of Vancouver. In my home city in China the sky is always grey. Once when my eight year old son saw a large piece of white cloud flying over his head, he was startled."<sup>23</sup>

Some immigrants migrated to Canada because they felt that Chinese society had become chaotic. One migrant said that he would only like to live in a country where everyone followed regulations and valued fairness. In China, he said, "you will always feel unhappy because some people are always trying to take advantage of others, such as jumping a line when shopping or not yielding the right of road to another driver. There are beggars or pickpockets who take your cell-phone or wallet."<sup>24</sup> It is widely felt among Chinese migrants that

---

20 To understand the reasons for mainland Chinese migration to Canada, I surveyed mainland Chinese migrants in Canada, especially Vancouver, read Vancouver's Chinese newspapers, interviewed Chinese immigrants, and examined websites run by mainland Chinese immigrants in British Columbia and Canada.

21 Mr. Chen and Mr. Xu, interviews by author, 13 April 2008.

22 "Let's talk about why we wanted to migrate," <<http://www.canadameet.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-4271.html>>, (viewed 5 June 2008).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

Canadian society is much better regulated: “here you will see a high quality of citizens with a high level of social morality in a multi-cultural social environment,” one Chinese immigrant in Vancouver said.<sup>25</sup>

According to some Chinese immigrants, government officials in China do not follow regulations and execute their public duty in corrupt and brutal ways. One Chinese couple mentioned their bad experiences with state power in China. They said that they had opened a kindergarten in a Chinese city before migrating to Canada in late 2005. They were very unhappy about having to pay extra-legal fees to various government institutions in their district, including the fire fighters’ office, the public health bureau, and the police station: “If you don’t do that, the officials of those institutions have various ways to find problems with your business and you will lose even more.” When asked why they chose to immigrate to Vancouver, they replied that Canada was a country based on the rule of law, and that such a country made them feel more secure. What this couple said was not exceptional. Many Chinese immigrants have found that government officials in Canada treat people in much more polite and fairer ways than their counterparts in China.<sup>26</sup>

Some mainland Chinese immigrants came to Canada because they were tired of China’s relocation control policy and the *hukou* (residence registration) system.<sup>27</sup> One immigrant said that he had worked in a *danwei* (work unit) for over 20 years before finding a job in 2003 in a foreign company in Beijing. His boss in the *danwei*, however, did not want him to leave and refused to give him his file, without which the police station in Beijing could not offer him temporary residence. Irritated by this bureaucratic interference, he decided to migrate to Canada, and he is now living in Vancouver. He feels sorry that getting permanent residence in Canada was easier than obtaining temporary residency in Beijing. On the other hand, he is happy with his decision to migrate because “the people’s servants” can no longer take advantage of him.<sup>28</sup> Another migrant had a similar experience with China’s *hukou* system. He got a bank job in a big city, but in this case the police of the city refused to offer him a *hukou*. He worked in the city for five years without one, and eventually lost patience with the bureaucracy and decided to migrate to Canada.<sup>29</sup>

In China, when people from smaller towns or villages travel to a large city to look for work, it is difficult for them to get temporary residence.<sup>30</sup> Some immigrants point out that, ironically, holding a Canadian passport allows them

---

25 Mrs. Yang, interview by author, 15 April 2008.

26 Mr. and Mrs. Wang, interview by author, 8 June 2008.

27 The *hukou* is a domestic migration control system in China.

28 “Let’s talk about why we wanted to migrate.”

29 Ibid.

30 This situation exists because of the Chinese government’s policy of curbing the expanding population in big cities.

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

to live in any Chinese city, including Beijing and Shanghai, without applying for temporary residence permission.

