This article examines two intervals of immigration and capital investment by Hong Kong Chinese into Vancouver’s Chinatown in British Columbia, Canada. In the first interval, highly educated professionals from Hong Kong arrived in Vancouver in the late 1960s and allied with local forces to block state-directed urban redevelopment projects which threatened to destroy the cultural and economic core of Chinatown. In the second interval, Hong Kong immigrants allied with offshore Hong Kong investors and local merchants and residents to reduce the development restrictions imposed by “heritage” zoning in Chinatown, thus facilitating the rapid gentrification of the area. The manner in which both preservation and redevelopment occurred highlights the ways that place, and the relationships between people, are always constitutive of and central to the functioning of global economic circuits. Further, the economic and cultural power of this global diaspora facilitated not just the reworking of a traditional place over time, but also galvanized new discussions concerning the very notions and definitions of what constitutes “tradition” itself. The ongoing redevelopment of Chinatown in Vancouver thus provides a lens for a particular type of global-local articulation, one that involves not just morphological change, but also a glimpse into contemporary renegotiations of the very terms and definitions of cultural heritage.
Over the last three decades there has been a large-scale exodus of highly educated, professional, and wealthy emigrants from Hong Kong into several urban areas around the world. Scholarship related to this migration in the Canadian and U.S. context has focused mainly on the influence of the Chinese immigrants on the predominant “Western” cultures and traditions of the nation. Questions of assimilation and/or contestation of the values and institutions of the host society have predominated, and issues related to the changing political and spatial structures of the pre-existing and relatively autonomous immigrant communities within Canadian and U.S. society have been largely ignored. This lack of interest is unfortunate for two reasons. First, the influence of the recent Hong Kong immigrants on both the traditional structures and political formations of Chinatowns worldwide has been absolutely immense over the past three decades. Second, an examination of the ways that the culture and capital of recent Chinese immigrants have penetrated traditional Chinese communities would seem to offer important insights into wider theoretical interpretations of global-local and global-traditional dynamics, which are often elided in more conventional globalization studies.

In addition, the impact of recent immigrants from Hong Kong on the redevelopment of Chinatowns worldwide has raised several important questions about the nature and discourse of “tradition” itself. In Vancouver, British Columbia, in the 1990s, for example, as offshore Hong Kong capital swept through the city and development projects dotted the urban landscape, the city’s attempt to preserve “traditional” Chinatown through its zoning policies was derided by many Chinatown residents as a form of neocolonialism. The preservation of tradition, imposed from above, against the wishes of many residents of the community, and in the form of buildings locked rigidly in the landscape, caused a number of people to ask, “Whose tradition?” Many Chinatown residents argued that the emphasis on architectural preservation was making the area uncompetitive in the bid for offshor

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Conventional globalization studies often miss these micro-moments of disruption. In relation to Vancouver’s Chinatown, many of the “standard” narratives of global forces and transnational flows have been unsatisfactory in explaining either the spatial or the social changes that have occurred over the past three decades. One reason is that the tendency to conceive of globalization as an abstract, monolithic and homogenizing process has obscured the way in which place is always constitutive of and central to the functioning of global economic circuits. As will be shown in this Vancouver research, specific networks, connections and alliances between global and local players have been integral to the manner in which preservation, redevelopment, and the discourse surrounding them have actually taken place.

Another important issue is that much early globalization literature in the social sciences privileged forces “from above,” leading to a view of Western-based processes such as capitalism and modernity as extending into every crevice of the world, irrevocably altering the structures and traditions of developing regions. This conceptualization is flawed on a number of counts. First, it has homogenized concepts such as capitalism, and located their origin, development and power squarely in the West. With such an orientation, explanations for local change (the “local” almost always being located in developing countries) have often rested on static, core-periphery types of arguments which have not been able to effectively explicate the types of transformations occurring in many parts of the world.

Moreover, the emphasis on capitalism as a purely Western development has elided historical capitalistic practices associated with non-Western societies. In China, for example, Gary Hamilton has demonstrated how early patterns of long-distance trade between clan and guanxi (regional place) members led to a different capitalist trajectory than that of most European societies. Thus, early patterns of interregional trade (within the context of a distant, tributary state system) influenced the development of a form of capitalism regulated more by interpersonal norms and sanctions than by bureaucratic organizations under state control. Historical and cultural patterns like these are important for contemporary analysis because they continue to have ramifications for contemporary business practices. Indeed, as numerous scholars have shown, contemporary Chinese business practices continue to reflect such a personalized, trust-based system. The use of extended family, regional and collegial ties, reliance on guanxi (personal relationships), establishment of credit pools, use of trust and reputation to “secure” deals, and omission of formal contracts and/or state-designed protections and regulations are all key features of Chinese capitalism as practiced today in numerous locales around the world.

