

Chinese Canadians: Enriching the cultural mosaic

by Tina Chui, Kelly Tran and John Flanders



It was gold in the 1800s that lured Chinese immigrants to settle in North America, first in California, then British Columbia. Chinese arrived by the hundreds in 1848 for the gold rush at “Gam Saan”, or Gold Mountain, as they called California. A decade later, when news spread about a Fraser River discovery, groups of Chinese headed north to British Columbia in search of a Canadian *Gam Saan*.

The first Chinese community in Canada was founded in Barkerville, B.C. By 1860, Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia combined had an estimated population of 7,000 Chinese. The first settlers worked the gold fields. But when the gold began to run out, they moved on to other occupations in domestic service and agriculture, and then as railway builders.

Canada’s Chinese community has come a long way since these first settlers struggled for a foothold more than a century ago. According to the 2001 Census, Chinese in Canada now comprise the country’s largest visible

CST What you should know about this study

This analysis uses data mainly from the 2001 Census of Population to examine the language, religion and settlement patterns of Chinese in Canada. Respondents identify themselves as belonging to the Chinese population group by checking a mark-in category on the questionnaire. This type of question, used to identify visible minorities,¹ was first introduced in the 1996 Census.

Prior to 1996, data on visible minorities were derived from responses to the ethnic origin question, in conjunction with other ethno-cultural information, such as language, place of birth and religion. Readers should exercise caution in comparing visible minority data between censuses which used different methods of collecting data.

Data on reasons for coming to Canada were obtained from the first wave of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC). Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) provides landing records of all immigrants coming to Canada since 1980. These records provide information on such characteristics as admission class, country of last permanent residence and place of birth for all immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1980 and 2001.

1. The *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” The visible minority population includes the following groups: Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Japanese and Korean.

minority group, surpassing one million for the first time, following successive waves of immigration. They are a diverse group, reporting a variety of countries of birth, mother tongues, home languages and religious affiliation. But they are linked by a common ethnicity.

Earlier Chinese immigrants came as manual labourers; recent arrivals tend to come with education and human capital, entering Canada either as skilled workers or to join their family. The children of Chinese immigrants comprise a large proportion of the population as well. Today, the Chinese in Canada are better educated, work in a much wider variety of occupations and are a growing source of skilled and highly-skilled workers.

Today's Chinese Canadian communities are vibrant. These communities have strong infrastructure serving members who come to Canada from different parts of the world. They have a strong presence especially in major cities and have played a role in Canada's cultural mosaic. While some historic Chinatowns have been abandoned, new neighbourhoods, such as the Chinese community in Markham, Ontario, or Richmond, British Columbia, have sprouted in major cities across the country.

This article examines the history of the Chinese in Canada, its diverse population and its contribution to the nation's rich multicultural mosaic.

Early Chinese immigration: working on the CPR and enduring discrimination

A major wave of Chinese immigration to Canada occurred when thousands of young Chinese were brought to Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. The hardships that the Chinese work gangs endured in helping to link Canada coast-to-coast are well-documented. Many were killed in dynamite blasting accidents; some were buried alive when tunnels

collapsed, while others drowned in the Fraser River. After Donald A. Smith drove home the last spike of the CPR in November 1885, most Chinese workers were simply let go.¹

For decades following the railway's completion, Chinese immigration was discouraged through restrictive policies, such as the *Chinese Immigration Act*. This act essentially excluded any Chinese person from entering the country and controlled those already in Canada. Some returned to the People's Republic of China, while those who remained worked in industries such as forestry, fishing canneries, sawmills and coal mines. Many moved east in search of other job opportunities. As a result, Chinese communities established themselves across the country.

Although the *Chinese Immigration Act* was repealed in the late 1940s, the number of Chinese immigrants coming to Canada remained relatively small.² In fact, between 1921 and 1960, fewer than 30,000 immigrants of Chinese origin arrived in Canada. Nevertheless, the repeal did allow Chinese residents who were not already Canadian citizens to apply for citizenship.