Some immigrants are attracted to Canada because of Canada's good social insurance system. This reason might seem ironic because the Chinese government considers itself to be a socialist country and Canada to be a capitalist country. In China, however, construction of a nation-wide social insurance system is still in its initial stages. Many people might have a good job, but they still feel insecure because they are not covered by a social insurance system, and are unable to enjoy satisfactory pension and health care benefits. Some people simply do not trust any insurance programs in China. One immigrant said that when he was in China, he did not participate in any pension or health care program because he was not willing to give his money to someone he did not trust to manage it.<sup>31</sup>

Of the motivations for mainland Chinese migration to Canada, the most commonly cited was education of children. Many Chinese believe that Western education is superior to that in China. It is considered a great achievement if a family in China can send its children to the West for education, with the result that in recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese families send their children abroad for secondary and post-secondary education. Western education is expensive, however, and paying for it is a heavy financial burden, even for a wealthy family in China. Migration to a Western country becomes a logical choice for parents who want their children to receive Western education because countries like Canada charge much lower education fees for immigrants than for international students. When asked why she wanted to migrate to Canada, one immigrant in Vancouver said, "when I saw so many people, at great expense, send their teenage children to secondary and post secondary schools in the West, it occurred to me that I could do it by immigration. My child was still very young; if I migrated to Canada, I needn't pay fees for my children's education, and my child could even get a 'milk stipend'."<sup>32</sup>

Some migrants want their children to escape China's trying and competitive education system. These immigrants tend to view educational methods in Canada as more reasonable than those practiced in China, where students are often assigned heavy amounts of homework and where the competition for places in institutions of higher education is very stiff. One Chinese Canadian migrant said that Chinese educational methods were too cruel to children and that she wanted her children to get a more humane education: "my daughter was too tired. I wanted her to enjoy all the happiness of her childhood so I chose to migrate."<sup>33</sup> Another woman who migrated for similar reasons said, "I had a

---

31 "Let's talk about why we wanted to migrate."

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

good job and a stable income in China, but when I saw my son buried in a huge pile of homework without time to take a break, I became determined to migrate.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Relocating Place: Living in Vancouver**

Compared to most other Canadian cities, Vancouver has a large Chinese Canadian community of over 380,000 people.<sup>35</sup> This community provides various conveniences of everyday life to new migrants, as well as job opportunities, especially for migrants whose English is not good. Some conveniences cited by mainland Chinese migrants in Vancouver include Chinese grocery stores, shops, bookstores, restaurants, barber and beauty shops, after-school classes, entertainment amenities, financial services, newspapers, radio and television channels, and various religious facilities. These amenities can greatly facilitate the transition to life in Canada. Chinese immigrants, for example, can often purchase products in Vancouver which have been imported from their province of origin in China. They can also find restaurants offering a range of foods prepared in Sichuanese, Cantonese, Beijing, or Yunnanese styles.

To attract immigrant business, local banks, department stores, casinos, and telephone and utility companies in Vancouver offer Chinese language services. Some branches of the British-based Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, for example, offer services in Cantonese, Shanghaiese, Chaozhouese,<sup>36</sup> and Mandarin. Shaw Cable and Telus both have Mandarin and Cantonese services. Even some hospitals and government offices have begun to offer Chinese language services. Chinese students studying English in Vancouver sometimes feel that the ease of conversing in Chinese dialects impedes their ability to learn English.<sup>37</sup>

The Chinese community has its own media, which comprises two radio channels (FM 96.1 in Mandarin and AM 1470 in Cantonese); three Chinese television channels (Channel 229 Talent Vision and Channel 242 Phoenix TV in Mandarin, and Channel 230 Fairchild TV in Cantonese); three large Chinese newspapers serving the Taiwanese and Cantonese communities (*World Daily* Taiwanese, *Mingpao Daily* and *Singtao Daily*); and a number of smaller newspapers, most of them for the mainland Chinese Canadian audience. The media reports news on China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and also shows various entertainment programs in Chinese. Collectively, their programs help the multiple

34 Ibid.

35 BC Stats, “Profile of Diversity in BC Communities 2006,” <[http://www.welcomebc.ca/en/growing\\_your\\_community/trends/2006/pdf/diversity/Greater%20Vancouver.PDF](http://www.welcomebc.ca/en/growing_your_community/trends/2006/pdf/diversity/Greater%20Vancouver.PDF)>, (viewed September 2008).

36 An area of Guangdong in China.

37 “Thoughts from the Chinese living Canada,” <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2005-03/20/content\\_2719999.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2005-03/20/content_2719999.htm)>, (viewed 30 August 2008).

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

Chinese Canadian communities keep close touch with events across the Pacific and around the world.