Thus, capitalism, as the primary “globalizing” process of the late twentieth century, cannot be adequately understood with a purely top-down approach. Its differing origins, development, and contemporary practices and articulations all influence the way it intersects with “traditional” forms and identities in various regional sites around the world. Knowledge of its particular cultural inscriptions, including the institutions and individuals engaged in capitalist practices (such as urban development), therefore, are essential to understand both how and why local transformation occurs. Certainly, in the case of Vancouver’s Chinatown this type of knowledge is imperative to an accurate picture of recent changes in the community.

Top-down approaches to globalization also tend to homogenize concepts such as “modernity,” and similarly posit it as a purely Western phenomenon. However, recent works by post-colonial critics such as Barlow, Rofel and Ong have critiqued this
vision, arguing for broader interpretations and “alternative” modernities that resist Enlightenment narratives of what constitutes the modern.4 Without a Weberian emphasis on rationality or the rise of the bureaucratic state as the key elements of modernity, it is possible to strip the concept to more basic foundations — to argue, for example, that modernity is comprised primarily of a shifting experience of being in the world, one that is linked with, but not limited to, the growth and spread of capitalist practices. Stripping the concept of its Western biases widens the analytical range of the concept; thus, a broader interpretation of modernity as a globalizing, but not necessarily “Westernizing” process, allows for more nuanced analyses of global-local dynamics and specific transformations of the “traditional,” such as will be discussed in the following sections of the paper.

Finally, much past globalization literature, particularly global-local studies, has fixed the relationship between scales as unilinear — i.e., as being always global to local. But research on contemporary migration movements, for example, has indicated that a great proportion of current migration is “transnational” — that is, involving constant and nearly simultaneous flows of people, capital and information back and forth between sending and receiving societies.3 In the context of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to Vancouver, there is unquestionably a transnational network of flows and alliances that has operated nonlinearly, and that has also jumped scales. The influence of this back-and-forth movement on the social and spatial politics of the community has been enormous.6

The view that emerges today is that place-based, spatial and political dynamics in Vancouver’s Chinatown have been influenced by nonlinear, highly personalized and contingent global-local articulations, as well as by local-local dynamics. Chinatown is a heterogeneous space and community, involving people with conflicting aims, goals, values, and understandings of community and what a community should be and look like. The Hong Kong migration to Vancouver, paralleled by a rapid and massive movement of capital into the city, is unquestionably part of a “globalizing” process within late capitalism, but it is a globalizing process that has created a very particular, site-specific set of dynamics within Vancouver’s Chinatown. The numerous changes that have occurred in the spaces of this community between the 1960s and the 1990s have been partly the result of global capital and cultural penetration. But they have also resulted from local contingencies, ethnic ties, personal connections, shared cultures and histories, and the transnational movements of people back and forth across space that have been characteristic of the last decades of the twentieth century.

HONG KONG MIGRATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: INTERVAL ONE

The original migrants to Vancouver were primarily rural laborers from four counties in the Say-yup region of the Pearl River Delta. A few of the earliest migrants were merchants, but the majority were laborers and farmers fleeing internal political strife, the Opium Wars, and a poor economy. The spatial community that became known as “Chinatown” was first established in the 1880s, and consisted of a few wooden shacks. After a building boom between 1900 and 1910, it also came to include several blocks of brick buildings (FIG.1). The larger buildings along Carrall and Pender Streets (the heart of the Chinatown community) were primarily brick, three stories high, with recessed balconies and wrought-iron railings (FIGS.2,3). These buildings were similar in style to the town buildings of South China. As a result of a local state policy of containment of Chinese immigrants, nearly all residents of Chinese descent in Vancouver lived in Chinatown until the 1970s.8

Soon after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1885, prohibitive Canadian immigration policies such as the “head” tax, greatly constricted Chinese migration.9 Then, following the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA) of 1923, immigration from China was completely banned. However, after the repeal of the CEA in 1947, the Chinese residential community extended east into Strathcona and north across Hastings Street into what is now the Downtown Eastside. Within a decade, the relative number of residents of Chinese descent in Strathcona grew from one quarter to approximately one half. This trend in the district’s population continued through the 1960s and early 1970s.10