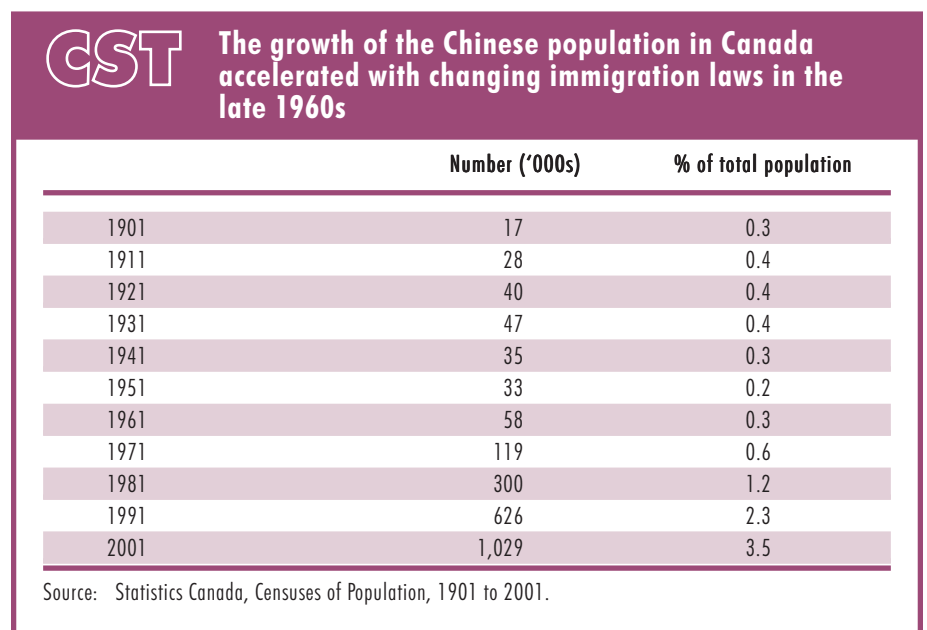
Europe and the United States continued to be the main sources of immigrants to Canada until the 1960s. However, Canada's immigration policy changed significantly in the late 1960s. The universal points system was introduced, and race or national origin was removed as a selection criterion.

With this change, which emphasized skills and educational attainment, many immigrants, Chinese included, arrived with educational and occupational backgrounds that were quite different from those of earlier arrivals.³

Immigration during the past two decades

The level of Chinese immigration to Canada took off during the mid-1980s. Chinese immigrants came mainly from three areas: China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. During the two-decade period from 1981 to 2001, an average of 35,400 immigrants arrived from these three sources each year.

The number of immigrants from Hong Kong increased significantly in the mid-1980s and early 1990s as concerns mounted about the



GST Chinese exclusion and the Head Tax

After completion of the Canada Pacific Railway, the 1885 *Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration* was the first in a series of exclusionary legislation aimed at limiting Chinese immigration to Canada. This act introduced the \$50 "head tax" which was required of any person of Chinese origin who entered Canada, although diplomats, consular representatives and merchants were exempted. This tax was subsequently increased to \$500.¹

The 1923 *Chinese Immigration Act* further prevented Chinese from entering Canada, and placed more restrictions on those already living in the country. Chinese residents were denied the right to vote, obtain citizenship and work in certain occupations.² During the exclusionary period, the population declined from 46,500 in 1931 to 34,600 in 1941.

Exclusionary legislation also delayed the growth of the Chinese second generation and led to a grossly imbalanced sex ratio: in 1911, the census recorded about 28 Chinese

men for every woman. Because it was difficult or impossible to sponsor wives or family members, many of the men already in Canada during this period lived as bachelors. Married life was limited mainly to wealthier Chinese merchants. The situation today is much different – 98% of married immigrants were living with their spouse in 2001.

It was after the repeal of the *Chinese Immigration Act* in 1947 that wives and children of Chinese residents were permitted to enter Canada. Eventually, immigration policies shifted from a focus on origin or ethnicity toward occupations and humanitarian grounds, thus making way for the increased presence of the Chinese in Canada.

