How Anti-Chinese Racism Exacerbates Inequality: A Case Study of Racial Discourse and Poverty in Richmond

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Abstract

In recent research about income polarization in Canadian cities, Richmond has been identified as an area of increasing poverty. It also has the highest concentration of Chinese residents of any North American city. As these two statistics converge, the public and news media have asserted that this is the result of undeclared incomes and ‘tax evasion.’ This paper attempts to analyze these mainstream claims through the lens of historic and current anti-Chinese racism in Metro Vancouver. It also uses Statistics Canada’s 2016 census data from Richmond’s V6Y neighbourhood to challenge the stereotype of wealthy Chinese ‘yacht people’ and identify the implications of this racial discourse for low-income households in Richmond.

Introduction

Recent news articles highlighting research about significantly high levels of low-income households in Richmond represent an interesting study on the state of race and racism in Metro Vancouver. With headlines such as “Poverty level income tax filings prompt questions in mega-rich Richmond, B.C.”1 and “Call this what it is: tax evasion,”2 news outlets have drawn quick inferences and made implicit assumptions about Chinese-Canadians3 with racist undertones that reveal white supremacist normative stances. Of course, this is not the first time Vancouver has had discourse about the presence of Chinese-Canadians, and the city’s racist history dates back to the 19th century. Why does the public discourse assume that poverty-level incomes in Richmond are suspicious given their understanding of the city’s demographic? What can we know for sure, and what do these suspicions say about racist stereotypes of Chinese people in Metro Vancouver? I will argue that anti-Chinese racism in Metro Vancouver, recently re-ignited by the influx of Chinese4 immigration and investment in the 1980s, has created a one-dimensional caricature of Chinese-Canadians that resentfully glosses over potentially impoverished neighbourhoods in Richmond. Unfortunately, the current public perceptions about poverty in Richmond may have lasting consequences to the detriment of families and individuals in real need.

This paper will first explore the origins of anti-Chinese racism in Vancouver in order to draw parallels to the current racial climate, and then review various newspaper articles and their findings related to both Chinese people and specifically Chinese-Canadians in Richmond. In the second part of the paper, I will present my own findings from the 2016 Statistics Canada census, comparing numbers from the Richmond-Brighouse V6Y neighbourhood to Metro Vancouver. I will use these findings to both refute positions taken in the newspaper articles and argue that the statistics are in line with conclusions from academic literature about immigrant poverty in Canadian suburbs.
The Persistence of Anti-Chinese Racism in Vancouver

The stereotypical image of Chinese-Canadians as wealthy “yacht people” with megamansions who are responsible for Vancouver’s housing affordability crisis may differ from historical prejudices, but the principles are remarkably similar. Kay Anderson argues that white sentiments towards Chinese-Canadians were produced and reproduced though a lens of Otherness, no matter how the Chinese tried to define themselves apart from their race. Chinatown itself is not only called that because the Chinese lived in this enclave, but because it is partly a European creation. There are no other neighbourhoods in Vancouver named after the predominant race living in its boundaries; thus, the implicit conclusion is that the normative racial makeup of Vancouver is white.

The racial discrimination that created Chinatown also produced particular perceptions of the Chinese race. The Vancouver News wrote in 3 June 1886 that Vancouverites believed Chinatown was a natural outcome of the “herd instinct” of the “clannish Chinese” with their “habit of huddling in limited quarters of their own, directly opposed to our conceptions of civilized progress, morality, and hygiene.” Though it was not entirely their choice to live in crowded quarters, the issues facing Chinese labourers became their fault, pointing more to their own ‘moral failing’ than to the discriminatory practices of private individuals and city hall. No considerations were made about the fact that Chinatown was not linked to public sewers at the time, or that there were widespread laws and covenants that prevented property ownership by the Chinese. In addition to being unhygienic, they were also pointed out to be evasive of the law and responsible for white unemployment. In 1893, Health Inspector Robert Marrion noted that “the Japs try to obey the laws, but the Chinese are always on the lookout to evade them.” These sentiments will resurface in later discussions about poverty-level income tax filings in Richmond. As for the job market of the time, the Nanaimo Knights of Labor accused the Chinese of “unfair competition,” complaining that they worked for lower wages and could replace white workers during strikes, undermining their effort to negotiate higher pay and better working conditions. Rather than recognizing the unfair practices of their employers, Europeans blamed the Chinese for the precarious job market. There are no mentions of the possibility that Chinese labourers accepted lower pay because employers would not pay them at a comparable rate to their white counterparts, or that perhaps it was a matter of survival to take jobs that paid something, which was better than nothing.