Internet technology also keeps mainland Chinese immigrants informed about events in China. Chinese migrants have created numerous websites in Vancouver and in Canada as a whole. An incomplete survey shows that at least 310 business websites have been maintained by Chinese immigrants in Canada, and more than 60 of these are run by Chinese immigrants living in Vancouver.<sup>38</sup> These websites supply Chinese immigrants with various local information about yard sales, used cars sales, rentals, job opportunities, etc. Since these websites are written in Chinese, they have proven useful for immigrants whose English may not be good enough to find the relevant information in local English media. In addition to websites, there are also many Chinese internet Bulletin Board Systems, which provide immigrants online sites to discuss issues relating to China.

To create a sense of community in their new home and to deal with the emotional challenges of living in a new country and culture, Chinese immigrants in Vancouver have established numerous associations, including alumni associations, business associations, and various interest-based organizations. According to statistics provided by a local Chinese newspaper, more than 60 associations in Toronto and Vancouver were founded by mainland Chinese immigrants in the last decade.<sup>39</sup> The most popular associations are native place associations. Indeed, people from many of China's provinces and metropolitan cities have established these native associations in Vancouver. There is, for example, a Yunnan Native Association, a Shandong Native Association, a Sichuan Native Association, a Shanghai Native Association, and even two Beijing native associations in the city.<sup>40</sup> These associations often organize outings or get-togethers in members' homes on holidays. For some mainland Chinese immigrants, going to Christian church is another way to meet other Chinese Canadians. There are more than 150 ethnic Chinese churches in the Greater Vancouver area. These churches are often managed by local-born Chinese Canadian Christians, or Christians from Hong Kong or Taiwan; but most of the church participants are Chinese immigrants from mainland China.<sup>41</sup>

---

38 For a list of Canadian Chinese Websites, see <<http://www.comefromchina.ca/>>, (viewed 8 September 2008).

39 Ma Dechao, "Strategy of the Chinese Associations — A Record of the Spring Festival Forum of Some of Mainland Chinese Association," *DawaNews* (12 January 2008), <<http://www.dawanews.com/printversion1.asp?policyid=211>>, (viewed 27 August 2008).

40 Mr. Wang, interview by author, 2 August 2008.

41 Li Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief in British Columbia," in *Asian Religions in BC*, eds. Larry, Baker, and Overmyer (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).

### **Work in the Vancouver-Chinese Community**

More than half of the mainland Chinese immigrants in Vancouver have professional skills, yet many face many challenges finding a job. The first few years in Canada can be particularly difficult. Many are unable to find jobs corresponding to their training and experience in China, perhaps because of language difficulties or because their education and skills are not valued highly. These disadvantages can be offset partly by working opportunities offered by the Chinese community. Immigrants have found jobs in grocery stores, bookstores, tourist agencies, and restaurants opened by Chinese Canadians. Though wages in these businesses are usually modest, the jobs provide new immigrants with at least a temporary means of survival. These jobs normally do not require a high level of English as customers are often or mostly Chinese Canadians themselves.

Chinese immigrants with experience in media-related work have also found jobs in Chinese-Canadian media companies. Investments in local Chinese commercial television and radio channels have historically been made by migrants from Hong Kong or Taiwan, but in recent years these companies have hired mainland Chinese migrants to work as Mandarin broadcasters or technicians. Most of the small Chinese newspapers have been established by mainland Chinese immigrants. The papers are often free or sold at very low prices, as their main income derives from advertisements bought by Chinese Canadian businesses in Vancouver. All Chinese-Vancouver newspaper companies employ large numbers of mainland Chinese migrants.

Work related to child education is another sector which absorbs the skills of mainland Chinese immigrants. Chinese migrants have attached a great deal of importance to their children's education, and in recent years demand for after-school tutorials has expanded rapidly. Most mainland Chinese immigrants working in this sector have teaching experience in China. Their tutorial classes cover most of the subjects in Vancouver's elementary and secondary school curriculum, but those subjects included in provincial exams have the largest market. In part for this reason, and also because many migrants want their children to know Mandarin, Chinese language tutorials have become increasingly popular in Vancouver. The courses have also drawn students from non-Chinese heritage backgrounds.

Some Chinese immigrants have found their skills in high demand in Vancouver. Art tutorials, for example, are popular among mainland Chinese immigrant families. Chinese parents often want their children to develop versatile skills and send them to music or painting classes. In Vancouver, teachers of painting and classical music are rarely short of students. Piano and violin classes are particularly popular, but some parents want their children to learn traditional Chinese instruments such as *erhu* or *zheng*. In Richmond, which has a large Chinese Canadian community, there are a number of music classes which teach traditional Chinese music instruments.

## AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION TO VANCOUVER

In this current decade, mainland Chinese migrants began to open commercial sports clubs. There are, for example, a number of Chinese ping-pong clubs in Vancouver. Some of the coaches of these clubs had been coaches or athletes for China's national teams. In the spring of 2008 Mr. Zhao, a former member of China's national soccer team, founded a commercial soccer club in Vancouver. There are also various kinds of Chinese commercial *gongfu* clubs in Vancouver, including a *Taichi* club whose coach was a former instructor in the Sichuan Sports College.

Some mainland Chinese immigrants who practiced traditional medicine in China have opened successful businesses in Vancouver, which is especially true of doctors who practice acupuncture. British Columbia was the first government in North America to recognize Chinese medicine as a legitimate, regulated health profession, where Chinese traditional medicine doctors can obtain licenses.<sup>42</sup> An increasing number of people in British Columbia have been trying this ancient Chinese natural therapy. Patients can easily access Chinese medicines prescribed by these doctors since shops of traditional Chinese medicine have been long-established by earlier generations of immigrants.

### **Mainland Chinese Investor Migrants**

Vancouver is an ideal location for conducting trade with China. Trade between China and British Columbia has increased rapidly in the last decade. In 2005, China topped Japan as British Columbia's second-largest trading partner, when trade between the province and China reached \$8.9 billion.<sup>43</sup> Though much of this business is conducted by large companies, small businesses opened by mainland Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, using their personal connections in China, also participate in the bilateral trade.

In the past decade, a new phenomenon has emerged within mainland Chinese migration to Canada: a rapid increase of immigrants who have come to the country as an investor class. During the 1980s and 1990s, about 3.5 percent of immigrants from mainland China came as investors.<sup>44</sup> This ratio has increased so fast that by 2006 British Columbia received 2,869 investor-migrants from mainland China — a figure representing more than 26 percent of mainland Chinese immigrants in that year.<sup>45</sup>

---

42 Caroline Alphonso, "B.C. takes steps to legitimize traditional Chinese medicine," *The Globe and Mail* (30 December 2000), <<http://healthwatcher.net/Quackerywatch//TCM/gm001230alphonso.html>>, (viewed 23 July 2008).

43 Wendy Leung, "China now B.C.'s No. 2 trade partner," *Vancouver Sun* (13 March 2006).

44 Shuguang Wang and Lucia Lo, "Chinese Immigrants in Canada," Table 2.

45 BC Stats, "B.C. Immigrant Landings by Source by Class, January – December, 2006," <<http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/mig/imm06t4a.pdf>>, (viewed September 2008).

The increase in Chinese investor migrants is closely related to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy in the last decade.<sup>46</sup> But having more wealthy people is not alone sufficient to explain the rapid growth of Chinese investor migrants. The United States generates much more per capita wealth than China does, but only 24 Americans migrated to British Columbia as investors in 2006. They represented less than one percent of Americans who moved to British Columbia that year.<sup>47</sup> A more important reason for the dramatic increase of the Chinese in the investor class is that some wealthy Chinese do not feel financially secure in China and migrate to Canada to have a “back up plan” if something happens to their fortunes in China.<sup>48</sup>

In Canada, British Columbia is the favourite province of Chinese investors. In 2002, almost half of the Chinese immigrants admitted to Canada under this class chose British Columbia. In 2003, the figure was almost 60 percent.<sup>49</sup> Many of the Chinese immigrants in the investor class buy houses in North or West Vancouver and are considered “VIPs” for a number of businesses, including real estate agents, insurance companies, banks, and tourist agencies.