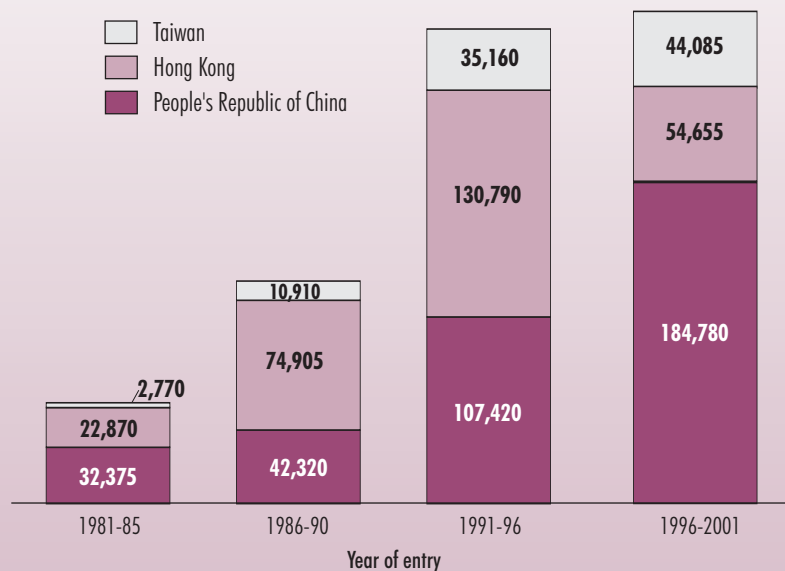
1. Anderson, K.J. 1995. *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. McGill-Queen's University Press. Montréal.
2. Li, P.S. 1998. *Chinese in Canada: 2nd Edition*. Oxford University Press. Toronto.

colony's return to the People's Republic of China. Immigration from Taiwan also increased throughout the 1990s. But between 1991 and 2001, the People's Republic of China was the top source country of newcomers to Canada; nearly 197,400, or 11% of all landed immigrants, were born there.

For some Chinese, immigration to Canada was secondary migration. About 5%, or 35,000, of immigrants who were born in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong had been a permanent resident elsewhere before landing in Canada between 1981 and 2001.⁴ As well, some Chinese from Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos arrived in the early 1980s, as Canada accepted an unprecedented number of refugees who had fled Southeast Asia.

In the early 1980s, just over half of Chinese immigrants were admitted under the "family" class of immigration. But during the 1990s, this proportion declined as the share of "economic" immigrants increased. In

GST Immigrants born in the People's Republic of China now make up almost two-thirds of Chinese immigrants



Source: Statistics Canada, Longitudinal Immigration Database.

the late 1990s, four in 10 immigrants born in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan or Hong Kong arrived in the economic class. A similar share came as their spouses or dependents. Chinese who arrived under the refugee category represent less than 2% of newcomers during the past two decades.

The Chinese population in Canada grew substantially in the last two decades of the 20th century. In 1981, the census enumerated about 300,000 Chinese living in Canada. By 2001, this population had more than tripled to 1,029,400, or 3.5% of Canada's total population. Chinese formed the country's largest visible minority group in 2001.

Across the generations: One-quarter of Chinese in Canada native-born

Although immigration has been the main spur to the growth of the Chinese population in Canada, the Chinese have been settled in Canada for over a century. As a result, they are one of the few visible minority groups with a fairly high proportion of individuals born in Canada.

In 2001, 25% of Chinese in the country were Canadian-born. This was still well below the proportion of 65% among Japanese in Canada and 45% among Blacks, the other two visible minority groups with a long immigration history.

Today's Chinese mainly live in Toronto and Vancouver

The majority of Chinese immigrants settled in the nation's biggest cities. As a result, almost three-quarters of the Chinese population in Canada lived in either Toronto or Vancouver in 2001.

Recent Chinese immigrants found Vancouver especially welcoming. During the 1990s, they helped double the size of the existing community. By 2001, the Chinese community accounted for 17% of Vancouver's total population, compared with 9% a decade earlier.

Recent immigrants also contributed to a 50% increase in the size of Toronto's Chinese community. In 2001, 9% of Toronto's total population was Chinese, up from 6% a decade earlier.

Immigrants offered varied reasons for settling in any given region. However, their chief rationale was that family and friends already lived there, which was reported by more than half of the Chinese newcomers who arrived in 2000/01. About one-quarter who settled in Toronto did so because of job prospects, while in Vancouver, many said the reason was simply the climate.⁵