There are striking parallels to today’s public sentiments about Chinese-Canadians, both in Vancouver and more specifically, the suburb of Richmond, regarding the influx of Chinese immigrants since the 1980s. Chinese buyers in Richmond, but also Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy, who redevelop properties into ‘monster homes’ have reignited discourse about the changing ‘character’ and ‘heritage’ of these neighbourhoods. Blame for the ‘red-hot’ housing market and rising unaffordability has landed squarely on the Chinese due to increasing investment since Expo 86. Recently, this has resulted in the 15 percent foreign buyer’s tax specifically aimed at Chinese investors. In Richmond, with articles such as “Call this what it is: tax evasion” and “Poverty-level income tax filings prompt questions in mega-rich Richmond, B.C.,” journalists attempt to separate race from the issue of low incomes in Richmond, but make assumptions and correlations about Chinese-Canadian wealth. As noteworthy are articles with headlines such as
“Chinese reach majority in Richmond,” that connote a certain alarm over changing demographics in suburban Canada. Extrapolating Anderson’s point about Vancouver’s normative racial makeup, it is important to hypothetically question if European-Canadians would receive similar news attention for changing the demographics of a city.

Again, the Chinese-Canadian ‘Other’ is blamed for Vancouver’s economic woes as though it is a problem of their own making. However, just as the Canadian state encouraged Chinese labourers to migrate for work on the railroad and in coal mines, the arrival of Chinese immigrants in Canada since the 1980s was a product of federal state intervention. During the 1980s, the federal government created the Business Immigration Program and its objective was “to promote, encourage, and facilitate the immigration of experienced business persons from abroad who will make a positive contribution to the country’s economic development.” With this program, immigrants with a minimum investment of $400,000 and net worth of $800,000 can score 25 out of a total possible 87 points on the application for admission. In contrast, skilled workers must score at least 70 out of a possible 110 points. The result was an influx of over a billion dollars per year for the first half of the 1990s and the Greater Vancouver area receiving over a third of business immigrant landings from 1984-1998.

As the Chinese community became more visible in Vancouver, both in the actual number of people and in signs of investment into real estate, there began correlations between ‘Chinese wealth’ and rising housing cost. As Katharyne Mitchell points out, “More important... is the perception of this speculative activity by long-term residents. This perception greatly exacerbated existing racism and contributed to the racialization of space and the ongoing struggles over spatial hegemony in the city.” In a globalized context, it is not unusual for investment to cross national boundaries. Moreover, in this neoliberal, transnational era, investments into property that reap the highest and best use, or the maximum exchange value, are looked upon with respect. However, the racialized nature of this investment, along with historic anti-Chinese racism embedded in Vancouver, makes this particular case an unwelcome one. The facts and statistics do not have to match up – simply the perception of speculative activity, whether by anecdotal evidence, loosely correlated data, or Chinese language development signs, are sufficient to make a reasonable connection. Investment is acceptable in general terms, but as Mitchell states, only if it is not “offensive to culturally British Canadians... difference was acceptable, but only when it worked for the nation, within a clearly proscribed cultural framework.” This difference was not acceptable because it was at odds with British culture, symbols, and imagery.

This newly crafted stereotype of the rich Chinese contrasts with the image of the ‘unhygienic, opium-smoking’ labourer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but many similarities remain. First, the concentration of Chinese-Canadians within the city is seen with suspicion and fear. Questions about how these newcomers will change the physical, cultural, and economic landscape of neighbourhoods, particularly ones like Kerrisdale and Shaughnessy that are historically British, are deeply embedded in the ‘Otherness’ of the Chinese race. Second, specific characteristics attributed to Chinese-Canadians are linked to urban issues, and they are used to explain the cause of said issues. In the past, Chinese-Canadians were blamed for their willingness to work for lower wages as the cause of a lack of jobs. Today, Chinese-Canadians are
blamed for their wealth as the cause of increasing real estate prices. Lastly, the fact that these stereotypes persist, as though there is only one socioeconomic form to all people of Chinese origin, and that particular behaviours are linked to racial identity, indicates not much has changed regarding the issue of ‘Othering.’