Although the CEA was repealed in 1947, it was not until 1962, when new regulations removed “country of origin” as a major criterion for admission to Canada, that direct, legal migration began to flourish. In particular, the shift to a “points” system in 1967, according to which admission came to be based more on education and skills than kinship or sponsorship, created a major surge in immigration from Hong Kong.11 The number of such immigrants continued to increase through the 1980s and 1990s.12

As a result of immigration restrictions and hard economic times, between 1923 and the end of World War II there was relatively little new construction in Chinatown or the adjacent

FIGURE 1. Map of Chinatown, (c.1892.) (Drawing by author.)
residential community of Strathcona. In the 1950s several new businesses were built along Pender Street and elsewhere, and a number of buildings were torn down or remodeled. At the time, the Chinese community in Strathcona occupied primarily two-story wooden homes built in the early decades of the century. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s urban planners launched extensive redevelopment plans to address so-called “blighted” areas of the city. The redevelopment, which was scheduled to take place over twenty years, targeted most of the residential sectors of Chinatown and Strathcona for demolition and rebuilding.

As with many other cities in Canada and the United States, the loss of the middle-class residential tax base, increasing competition for downtown commercial land, difficulties in procuring mortgages and home-repair financing for city housing (particularly by nonwhite applicants), and increasing relegation of the poor to confined and rapidly deteriorating inner-city areas had resulted in housing stock in areas such as Chinatown that was generally in bad condition. These areas were then represented as blighted, or (in more anthropomorphic terms) as “ulcers” or “sores” which needed to be surgically removed for fear their infectious, diseased qualities would contaminate other areas of the city. In the 1950s this rhetoric was heavily laden with cross-references to communism, which was perceived as germinating in vile, crowded slums, and spreading from there to the general body politic.

During this decade there was also a strong move by a number of government bureaucracies, especially transport and planning departments, to “rationalize” or “modernize” land use. Land that was unregularized, with a hodgepodge of uses and activities, was seen as inefficient and, more importantly, expensive for the city to maintain. In 1948 Dr. Leonard Marsh wrote of Strathcona in the report, Rebuilding a Neighborhood, that the area had become “a kind of zoning ganglion of mixed uses, badly in need of rationalization.” In a later report he called the area a “revenue sink . . . its state of deterioration a menace.” Marsh went on to suggest this inefficiency was costly to the city, especially given the neighborhood’s proximity to valuable land in the commercial and business districts.

Indeed, this connection between capital revenue “lost” and a perceived lack of rationalization was made explicit in a number
of government documents. The effort to clear out huge swathes of blighted urban areas in Chinatown and Strathcona was clearly also therefore an effort to increase capital circulation to and through Vancouver’s adjacent central business district. This project also included construction of a massive eight-lane freeway to connect the relatively underdeveloped North Shore with the downtown and the southern part of the city by means of a route through central Chinatown (a plan conceived as early as the 1950s, but not made public until 1967). Thus, the removal of crowded and chaotic residential settlements was conceived of as only part of a much larger project of rationalization that would allow more extensive city development and freer circulation of capital and goods.6

Furthermore, effective bureaucratic control of the heretofore undisciplined and autonomous community spaces of Chinatown would present a picture to the world of a city ready to attract “modern” capital. The workings of modern capitalism, in this conceptualization, could only operate efficiently in a nonlocal, nonparticularist, unfettered, and “rational” manner—in other words, one that precluded the form of capitalism employed by most members of the extended Chinese community. For example, since such capitalist practices were often based on the procurement and maintenance of long-term relationships (generally based on extended family or regional ties) instead of short-term profit-making, they were perceived as “irrational” and premodern, and therefore not appropriate for the entry of a new world city onto the global economic stage.7

The proposed slum clearance project involved the razing of numerous blocks of row homes and the demolition of small commercial areas around the south rim of False Creek, the heart of residential Chinatown. The plan eventually led to the displacement of thousands of residents, who were offered accommodation in high-rise apartment buildings, only one of which was located within walking distance of the traditional community. Phase One of the slum clearance project began in 1960 and was completed in 1963. It involved the displacement of 860 people and the demolition of 30 acres of residential and commercial buildings. Phase Two began in 1961 and involved the demolition of several more blocks of Chinatown and the displacement of more than 2,000 additional people, mostly Chinese (Fig. 4).8