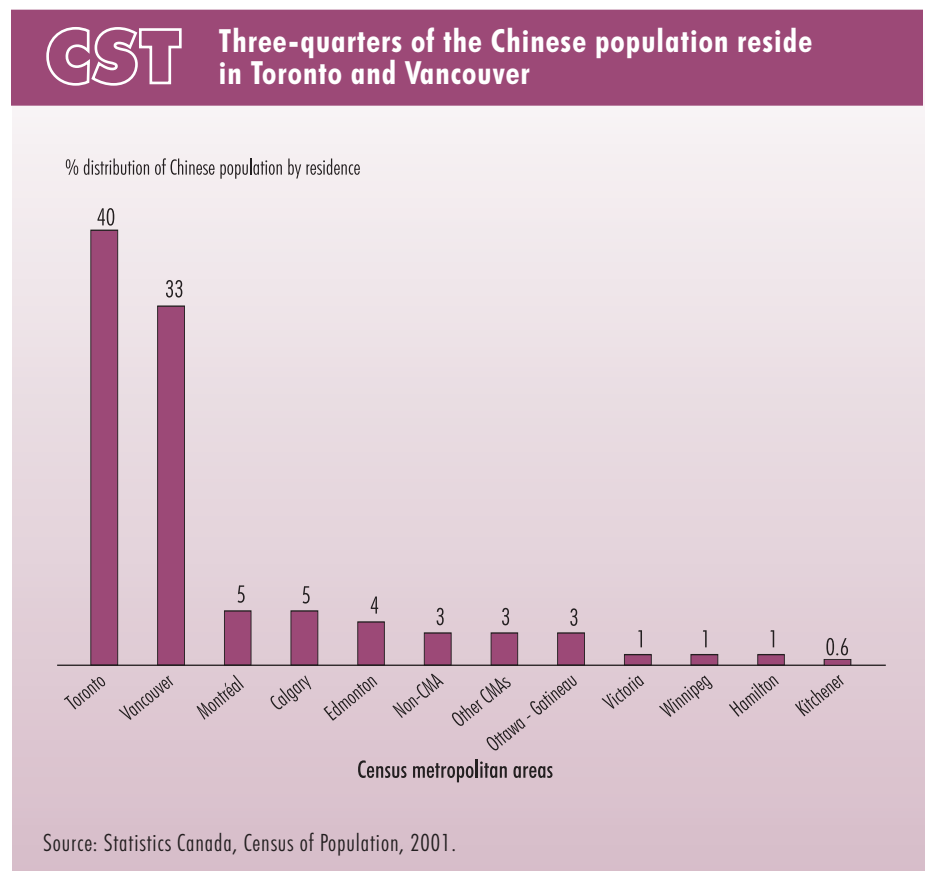
Within the major urban centres, traditional Chinatowns – areas in the city core characterized by Chinese architecture, restaurants, shops and heavy use of Chinese dialects – are now joined by new communities. In Toronto, Chinese communities have spread beyond the traditional Chinatowns into the suburbs. For example,

three in 10 residents of Markham were Chinese in 2001, as were slightly over one in five Richmond Hill residents.

In the Vancouver region, almost four in 10 residents in Richmond were Chinese, the area with the highest Chinese concentration in Canada. Most Chinese residents in Richmond were born in Hong Kong, the majority (65%) having arrived in the 1990s. In the city of Vancouver, 30% of the population was Chinese, as was 26% of the population of Burnaby.

Better educated, more highly skilled

Overall, today's Chinese in Canada are better educated than their predecessors. Nearly one-third (31%) of Chinese, whether they were foreign-born or Canadian-born, had a university education, almost double the rate of 18% among the general population.



The first Chinatown in Canada was in Victoria, British Columbia, where many immigrants from China set up tents and mud huts on Cormorant Street in 1858.¹ In Vancouver, Canton and Shanghai Alleys were bounded by Carrall, Pender and Main streets.² And in the east, the site of Toronto's current city hall once housed the first Chinese laundries and restaurants in the city.³

The development of a Chinatown is argued to be the result of the discrimination and exclusion during the early days of Chinese settlement. Chinatowns in those days were characterized by a population consisting predominantly of men, who worked as laundrymen, domestics or cooks. Chinatowns served as a cultural gathering point, where people with common language or dialect, background and experiences with discrimination and harsh treatment could live and work together.

Over the years, some Chinatowns grew and expanded into different parts of a city, while others became extinct. With the completion of the CPR in the late 1800s and the subsequent restrictive immigration policies, many of the first Chinatowns on Canada's west coast were abandoned.

However, when immigration policies were reversed and Canada began to open its doors to more immigrants, the Chinese population began to increase. As a result, Chinatowns grew to encompass a wide variety of businesses to meet the needs of this population.

Although some urban centres still retain their historic Chinatowns, new commercial areas that cater to ethnic Chinese sprouted all over Canada's major cities, especially Toronto and Vancouver. This was due to the increasing need for Chinese merchandise and services for the growing community.