The Case of Low-Income Chinese-Canadians in Richmond

A problem arises when these stereotypes overlap with contradicting information. As income tax reports have been compared to real estate prices in certain neighbourhoods, some have questioned how it is possible to have such high percentages of residents report low incomes. The Vancouver Sun wrote an article titled “Thousands of Metro Vancouver mansion owners avoiding taxes,” correlating neighbourhoods with high concentrations of low-income tax filings with the proportion of Chinese residents. Researchers pointed out that “most of the Metro neighbourhoods where residents own expensive houses but many declare low income contain a much higher than Metro average of visible minorities, particularly of Chinese origin.”

They also claimed a correlation between these low-income expensive-housing neighbourhoods and ‘astronaut’ families, where husbands work overseas while the children and wives live in Canada. They also found it odd that these neighbourhoods were dominated by homeowners, rather than renters. The conclusion in this article was that Chinese residents in Vancouver were not reporting global income, and therefore were not contributing to the tax base, essentially becoming “freeloaders” who benefitted from social services without paying into them. Samuel Hyman, a Vancouver lawyer, wrote an opinion piece in the Vancouver Sun, stating that “We do not need freeloading wealthy international tax cheats who have no intention or willingness to abide by Canadian tax laws.” He never once mentioned the Chinese, but by speaking specifically about Richmond and immigrants, he was certainly aware of the connection he was making to Chinese-Canadians. He also defended his stance, saying “The issue must be so dealt with by our senior governments without being derailed or denigrated by mention of the ‘r’ word that some would use disingenuously as a justification for inaction,” and of course the ‘r’ word here was race.

Specifically in Richmond, the nation’s (and continent’s) most concentrated population of Chinese residents, the income to home price contradiction caught the attention of urban planner Andy Yan. He reported that Richmond’s poverty rate is 22.4 percent, while the Metro Vancouver average is 16.5 percent, and concluded that “these figures are likely skewed due to underreporting of income.” However, he did pose the question: “How much of it is poor paying jobs vs this issue of underreporting incomes?” In another study by Yan, this time focusing on Richmond City Centre, he found that 35.5 percent of the working-age population was in a low-income household, and that the benchmark price for a home was $700,000. In the same article, Daniel Hiebert also suggested that “it’s unlikely that Richmond is seeing high levels of low-income residents because they’re all poor,” but admitted the limitation to the thesis of underreporting incomes: “The problem with undeclared income is that it’s by definition impossible to measure. So this bit can’t be proven.” However, aside from Hiebert, the other experts weighing in on this argument did not explicitly admit that these are merely hypotheses,
not proven facts. Quick assumptions were made about the contradiction between low incomes and high home prices, correlating data to support the idea that ‘those’ Chinese-Canadians were trying to deceive ‘us.’ Earlier in the essay, I mentioned a comment that a health inspector once said in 1893 – that the Chinese evade the law. It seems this sentiment continues to pervade the European-Canadian imagination.

2016 Census Data for Richmond-Brighouse V6Y

Using readily available census data from Statistics Canada, I reviewed the numbers from the V6Y postal code surrounding the Richmond-Brighouse SkyTrain station, and compared them to the Census Metropolitan Area – Metro Vancouver. The reason why I selected V6Y is because it was the closest match with the census tract that Ley and Lynch identified in their income polarization research as having the highest proportion of low-income households in Richmond.25

The V6Y area has a population of 47,768, with ethnic Chinese individuals making up 66 percent of the total; this contrasts with all of Metro Vancouver (from here on referred to as CMA), where ethnic Chinese make up just 21 percent of the total population. Average household sizes in V6Y do not vary much from CMA – 2.4 and 2.5 respectively. The same can be said about married or common law households, at nearly identical percentages of 58 and 56 percent for V6Y and CMA respectively. Most interestingly, there is almost no difference between the percentage of lone-parent households, with 18 percent of households with one parent in V6Y, and 15 percent for all of Metro Vancouver.