Meanwhile, between 1967 and the late 1970s a new trend appeared in Chinese immigration to the city. Many of the new immigrants were highly educated professionals from Hong Kong who qualified with high points under the new immigration program. In contrast to prior policies, which had encouraged the entry of unskilled rural peasants and then allowed them to sponsor their relatives, the new system favored urban, middle-class applicants with a particular trade or professional skill.9 These new immigrants immediately began to affect the political and spatial dynamics of the Chinese community, intervening in formative ways. One was the successful effort to block the third phase of the Strathcona “renewal” project. Another was the effort to halt construction of the proposed freeway that would have bisected Chinatown.
aided by architects, social workers, and other unpaid professional consultants, and also by the newly arrived, highly educated professionals from Hong Kong. This last group was in a special position since they were able to contest many of the undemocratic operations of the CBA and other institutions from the dual position of being outsiders yet also insiders by virtue of their ethnic Chinese identity.23

Both the freeway and Phase Three of the Strathcona renewal project were halted by the end of 1968 (fig.5). SPOTA successfully lobbied the higher levels of government to block the urban renewal plans, arguing that the Strathcona redevelopment would negatively affect the economic vitality of Chinatown’s commercial core, and thus also tourism in the city (a large money-maker). In one brief, they wrote,

Vancouver City Council and the Vancouver citizens at large have urged that Chinatown be preserved and developed as a business and tourist attraction. These same people must realize that Chinatown cannot continue to exist if there is no residential Chinese community nearby. The present urban renewal scheme for Strathcona is likely to destroy the Chinese residential community and in turn will seriously affect Chinatown as a city asset.”

In 1971, in response to these arguments and to a general change in mood (particularly on the federal level) concerning urban renewal, the province passed zoning bylaws designating the commercial (Pender Street) area of Chinatown, and also the adjacent historic district of Gastown, as heritage areas. In 1974 new zoning regulations created an HA-1 historic district (for Chinatown). This area was considerably larger than the earlier provincial designation and was to be managed by the City of Vancouver. In 1975 a new HA-1A zoning district extended the protected area further from Pender Street to Union Street to the south and Quebec Street to the west, an increase in size of more than 200 percent (fig.6). The intent of the new zoning was “to recognize the area’s unique ethnic quality and to ensure the protection, restoration and maintenance of Chinatown’s historical, architectural, and cultural character.”25 This designation carried such tight restrictions on architectural change that it effectively froze the entire area from further redevelopment. It was a designation, however, that would be challenged within just two decades by Chinatown representatives as being exceedingly detrimental to the continued economic vitality of the community.

FIGURE 5. Map of urban renewal plan for Chinatown and Strathcona. (Drawing by author.)

FIGURE 6. Heritage zoning map. (Courtesy of City of Vancouver, Planning Department.)
Statistics show a shifting pattern of immigration into Canada over the last several decades. Since the 1960s the European predominance (particularly from Britain) has changed to an Asian predominance (primarily from Hong Kong). Furthermore, in the last six years of the immigrant total of approximately 220,000 per year, more than half have arrived from Asia. Immigration from Europe, by contrast, has diminished to less than one-fifth of the total. Of the immigrants from Asia, Hong Kong has been the top source country for the last decade, jumping ahead of India in 1987 and remaining the leader through 1998.44

After Toronto, Vancouver is the second most popular destination for all immigrants, and also the second most popular destination for Hong Kong immigrants. The numbers of people arriving in Vancouver from Hong Kong have increased dramatically since the mid-1980s (through 1997), with the largest group, 15,663, entering in 1994 (fig. 7). However, although Vancouver is second to Toronto in terms of overall number of immigrants from Hong Kong, it leads the nation as the destination for “business class” immigrants. (In the 1990s the average annual rate of business immigrants and their families coming to Vancouver was approximately 12 percent of total Hong Kong-Vancouver immigration.)45

While the earlier “points” system privileged those with education, skills and training, the business category was specifically created to encourage immigration by people with either business experience or capital to invest. It was first implemented in 1978, designed to facilitate the immigration of those who could “make a positive contribution to the country’s economic development by applying their risk capital and know-how to Canadian business ventures which create jobs for Canadians.”46 According to the program, if an investor had a personal net worth of at least $500,000, they could apply within this category. Entrepreneurs would be eligible if they promised to invest at least $250,000 (C$350,000 in British Columbia) into a Canadian business for three years.47