Today's Chinatowns are a far cry from those that served earlier settlers. Instead, they are places of business or commerce, where traditional Chinese food or goods unique to the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong or Taiwan are sold. As well, many Chinese shopping areas are not located in the traditional downtown cores. The relatively new Chinese retail areas were established to serve the clientele in nearby residential neighbourhoods.

In addition to serving the needs of the Chinese community, Chinatowns retain an exotic appeal that continues to attract non-Chinese and tourists.

1. Lai, D.C. 1988. *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada*. UBC Press. Vancouver.
2. Ng, W.C. 1989. *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power*. UBC Press. Vancouver.
3. Thompson, R.H. 1989. *Toronto's Chinatown: The Changing Social Organization of an Ethnic Community*. AMS Press Inc. New York.

Chinese work in a wide variety of occupations. In 2001, about one-fifth of prime working-age Chinese (aged 25 to 54) were in sales and service occupations, and another fifth in business, finance and administrative occupations.

About 16% were in natural and applied sciences occupations, more than twice the share of 7% for the general population. Another 13% of Chinese were in management occupations, and 11% in occupations in processing, manufacturing and utilities.

Challenges in the labour force

The Chinese see themselves as hard-working, industrious people. They have had an impact on the development of Canada's labour force during the 1990s. A total of 303,800 Chinese aged 15 to 64 came to Canada in the 1990s, representing roughly 22% of the growth in the labour force population during that period.

However, as have many other newcomers, some recent Chinese immigrants experienced difficulties entering the labour market. According to the 2001 Census, prime working-age Chinese who immigrated in the 1990s had an employment rate of

61%, lower than the level of 80% for the total population. Many reasons lie behind the challenges to economic integration, but the recognition of foreign qualifications was reported by many Chinese as a major issue.⁶

The employment situation of Chinese born in Canada was comparable to that of the total population. The employment rate of Canadian-born Chinese men aged 25 to 54, at 86%, was the same as that for all Canadian-born men. Meanwhile, the rate for native-born Chinese-Canadian women, at 83%, was in fact higher than the proportion of 76% for all Canadian-born women.

	Total population	Chinese-Canadian population			Other visible minorities
		Total	Foreign-born	Canadian-born	
Total population ('000)	29,639	1,029	754	252	2,954
			%		
Education, population aged 15 and over					
Less than high school graduation	31	30	31	25	27
High school graduation and/or some postsecondary	25	24	22	29	26
Trades certificate or diploma	11	4	4	4	8
College certificate or diploma	15	11	11	11	13
University certificate diploma or degree	18	31	32	31	26
Experienced labour force, population aged 15 and over¹					
Paid workers	88	87	86	94	91
Self-employed	12	13	14	6	9
Labour force activity, population aged 25 to 54					
Employment rate	80	71	70	84	74
Unemployment rate	6	7	7	5	9
Occupation, population aged 25 to 54					
Management	12	13	13	14	9
Business, finance and administration	19	20	20	26	18
Natural and applied sciences and related	7	16	15	16	8
Health	6	5	4	9	7
Social science, education, government service and religion	9	6	5	9	6
Art, culture, recreation and sport	3	2	2	4	2
Sales and service	19	20	21	14	22
Trades, transport and equipment operators and related	15	6	7	5	12
Primary industry	3	1	1	1	1
Processing, manufacturing and utilities	7	11	12	2	14

Note: Excludes non-permanent residents.

1. Experienced labour force comprises workers, employed or unemployed, who worked for pay or in self-employment since January 1, 2000.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

Language: Cantonese the main dialect

Chinese characters are generally used as the written language among members in the community. However, Chinese people speak different dialects, depending on the region from which they originated.

Taken together, the Chinese dialects represent the third most common mother tongue reported in the 2001 Census, after English and French. About 3% of the population,

or 872,400 people, reported a Chinese language as their mother tongue, that is, the language (or one of the languages) that they learned as a child and still understand.

More than 320,000 people reported that their mother tongue was Cantonese. Of these Cantonese speakers, 44% were born in Hong Kong and another 27% in the People's Republic of China. However, 18%, or more than 60,000, were Canadian-born.