In terms of housing, V6Y has disproportionately less single detached houses compared to CMA, as they make up just 11 percent of the housing stock, while CMA boasts 29 percent. Though housing prices all over Metro Vancouver are unaffordable, it is clear though that there is a significant contrast between V6Y and CMA. The median value of all dwellings in V6Y is $501,602, while the CMA median is 37 percent higher at $800,220. Despite of the lower housing cost, however, both renter and owner households in V6Y occupy unaffordable homes. In total, 42 percent of all households spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, compared to 32 percent of CMA. A startling 53 percent of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, compared to the CMA figure at 44 percent. Renters’ median monthly cost is also higher than the CMA median, at $1,240 compared to $1,136. It is important to mention that in the V6Y neighbourhood, it costs less to own than to rent. While renters spend a median $1,240 a month on housing, owners spend just $1,159.

Assuming that the census accurately depicts individual and household incomes in V6Y, they fall substantially lower than CMA medians. The median individual after-tax income in V6Y is $21,271, while in CMA it is $29,422. The contrast is greater within households, where the median after-tax income for V6Y is $46,836, while for CMA is $63,365. By no means is this a result of a lack of employment. V6Y and CMA boasts a virtually identical unemployment rate, and are within 8 percentage points for the number of people who worked throughout the reference year at an average of 41.5 weeks of 2015. What is concerning though is a lower percentage of
full-time workers in V6Y and total full-time and part-time workers. Additionally, out of all the jobs that V6Y residents have, 32 percent are in the sales and service industry.

Though the news articles cited earlier in the essay focused on ethnically Chinese residents, census figures on citizenship and language skills can help shift the discourse from race to nationality, diverting attention away from terminology such as ‘immigrant’ and ‘foreigner’ that connotes ‘Otherness.’ In V6Y, Canadian citizens account for 79 percent of the population, compared to 87 percent in the CMA; non-permanent residents only make up 5 percent of this census area. However, it is true that most of the residents in V6Y arrived in Canada as a result of the business immigration program, since economic immigrants make up 71 percent of total immigrants from 1980 to 2016, compared to 58 percent for CMA. Though 56 percent of V6Y individuals identify a Chinese language as their mother tongue, 85 percent of respondents can speak English conversationally, compared to 93 percent of all Vancouver CMA. The percentage may not be as high, but the vast majority of V6Y Chinese-Canadian residents are citizens who can speak English.26

Given this snapshot of a Richmond area, it both denies some of the assumptions and claims made by news outlets mentioned in the previous section, and affirms much of the academic literature about immigrant populations in urban contexts. The following section will explore both of these dynamics.

The Immigrant Experience in Richmond and Beyond

Given the statistics from V6Y, some of the hypotheses and comments made about Chinese-Canadians in Richmond can be debunked. The main explanation for the influx of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver involves the so-called ‘astronaut’ families, where the husband lives abroad while the wife and children live in Canada assisted by his overseas income. This does not seem to be the case in V6Y, where the average household size is 2.4 and lone-parent households only make up 18 percent of total households. Just over half of census families are two people, and the other half are families with children.27 At least in the V6Y area, it appears that whole families are living under the same roof. In addition, these are working families. V6Y and CMA have similar levels of employment and unemployment, and also the number of weeks worked in 2015. The notion that the majority of Chinese-Canadian families in Richmond are living off of global capital is less likely than the fact that individuals are employed in lower-paying job sectors. With almost a third of the working population in the sales and services industry, low incomes may be closer tied to low-paying jobs as Andy Yan posited.