Figures today show that this program has led not only to vast increases in the immigration of wealthy business people and their families to Canada, but also to flows of capital into Vancouver reckoned in the billions of dollars.48 For a number of reasons, including the personal connections between well-known Hong Kong real estate entrepreneurs such as Li Ka-shing and many smaller developers and the stipulations of the business immigration requirements, much of this capital flowed directly into major urban redevelopment projects in the Greater Vancouver area.49

SPATIAL CHANGES IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

In the past decade Vancouver has been spatially and demographically transformed. In addition to five major urban redevelopment projects in the downtown and adjacent waterfront areas, there has also been a huge turnover of housing stock in residential areas, with numerous demolitions of older buildings and their replacement with much larger “monster houses” or luxury condominiums.49 Many of the new immigrants from Hong Kong (and also Taiwan) have bought houses in either the west-side neighborhoods of the city or in nearby suburbs, such as Richmond. For example, census statistics show a major demographic shift in the ethnic profile of Richmond over the past decade. In the late 1980s residents of Chinese descent made up just 7 percent of Richmond; contemporary figures indicate those of Chinese heritage now make up approximately 37 percent of the area’s 129,500 residents.49 However, by virtue of the rapidly rising house prices in west-side areas, as well as in Richmond, only relatively wealthy immigrants, such as those entering through the business immigration category, could afford to move to these neighborhoods.

In response to the rapid dispersal of upper-middle-class and upper-class Chinese immigrants into west-side communities and suburban municipalities, developers quickly sought to attract this new niche market through the construction of so-called “Asian” malls in these areas. Aberdeen Centre at Hazelbridge and Cambie, and Parker Place at Number 3 Road and Cambie, were built in the center of Richmond specifically to attract this new clientele. Both malls contain luxury, Hong Kong-style boutiques, entertainment areas, and dim sum restaurants, with all signs posted primarily in Chinese characters. More recently, two other malls catering to a Chinese and/or Japanese clientele have been built, at President Plaza and Yaohan Centre in central Richmond.49 Following this, other Asian malls have also been built in the suburban municipalities of Surrey, Burnaby and Coquitlam.

The identity and background of those business people responsible for the construction of these projects is important in understanding the workings of this global-local economic phenomenon. For example, Thomas Fung, the developer of the first two malls, is the son of Fung King Hey, who ran the Hong Kong-based firms...
Sun Hung Kai Securities and Sun Hung Kai Bank, among other ventures, until his death in 1985. At the time of his death, the father was among the super-rich strata of Hong Kong, with a personal fortune of at least $300 million and connections to most of the top business echelons in the colony — including the developer Li Ka-Shing. Thomas Fung, through his father's personal contacts, is now networked with many of the key Chinese financial moguls and real estate developers in both Hong Kong and Vancouver.

Another key player, Jack Lee, the developer of President Plaza, grew up in Taiwan and has numerous connections with real estate and food conglomerates there, as well as with local developers. He made the development of President Plaza financially possible by establishing an immigrant investor fund, which could attract Taiwanese immigrants with the prospect of a “legitimate” investment site for the $350,000 required by Canadian government regulations for entry as “entrepreneurs.”

This type of investment syndicate has often allowed business immigrant capital to “join forces with offshore capital,” and so facilitate the financing of urban megaprojects.

Similarly, Kazuo Wada, who was raised in Japan, has retained his Japanese real estate and banking connections in addition to his extensive ties with Vancouver developers such as Lee and Fung. All three of the developers are networked with Hong Kong, Taiwanese and Japanese venture capitalists and real estate developers through personal and collegial ties, and through cultural and ethnic links. Large consortiums of offshore capital, managed and facilitated through local Chinese banking networks such as the Hong Kong Bank of Canada, have provided the primary funding for the development of all four of the Richmond Asian malls, as well as the Asian malls in most of the other municipalities.

By contrast to the massive urban redevelopment occurring throughout Vancouver, as well as in Richmond and in the case of other suburban malls, Chinatown could manage to attract little of this offshore Asian investment. By the 1990s local Chinatown businessmen, represented by the Chinese Merchants Association (CMA), felt one of the primary reasons they were being locked out of these development schemes was a lack of interest in Chinatown because of its HA-1 historical designation. They claimed the area had been “frozen” by this designation — unable to shift alongside the shifting nature of capitalist relations and Vancouver’s new status as global city. It was for this reason, they claimed, that businesses were in trouble and the community was stagnating.