The second most common Chinese dialect language was Mandarin, the mother tongue of more than 103,200 people. Fully 85% of these individuals were born in the People's Republic of China or Taiwan, while an additional 7% were born in Canada and 2% in Malaysia. Almost, three-quarters (74%) arrived in Canada in the 1990s.

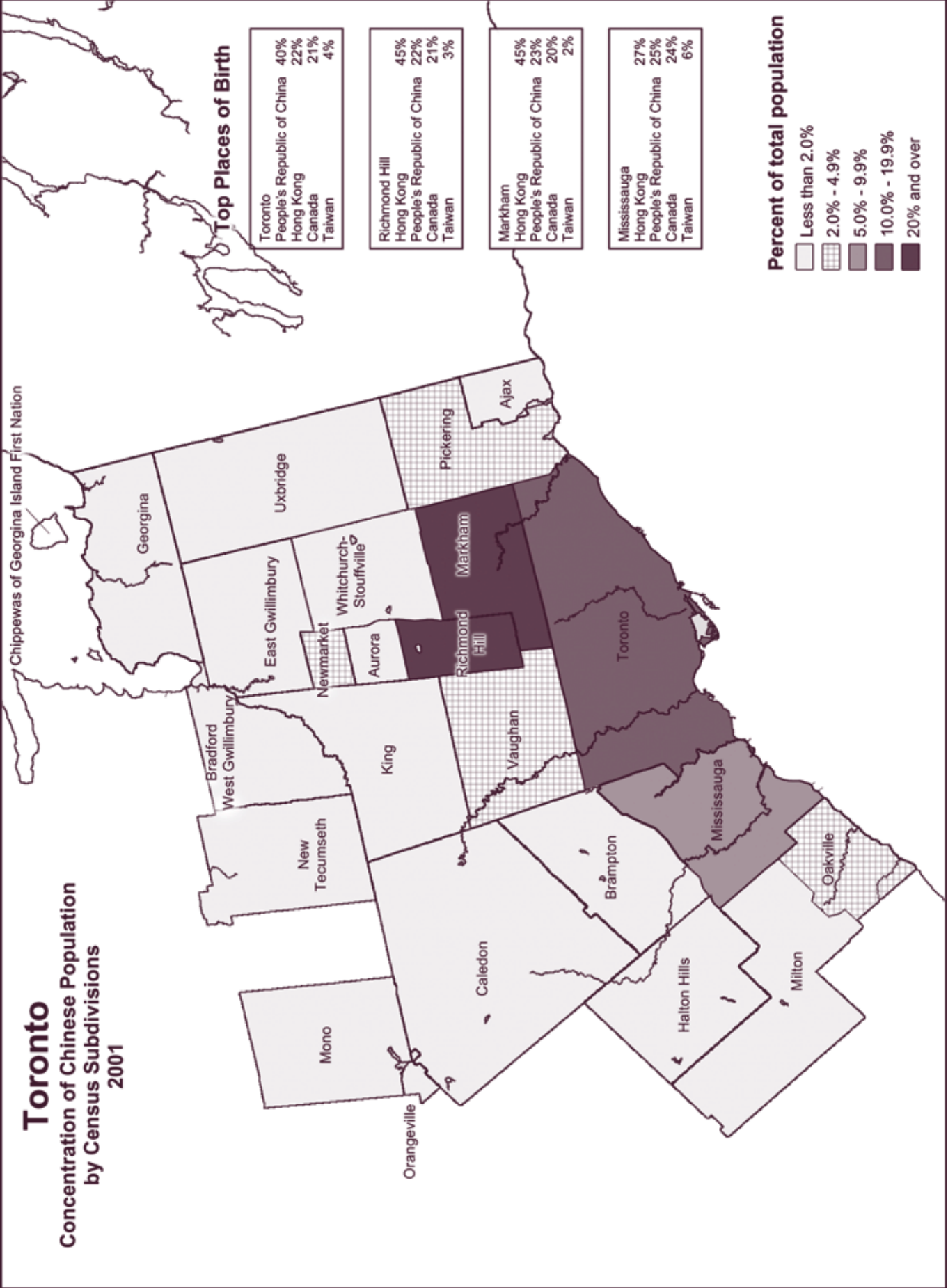
However, only about 790,500 people reported speaking a Chinese language at home on a regular basis,