Also, while news outlets question how low-income families could afford to purchase homes, it is important to note that home prices in V6Y are significantly lower than in Vancouver CMA. It would be reasonable to suggest that a large part of newcomers’ choice of residence in Richmond as opposed to Vancouver is due to these lower home prices. Moreover, research on immigrant housing patterns indicate that immigrants are more likely to own homes, rather than rent them. Preston et al. found in the 2006 census that ownership rates for immigrants and the Canadian-born were almost identical: 71.6 percent and 75.3 percent. Furthermore,
homeownership increased faster between 2001 and 2006 for immigrants.²⁸ Carlos Teixiera points to a significant amount of Canadian literature on immigrants’ housing careers, adding that “attainment of homeownership... for many immigrant households represents a steady and secure economic investment and a realization of the ‘Canadian dream,’” and because many of them experienced prolonged difficulties in the rental market.²⁹ Katharyne Mitchell was able to interview key informants, who told her that as a general rule, Hong Kongers who had average incomes (middle to upper middle class in Vancouver terms) tended to buy in Richmond, because new houses were large but prices were lower than in other Vancouver neighbourhoods.³⁰

Another possibility for how low-income households in Richmond acquired homes may be linked to the business class immigration program. Preston et al. suggests that though Chinese immigrants came with “sufficient assets to purchase housing upon arrival,” they have found difficulty reproducing income in Canada.³¹ In Ley’s research, he found that “Chinese immigrants who declared incomes below the poverty level were recorded for over 50 percent of households in 1996; compare homeownership rates of over 80 percent for the same group in Canada’s most expensive housing market... it suggests a group that, while asset-rich, may be cash-flow-poor.”³² This may have something to do with major employment hurdles that immigrants in general face when arriving in Canada. Ley and Lynch suggest that immigrant workers, especially those with foreign credentials and with poor English, are underemployed in de-skilled, low-paying service jobs, which falls in line with the large number of workers in V6Y in sales and services industries.³³

In general, a repeated theme in urban immigration literature is the steep learning curve in the Canadian workforce, coupled with discrimination based on language and lack of domestic experience. One of the interviewees in Smith and Ley’s research summed up this struggle aptly:

So the main thing I could never understand is when you go for immigration and they consider your qualification and your experience, and without that qualification and without that experience you couldn’t get the immigration to Canada. But when you enter into Canada... if you go to find a job... they first ask if you have any experience of other qualifications of use for Canada... if you do not want to consider the qualifications and experience of the immigrant [when they apply for a job], then why don’t they consider that at the time of admission?³⁴

With the Canadian point system for immigration, the federal government ostensibly selected the very best and brightest of what foreign countries had to offer. The issue was that employers were not on board with this merit-based process. As a result, “the wages and salaries of immigrants take longer to converge on those of the Canadian-born than in the past. Between 1996 and 2001, more than one half of all immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 10 years were overqualified for their jobs.”³⁵ Other immigrant groups in Metro Vancouver face similar woes to the Chinese, such as Iranian refugee families highlighted by the Globe and Mail’s “B.C.’s hidden new face of poverty.” In this article, impoverished ethnic groups are generally characterized by residence outside the urban core in areas less serviced by transit, less employment opportunities, and less visible to the public eye in a phenomenon called the ‘suburbanization of poverty.’³⁶ Though the Chinese-Canadian community benefits from the SkyTrain line running into Richmond, suburbanization coupled with low incomes follows other
immigrant trends in Metro Vancouver.

The most interesting statistic from V6Y that was not included in any of the news article studies was the percentage of residents who were Canadian citizens. Consequently, assumptions and notions of who is “Canadian” are contested in this part of the discussion. Approximately 8 out of 10 V6Y residents are Canadian citizens, and yet the public discourse about wealth and poverty in north Richmond centers around ethnically Chinese immigrants. Tensions have grown in the last few decades regarding Chinese migration into Richmond and the changes they have brought – not only ethnically, but spatially as well. These tensions may have had some influence on the public finding out that Richmond has a significant amount of low-income households.

Ray, Halseth, and Johnson’s research on suburbanization is helpful in framing this situation. They suggest that “as a physical place, the suburb is a landscape of home ownership marked by a peripheral location, low density development, and relatively easy access to ownership for young families with children... as well as strong class, ethnic and racial homogeneity.” In addition, they argue that the suburbs “were built primarily to house a native-born white middle class population and as such were in large measure an escape from immigrants.” Since the normative reality of suburban life in Metro Vancouver has been historically white-dominated, Richmond has engaged in debates around concerns of cultural diversity, but they are framed in ‘colourless’ ideologies such as ‘way of life,’ ‘livability,’ and ‘tradition.’ However, Ray, Halseth, and Johnson claim that “the constructed images and popular discourse surrounding change in Richmond bear only a weak relationship to the actual nature of change and the Chinese population.” In fact, they believe that the dominant culture’s complaints have “relatively little to do with physical change per se, and instead is reflective of a long history of ideas about immigrants, race and place in the suburbs.”