## Conclusion

One of the major changes in the last decade in the character of Chinese migration to Vancouver and to Canada as a whole is that mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest source of Chinese immigrants arriving in Canada. In Vancouver, mainland Chinese migrants have become the largest group within the Chinese community. In this paper I have explained the historical background for this change and analyzed the motivations behind mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver and British Columbia. I have pointed out that most migrants from mainland China have come from a middle class background. Poverty, family union, and political dissent are no longer major driving forces in peoples’ decisions to migrate. In the 1990s and 2000s, mainland migrants have sought to better their natural and social environments, and to seek a higher quality of life for their children. Prospective migrants to Canada view the exis-

---

46 The immigrants in this class are mostly businessmen or former government officials.

47 BC Stats, “B.C. Immigrant Landings by Source by Class, January – December, 2006.”

48 The large number of investor immigrants coming to British Columbia has led to significant increases in money flowing from China to Canada. The Canadian government has also increased the amount of money required to obtain investor immigrant status. In the past decade, the total amount increased from \$350,000 to \$400,000 for each applicant. The interest taken by the Canadian government increased correspondingly. By 2000, the total interest the government charged to each investor increased to \$120,000.

49 Jennifer Hansen, “Special Feature: Immigrants from India and China,” 2. It seems that many of the investor immigrants have their own social circles and tend to have a low profile in Vancouver. They are usually not active in public events organized by the local Chinese community.



AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECENT MAINLAND CHINESE MIGRATION  
TO VANCOUVER

tence of a large Chinese community in Vancouver as an important attraction, providing new immigrants with certain conveniences in everyday life and various job opportunities.

The biggest challenge for Chinese migrants and migrant families in Canada is to find a satisfactory job and to maintain a stable income. Migrants feel familial and personal pressures to maintain or to improve their quality of life, but the reality is that it is frequently difficult to find a job corresponding to their education and skills. Many new migrants from China face a difficult choice between staying in Canada or going back to China, that is, between a better social and political environment or more job opportunities. Some immigrant families have agreed to split temporarily to improve their prospects. In these *taikong* families, one person, usually the husband, returns to China to work, while the wife and children stay in Vancouver. In this way, some members of the family retain their immigrant status while one parent earns a stable income from China. The spouse working in China normally visits Vancouver once or twice a year. In many cases the wife will stay in Canada for three or four years, waiting for Canadian citizenship. She might then go back to China to join her husband. The children however, remain in Vancouver and continue their education.<sup>50</sup> Those who decide to give up their immigrant status and return to China tend to be young people. Statistics show that among Chinese immigrants between the ages of 25 and 45, one-third chose to leave Canada, and 15 percent of them leave in the first year.<sup>51</sup>

The increase in the numbers of returning migrants and *taikong* families show that for many mainland Chinese immigrants, the prospects of additional job opportunities in China have outweighed the attractions of remaining in Vancouver. This situation is not a new phase of the Chinese migrant experience, however, because Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants have similar experiences. With improvements in the social and natural environment in China, there may be a decline in mainland Chinese migration to Canada in the future. As Don J. DeVoretz suggested in his article on Asian skilled-immigration, migration to Canada is not only decided by the country's "tap on, tap off" immigration policy.<sup>52</sup> However, China's growing middle class will likely continue to be one of the major sources of immigrants to Canada for some years to come.

\* \* \*

---

50 The three years staying in Vancouver waiting for citizenship is jokingly called "sitting in immigration jail."

51 Zhang Nanxiao, "A Wave of Chinese Return Migration from Canada," *Global Times* (30 March 2006).

52 Don J. DeVoretz, "Asian Skilled-Immigration Flows to Canada: A Supply Side Analysis," *Foreign Policy Dialogue Series* (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, September 2003), 3.

**LI YU** received his academic training in East Asian History at universities in China, Japan and Canada. He obtained his Ph.D in Chinese History from the Department of History at the University of British Columbia in 1999 and is an instructor of Asian Studies at Langara College, Vancouver. He has taught at Yunnan University in China, Simon Fraser University, University of the Fraser Valley, and the University of British Columbia. He has published articles on Chinese social history and intellectual history in several leading Asian studies journals.

**LI YU** a reçu sa formation en histoire est-asiatique dans diverses universités de Chine, du Japon et du Canada. Il a obtenu son doctorat en histoire chinoise du Département d'histoire de l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique en 1999 et est chargé de cours en études asiatiques au collège Langara de Vancouver. Il a enseigné à l'université Yunnan en Chine, à l'université Simon-Fraser, à l'University of the Fraser Valley et à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique. Il a publié des articles sur l'histoire sociale de Chine et l'histoire intellectuelle dans plusieurs revues scientifiques asiatiques importantes.