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Toronto

Concentration of Chinese Population by Census Subdivisions 2001

Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation



Vancouver

Concentration of Chinese Population by Census Subdivisions 2001

Top Places of Birth

Richmond	38%
Hong Kong	26%
People's Republic of China	16%
Canada	13%
Taiwan	

Vancouver	37%
People's Republic of China	24%
Canada	22%
Hong Kong	8%
Taiwan	

Burnaby	29%
People's Republic of China	23%
Hong Kong	21%
Canada	17%
Taiwan	

Greater Vancouver RDA	57%
People's Republic of China	12%
Canada	12%
Taiwan	11%
Hong Kong	

Coquitlam	31%
Hong Kong	20%
People's Republic of China	19%
Canada	17%
Taiwan	

Percent of total population



81,900 fewer than those who reported having a Chinese mother tongue. This suggests some language loss has occurred, mainly among the Canadian-born who learned Chinese as a child, but who may not speak it regularly or do not use it as their main language at home.

Although language retention is an important component of cultural diversity, knowledge of an official language is of particular importance for social and economic integration, especially for immigrants. In 2001, 85% of Chinese reported that they had conversational knowledge of at least one official language. About 15% reported they could speak neither English nor French.

Not surprisingly, half of those who could not speak an official language were immigrants who came to Canada in the 1990s, while more than one-fifth (22%) had come earlier in the 1980s. These immigrants were more likely to be in the older age groups. In contrast, the vast majority (89%) of prime working-age Chinese immigrants reported knowledge of at least one official language.

Most reported no religious affiliation

In general, six in 10 Chinese reported no religious affiliation in 2001, compared with only 16% of the total population. Religious affiliation varied with the region from which immigrants originated. Of those who were born in the People's Republic of China, 71% reported no religious affiliation, as did 58% of those born in Hong Kong and 48% of those in Taiwan.

Members of the Chinese community who did hold religious beliefs tended to report Buddhism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as their religious affiliation. About one-third of Taiwanese immigrants indicated they were Buddhist, whereas one-third of immigrants born

in Hong Kong reported they were Roman Catholic, Protestant or members of some other Christian denomination.

Chinese families have strong presence

Although the majority of earlier Chinese immigrants came to Canada and lived here while their families remained in China, today's Chinese families have a strong presence. In 2001, some 93% of Chinese resided in a family household, compared with 87% of the general population.

Almost half (46%) of the Chinese were a spouse in a census family, compared with one-fourth of the total population.⁷ And nearly 38% of Chinese were children in a family, as opposed to one-third (33%) in the general population.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes respect for the elderly and the taking care of aging parents as a family responsibility. It is not uncommon for Chinese households to consist of several generations living together under one roof.

Among the Chinese who were aged 65 or older, 16% were non-census family members living with relatives. This proportion was four times higher than among the same age group in the general population. Indeed, only one in 10 senior Chinese Canadians lived alone, compared with almost three in 10 non-Chinese seniors.

Summary

The Chinese population has undergone a tremendous transformation in Canada since the first settlers arrived here 150 years ago: from a group that numbered barely 17,000 in 1901 to the largest visible minority group at about one million in 2001. The Chinese community, comprising immigrants and the Canadian-born, is a key player in Canada's multicultural mosaic. Today's Chinese Canadians have a

vastly different socio-economic profile than their predecessors. Many brought a range of skills and experience from their countries of origin. Although, in general, recent arrivals faced challenges in economic integration, Chinese who were born in this country have made significant headway.

A history that began with hard work, commitment and perseverance continues, as each Chinese Canadian searches for his or her own *Gam Saan* in the 21st century.



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1. Lee, W.M. 1984. *Portraits of a Challenge: An Illustrated History of the Chinese Canadians*. Council of Chinese Canadians in Ontario. Toronto.
2. Immigrants arriving shortly after the Second World War were mainly "displaced persons" from European countries such as the Netherlands, Poland and Hungary.
3. Li, P.S. 1988. *Chinese in Canada: 2nd Edition*. Oxford University Press. Toronto.
4. Based on administrative records of immigrants born in Hong Kong, Taiwan or People's Republic of China who reported a different country of last permanent residence.
5. Data on reasons for settlement choice were collected by the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada for those who landed in Canada between October 2000 and September 2001.
6. Chui, T, K. Tran and J.L. MacDonald, "Landing a job: the role of foreign qualifications". Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Population Society, June 2-5, 2004.
7. A census family consists of either married or common-law couples living with or without children, and lone-parent families.