The fact is that suburbs in many major North American cities have been changing as a result of the gentrification of post-industrial areas near downtowns. This is further compounded by immigrant desires for safe neighbourhoods and better education opportunities for their children. In the wake of these recent shifts in the suburban landscape, sociologist Wei Li coined a new term in 1997: the “ethnoburb.” Racial tensions and nativism have flared up in other North American cities such as Los Angeles, where the Chinese are also blamed for “driving prices out of local reach.” As the image of the suburbs continues to change and challenge assumed notions of its normative ethnic and socioeconomic makeup, visibly ‘Other’ residents will continue to be blamed for undesirable urban changes. Even if the racially non-white neighbours follow a traditionally suburban way of life, they are still seen as an ‘Other.’ Ray, Halseth, and Johnson’s observation is that the Chinese residents in Richmond “so closely match the social, economic and housing qualities of the stereotypical suburbanite. For the most part, Chinese immigrants are family-oriented, middle class homeowners who live in single-detached dwellings.” The only difference is that they are not “long-time residents of either Canada or Richmond, nor are they ‘white.’”

The discussions surrounding low-income tax filings in Richmond are not merely about taxes and deception, but they are deeply embedded in over a century’s worth of anti-Chinese racism and the European-Canadian conception of the Chinese race. Today’s political climate
prevents European-Canadians from being openly racist without consequence, but the implicit connections do not go unnoticed. White frustrations of rapidly diversifying neighbourhoods, and fears of a housing bubble making homeownership increasingly unattainable for even middle-class households, are all mixed into the discourse. It seems less important that the residents occupying Richmond are in fact Canadian citizens, and more pertinent that they look, sound, and act like Chinese people, whatever their perception of the Chinese race may suggest.

Implications and Consequences

The implications of this shrugging off of poverty in Richmond are potentially significant. Ley and Lynch’s income polarization study has shown that income trends for immigrants have gotten worse over the years. In 1981, immigrants earned on average 90 percent of Canadian-born residents, but in 2001, they earned only 65 percent. They noted that “the troubling relationships between race and economic success are producing new forms of social exclusion that are most acute in Toronto and Vancouver,” and may be a contributing factor to the concentration of new Chinese immigrants in Richmond. With more precarious incomes and less promising job prospects, it is no wonder that Teixeira found “the majority of the study participants settled directly in Surrey and Richmond to live near people of the same ethnic or cultural background... They relied predominantly on their personal networks and eschewed the use of service agencies to find housing.” In order to create a support network for emergency and survival purposes, it is likely that more recent immigrants will gravitate towards the suburbs. In some instances, immigrant families share accommodations, both in the early stages while finding housing, and during homeownership to ease the burden of mortgage payments. This does not seem to be the case in V6Y, but that may be due to smaller housing accommodations, since the majority of dwellings are townhouses, row houses and apartments, not single detached homes.

Discounting poverty in Richmond may also mean that these kinds of assumptions may influence policy, rolling back governmental supports appropriate for low-income households. If Teixeira is correct in saying that almost half of his Richmond research participants were paying more than $1,000 in rent and more than half of participants spending more than 50 percent of their monthly household income on housing, this puts them seriously at risk of homelessness. The City of Richmond’s Housing Affordability Profile acknowledges the city’s low income residents, those living in unaffordable housing, and long wait lists for BC Housing, while at the same time anticipating population growth and increased housing demand. Unfortunately, the report falls short of recommending concrete steps to increase and retain affordable housing stock. It is imperative for the City of Richmond to take seriously the fragility of many households’ financial situations.