To address some of these concerns, the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee (CHAPC) was called on to advise the Vancouver Planning Department as to the best strategy for Chinatown’s future. The original mission of CHAPC, which was formed in 1976, was to “advise the Director of Planning on matters relating to the HA-1 and HA-1A zones” and to “preserve and protect the heritage and character of the Chinatown Area.” In the 1990s the committee was composed of members from the Chinatown Properties Owners, Chinese Cultural Center, Heritage Vancouver, the Chinese Merchants Association, and a number of other key Chinatown institutions. At that time CHAPC’s opposition to the continuation of the HA-1 designation was made forcefully in a number of letters to City Hall and the planning department which, nevertheless, continued to uphold the zoning designation. Joe Wai, an architect, and a member of CHAPC in the early 1990s, expressed the committee’s views concerning the HA-1 designation in Chinatown succinctly in a letter to City Hall in July 1993.

The issue is not necessarily “the numbers of buildings to be preserved”, but the fundamental view, thus approach, of what is “heritage”? If the view is primarily “architectural character”, then Planning is correct in holding on to their approach and position. However, if “Heritage” is consideration of culture first (and architectural character is A PART of that) then a more holistic view and action are required. It is our contention that “Heritage” particularly for Chinatown goes beyond “Architectural merits” only. [Chinatown is] a place where a continuous way of life has thrived, evolved over 100 years, . . . “Culture” (language, sounds, smells, ways of being . . . etc.) is the essence and the character. . . . The economic clock is ticking louder and louder each passing day, buried in an essentially stifling environment: high taxes/rents; crime, inadequate parking and virtual freeze on redevelopment.

Despite the rhetoric of death and decay, however, at the time this was written Chinatown land had been increasing in value as a result of its proximity to several urban megaprojects built on part of the enormous False Creek land parcel originally purchased from the city by Li Ka-shing in 1988 (figs. 8, 9). Li had quickly subdivided this land and sold a section to his friend, the Hong Kong tycoon Lee Shau Kee, of Henderson Development (Canada) Ltd. Henderson Development planned to build a 300,000-sq.ft. project here, adjacent to Chinatown, called International Village.

Owing to the proximity of this enormous urban redevelopment project (one of several along the north shore of False Creek), as well as a sense of stagnation and missed opportunity among local businessmen, a movement had quickly grown within Chinatown to loosen the heritage designation and “unfreeze” the community. Among other strategies, members of the Chinatown Merchants’ Association (CMA), in cleverly worded messages to planners and journalists, began to depict the heritage designation as a form of racism in reverse. In one newspaper interview a local businessman said, for example: “It seems there is a conspiracy and a discrimination factor aimed towards limiting Chinatown’s growth and potential to what it was supposed to be 100 years ago.”

CMA members further argued that the district’s heritage designation was “reflective of a patronizing and colonial attitude towards the Chinese-Canadian community.” Derrick Cheng, of the CMA, said in an interview: “The buildings and architecture of Chinatown represent colonialism. These are not the buildings that the Chinese want to see — they are a Spanish-Portuguese blend with U.S. architecture lifted from California during the gold rush.” He then compared the heritage zoning designation enforced by City Hall against the wishes of the community, with earlier eras when government dictated Chinatown policy and tried to manipulate the identity of Chinatown and its residents at the same time.
Cheng and others publicly questioned whether the urban “preservation” designation was actually promoting the death of the community; whether, in the overweening effort to protect its physical spaces, it was destroying its economic and cultural spaces. Allan DeGenova, the project coordinator for the CMA at the time, raised a number of similar issues in a lengthy newspaper interview. As did Cheng, he spoke openly and with scorn about the normative assumptions held by the planning department with regard to the traditional nature of Chinatown. The new discourse opened up by Cheng, De Genova, and others reverberated around the question, “What is Chinatown?” Was it a set of perfectly preserved buildings, a tourist area, a heritage site, a development zone, a way of life? According to De Genova, “We want to be able to put up new buildings and still cater to the character of Chinatown. But after all, the flavor of Chinatown isn’t the buildings — it’s the people.”