Concluding Remarks

It seems that the very population blamed for the economic perils of Vancouver’s housing market also face the same issues of unaffordability. The globalized neoliberal market has created
conducive conditions for housing speculation and low-paying jobs, regardless of race. It is undeniable that years and billions of dollars’ worth of investment from Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese individuals has had an impact on Vancouver’s housing market. It is true that tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants found themselves in Richmond, for personal and structural reasons. Urban spaces have changed as a result of the Canadian state’s insistence of wealthy foreigners to live here. However, to say, whether explicitly or implicitly, that Chinese immigrants are the cause of Vancouver’s most pressing urban issues due to their wealth, is problematic.

From the very start of Chinese settlement in Vancouver, the community’s racial ‘Otherness’ segregated them from European-Canadian spaces. A number of legislations and policies from various levels of government “institutionalized the notion of a Chinese race as a salient public concept,” while the structure of the labour market perpetuated income inequality. At the same time, they were the target of criticism for ‘stealing jobs’ from European-Canadians. Since the 1980s, new concentrations of Chinese immigrants in various neighbourhoods have given rise to new concepts – as a group of wealthy individuals ‘stealing property’ from European-Canadians. The B.C. government’s 2016 decision to impose a foreign buyer’s tax was a symbolic admittance to put partial blame on investors of Chinese origin. Most importantly, the modern construction of the Chinese race as wealthy and opportunistic makes no differentiation between those living abroad and those living in Canada.

A recent Georgia Strait article from September 2018 highlighted some of the overt racism towards Chinese-Canadians, and how the line between foreign Chinese and resident Chinese does not seem to matter. In a letter to realtor Winnie Wu, an anonymous writer wrote that “Asians” are “not welcome” because of their “appearance, culture, language, and unbridled greed.” In addition, the writer said Asians have “invaded, infested, and defaced Vancouver” to the detriment of “citizens who belong here, who were here long before you.” Disdainful language around particular aspects of Chinese culture and the notion of ‘invading’ land is similar to historic hatred of Chinese residents in Chinatown. In the same letter, the writer states “we don’t want ‘empty’ houses in our neighbourhoods,” which points to discontent about overseas Chinese investors not living in Canada. Therefore, European-Canadians feel threatened by both the Chinese living and not living in Canada. The issue is about any presence of the Chinese race in a city where ‘ownership’ of the land is assumed to belong to white Canadians. In fact, nuance in specific ethnicity may not matter either, considering the writer simply addressed ‘Asians’; the focus is on any people groups that deviate from whiteness.

As current anti-Chinese sentiments converge on a city region facing a housing affordability crisis, the lack of empathy and quick conclusions about poverty-level incomes fall in line with Vancouver’s historic tendencies to scapegoat Chinese-Canadians. However, these inferences do not seem to be congruent with census data from the V6Y Richmond-Brighouse area. In my interpretation of the statistics, the numbers suggest that Chinese-Canadians living in Richmond are not that different from the rest of the Metro Vancouver population in terms of family size and citizenship, while at the same time remarkably similar to other immigrant groups in areas such as income, employment, and income to housing cost ratio. This has two potential implications: first, on further intensification of ethnic concentration in Richmond as a survival strategy, and second, on future policy related to affordability. These findings on income
polarization and the suburbanization of poverty, particularly among racialized Canadian residents, should be taken seriously and future qualitative studies should be done to achieve a more accurate understanding of who is living in Richmond and their living conditions.


3 This is an intentional identity, first to resist the public and news perception of Chinese people as foreigners, and second because, as it will be discussed later, the vast majority of Chinese residents in Richmond are Canadian citizens.

4 By “Chinese,” I am referring to individuals from the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. I understand that those from Hong Kong and Taiwan may object to this classification.


7 Ibid., 81.

8 Ibid., 123.

9 Ibid., 85.

10 Ibid., 37.


17 Mitchell, Crossing the Neoliberal Line, 68.

18 Ibid., 93.

19 Ibid., 73.


21 Todd, “Mansion owners avoiding taxes.”

22 Hyman, “Tax evasion.”
Wood, “Poverty level income tax filings prompt questions.”


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Mitchell, Crossing the Neoliberal Line, 249.


Ibid.


Ibid., 177.

Ibid., 180.