The discussion about the future of Chinatown’s heritage zoning policy became increasingly heated during the period between 1988 and 1993. Local Chinese merchants and developers (and one prominent architect, Joe Wai) were the primary participants in this discussion, but there appeared to be little dissent from within the community. Most institutions, representing a strong cross-section of the community, backed the sentiment that Chinatown needed to remain economically viable in order to survive. The main disagreement concerning the removal of the heritage designation came from the Vancouver Planning Department, which stalled on implementing any changes for a number of years. After five years of meetings and letters back and forth, however, a new zoning agreement was reached in 1994 that lifted the blanket historic preservation designation, but protected specific buildings and areas within the community.

In the years following the removal of the blanket HA-1 designation, a number of redevelopment projects have begun to take shape throughout the major commercial areas and surrounding residential areas of Chinatown. This redevelopment has included Chinatown Plaza, a seven-story, 1,000-car “parkade” and shopping mall near the corner of Keefer and Columbia financed by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (fig. 10). It has also included a major new building on Main and Keefer financed and built for the Hong Kong Bank of Canada (fig. 11). Other projects have included a new headquarters for SUCCESS and the CBA adjacent to International Village, the extension of the Chinese Cultural Centre, and the construction of new housing (fig. 12).

DISCUSSION

In the development of Vancouver’s Chinatown, two differing intervals of immigration have produced quite different results with regard to the community’s preservation and development. During the first interval, the attempt to “rationalize” the city within a Western, government-dictated context came to be resisted in the 1960s by community members. Although the primary resistance came from within the community as well as from social workers, professors and architects, well-educated recently arrived immigrants from Hong Kong also
played a key role. Civic bureaucrats, eager to push Vancouver onto an international stage, believed a drive toward modernization necessitated the removal of local barriers and particularities in order to allow the free, rational movement of capital through the city. They attempted a piecemeal, phased removal of real difference (in terms of an active Chinese commercial and residential district), and proposed instead the substitution of aesthetic difference in the form of Chinatown as a tourist site (including shops with neon lights and a pagoda gateway). This modernization drive was halted after two early phases of housing and commercial demolition and the resulting displacement of thousands of Chinese homeowners and tenants.

The idea of modernization, however, was received quite differently by Chinatown merchants and residents when it was presented as part of a Chinese-inspired and -financed effort to revitalize a dying community. Once outside a Western, state-directed framework of rational management, the redevelopment of the neighborhood has been viewed much more positively, and it has generally been encouraged by community residents — as well as by more recently arrived Hong Kong immigrant entrepreneurs. In this case, and in contrast to the hard-line stance of the 1960s and early 1970s, development has been seen as necessary for the economic vitality and cultural survival of the neighborhood.

Capitalism is a global process, but one involving specific people and groups of people with specific types of affiliations. This article has posed the question of the impact of “globalizing” forces on the “traditional” spaces of Chinatown. In order to be adequately described, however, globalization must be dissected as a contingent, place-based phenomena. Despite the use of a general rhetoric, such as that concerning a “space of flows,” to describe the shifting contours of place and the loss of the primacy of place in a globalizing world, it is evident here that the way global flows actually flow remains fundamentally related to particular histories and geographies. The manner in which Vancouver’s Chinatown has been both preserved and developed over the past three decades has had as much to do with immigration policy, transnational connections, ethnic ties, state leadership, business networks, and guanxi (personal relationships), as it has had to do with the potential for capital accumulation within a “modern” global economic framework.

Foregrounding the dynamic and ongoing connections between people who migrate back and forth across space, and move between the scales of the local, national and global levels with ease, also enables a rethinking of the vast literature on Chinatowns. Chinatowns as “traditional” towns have often been depicted as fixed, static, cultural spaces that provided a symbolic glimpse into Chinese lives and lifestyles and the everyday practices and cultural artifacts that were brought from China in the late nineteenth century and inscribed in the landscape. The focus on transnational movements and differing immigration periods and types of immigrants, however, has moved understanding of these places away from a static, Orientalizing gaze and toward interpretation based on the dynamism of shifting identities and spaces. It has also supplemented work that has foregrounded the social construction of Chinatown. This latter work, although a vast improvement on the earlier essentializing literatures, has, however, overemphasized the imposition of global and Western-centric definitions of racial Chineseness on the community’s spaces and politics, thus privileging hegemonic structural forces from above to the detriment of a greater understanding of the internal, local-local and community dynamics of Chinatown and their spatial implications. It is revealing in this regard that the idea of race and the racialization process, and its implication in colonial practices, have not merely been imposed from above and outside the community, but have also been dexterously manipulated from within the community — as was indicated in the rhetoric of neocolonialism employed by the Chinatown Merchants’ Association.

The injection of transnational studies into the literature on global capital and global cities has also been a positive development. Cities can no longer be conceptualized as homogenous
entities that either are or are not part of a growing network of so-called “world” cities. They are fragmented and multilayered, and different elements within the urban fabric can become caught up differently in capitalist nets and networks. It is necessary to examine empirically the ways in which specific types of capital articulations and particular communities within such cities become linked into transnational processes in very distinct ways.52

This article has employed a case study of Vancouver’s Chinatown to elucidate both the fluidity of concepts such as heritage and tradition, and also the ways in which these concepts and the struggles over them are imbricated in a fundamentally global political and economic milieu. Heritage, which many architectural historians have attempted to maintain by preserving the buildings and cultural artifacts of a particular ethnic community, can quickly become hollow rhetoric, easily manipulated by all parties, when the actual lived experiences and practices of community members are not included as a primary aspect of its definition. Local state power over the formation of communities such as Chinatown has meant that historically, state definitions of heritage and tradition quickly became the normative discourse. With the newfound economic and cultural power of certain global “ethnic” diasporas, however, what is “traditional” about traditional towns is increasingly open for debate. The ongoing redevelopment of Chinatown in Vancouver thus provides a lens for a particular type of global-local articulation, one that involves not just morphological change, but also a renegotiation of the very terms and definitions of cultural heritage itself.

REFERENCE NOTES

9. The head tax was imposed in 1884 following the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad; it was initially a $10 tax on all Chinese, but was raised to $50 in 1886, and raised again to $750 in 1904. This large sum effectively halted Chinese immigration; nevertheless, it was replaced with an even stricter measure, the Chinese Exclusion Act, in 1923. J. Tan and P. Roy, The Chinese in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1985), pp.7-8.
11. E. Wickberg, From China to Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1982).
12. Census statistics showed a rapid increase in the numbers of the total population claiming “Chinese Single Ethnic Origin” in Vancouver between 1961 and 1991. In 1961 the total population of those of Chinese ethnic origin was approximately 18,000. By 1991 this population had increased to 167,420. This increase was far greater than the general population increase for the metropolitan area as a whole, which rose from 706,165 in 1961 to 1,602,502 in 1991. See the Census of Canada, 1961, Population: Ethnic Groups (1962); Census of Canada 1991, Profile of CMAs and Census Part B (October, 1993).
14. Quoted in Anderson, Vancouver’s Chinatown, p.188.
17. Many early scholars of capitalism, including Karl Marx, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, argued that the context in which modern capitalism developed had to be one of universality and rationality (based on western understandings of these concepts). Personalistic ties and long-term relationships, from this perspective, were features of ‘pre-capitalist’ societies that would inhibit the “true path” of modern capitalist development.


27. Ibid.


36. Dolphin, “Zen and the Art of Mall Raising.”

37. The HA-1A zone was the area added to the original Pender Street designation in 1974. From a Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee pamphlet, December 13, 1994, available in the Chinatown-related files of the City of Vancouver Planning Department.


39. This land, the site of Expo ’86, comprised a full one-sixth of downtown Vancouver at the time. For more information on the development of this land, see Mitchell, “Facing Capital”; and Olds, *Globalization and Urban Change*.


41. Ibid.

42. Ibid


44. A number of community institutions, such as the Chinese Cultural Center, SUCCESS, the Chinese Benevolent Association, and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden Society, supported the efforts to rezone Chinatown and allow more flexibility on the issue of development.

45. The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce is partially owned by Li Ka-shing and facilitates many of the offshore consortiums involving Hong Kong money.


47. Unquestionably the smaller “scale” of the development (rather than the massive freeway development proposed earlier) was also an important factor in the community’s general acceptance of the later redevelopment. With thanks to Kris Olds for pointing this out.

48. Here again, the issue of control is key. While some development was always seen as vital for the community’s survival, development imposed from above and profiting those outside the ethnic community, was strenuously resisted. See Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown*; and Hasson and Ley, *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*.


50. See, for example, D. Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (*Vancouver*: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).

51. E.g., Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown*.


All photos are by the author.