

# Vancouver's Chinatown Night Market: Gentrification and the Perception of Chinatown as a Form of Revitalization

*The Chinatown Night Market is held in Vancouver's downtown historic Chinatown. Iconic elements of Taiwan and Hong Kong, night markets have a specific sensorial design created by tightly packed crowds, loud music, Chinese dim sum, and vendors selling pop culture goods. The Chinatown Night Market represents an urban landscape shaped by both the expansion of capital markets in devalued inner urban areas and the emerging consumption preferences of the new middle class. In the case of the former, culture is produced to raise real-estate values. In the case of the latter, urban developers and city managers are engaged in promoting and producing consumptionscapes that cater for the live-work-play philosophies of baby boom professionals and the creative class. Since its inception, the Chinatown market has served as a safe night-time gathering place for the area's Chinese community, while catering for tourists, and attracting suburban families and local residents. Increasingly, it provides seasonal ambiance for the leading edge of gentrification in the inner city. Drawing on interviews with consumers, vendors, city officials, and market administrators, as well as participant observation in the markets, this paper connects the concept of inclusivity and the current cultural conceptualization of consumption space to the future and fate of Vancouver's Chinatown. The Chinatown Night Market is produced for consumption to serve revitalization goals. Ultimately, a sense of long-term inclusivity is overlooked in the hopes of future economic success.*

Night markets have gone mainstream in North America, popping up in downtowns, in suburbs, in parking lots, alleys, and campus student union buildings. Iconic elements of Taiwan and Hong Kong, night markets have a specific sensorial design created by tightly packed crowds, loud music, Chinese dim sum, and vendors selling pop culture goods. Vendors assemble, hawking everything from snack foods, to Hello Kitty backpacks, to pirated DVDs, and fake Chanel handbags. Besides their function as sites of popular consumption, scholars note their transformative nature, a process by which ordinary streets by day morph into zones of 'red hot sociability' by night (Chau, 2008; Hou, 2010; Yu, 2004).

Although night markets a relatively new phenomenon in North America, they have already entered into planner's toolkits because of their ability to transform the temporal uses of certain spaces. In the last 5 years, local governments and entrepreneurs in North American cities have seized the night market form in order to revitalize downtown spaces and to capitalize on ethnic consumer preferences. Pittsburgh's 'Project Pop Up: Night Market', for example, is part of City's Downtown Partnership core revitalization programme (Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, 2012). In suburban Los Angeles, the '626 Night Market' caters for a diasporic nostalgia for Asian culture. The digits '626' refer to the area code of the San Gabriel Valley, an area of suburban Chinese settlement described by Wei Li's (1998; 2009) *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America*. In New York City, a night market feasibility study is currently underway (Chiu, 2012). In Canada, night markets have

been termed ‘Canada’s exciting new import’, represented as a positive corollary of immigration and cultural diversity (Li, 2011). Toronto and Vancouver now each have three night markets, in both the downtown cores and in the suburbs.

The Chinatown Night Market in Vancouver prides itself as the first such space in North America. It began in 1996 in downtown historic Chinatown. A seasonal event, it runs from May to September, on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings. It started as an event targeting new waves of immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan who arrived in Metro Vancouver in the 1980s and 1990s. Since its inception, it has served as a safe night-time gathering place for the area’s Chinese community, while catering to tourists, and attracting suburban families and local residents. Increasingly, it provides a picturesque seasonal backdrop for the leading edge of gentrification as new businesses in the area capitalize on its kitsch cacophony – a convivial lure designed to attract young Vancouverites seeking out new hip urban scenes.

This paper considers the role of the Chinatown Night Market in supporting inclusive public life, through an ethnography including thirty-six interviews with consumers and vendors, and ten in-depth key informant interviews (with market administrators, city officials, and community associations) and hours of participation observation in the market over the course of two years. Connecting the concept of marketplace inclusivity to the current cultural conceptualization of consumption space, this analysis considers the future and fate of Chinatown. The experiences of consumers, vendors, and city planners with the marketplace illustrate shifts in the strategic production of culture in the service of Chinatown’s trajectory of revitalization. Ultimately, a sense of long-term inclusivity is overlooked in the hopes of future economic success.

### **Gentrification, the Marketplace, and Consumption of Cultural Difference**

Contemporary scholarship has evolved to acknowledge the complementarities of both cultural and economic explanations of gentrification (Davidson and Lees, 2010; Hackworth and Rekers, 2005; Lees, 2004; Zukin, 1982). The Chinatown Night Market represents an urban landscape shaped by both the expansion of capital markets in devalued inner urban areas and the emerging consumption preferences of the new middle class (Caulfield, 1994; Ley, 1996; Hamnett, 1991; 2000. In the case of the former, culture is ‘strategically produced’ to raise real-estate values (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, p. 215). In the case of the latter, urban developers and city managers are engaged in promoting and producing *consumptionscapes* that cater for the live-work-play philosophies of baby boom professionals and the ‘creative class’ (Florida, 2005; Lees, 2004; Quastel *et al.*, 2012).

Marketplaces are consumptionscapes par excellence. Tunbridge’s (2001) typology of marketplaces distinguishes markets by their degree of association with revitalization and the remaking of the central city. The festival marketplace schemes of the late 1970s (such as the redevelopment of Boston’s Quincy Market into Faneuil Hall) were attempts to lure the middle class back to the inner city via a ‘nostalgic theme park of urban heritage values of public space, marketplace, a festival and waterfront; privatized, sanitized, and security enforced’ (Tunbridge, 2001, p. 357). Open-air marketplaces allow for ‘alfresco eating’ (Valentine 1998, p. 201), playing into ‘self-indulgent consumers’ and the ‘illicit pleasures of mobility’ (Zukin, 1991, p. 235). According to Zukin (2008, p. 736), markets invite the ‘consumption of a special kind of authenticity’ such that, ‘in the process of developing alternative consumption practices, they contribute to changes that make spaces more desirable’.

Marketplaces are now firmly entrenched as tools of ‘best practice’ for North American cities. As the *Atlantic Cities* magazine recently noted, markets have become the proverbial ‘number 1 seeds’ of the ‘sidewalk ballet’ paradigm of urban design, along with food trucks, pop-up parks, pedestrian streets, repurposed malls, and adventure playgrounds (Grabar, 2013). Diversity promotion and immigrant integration have emerged as part of the rationale for marketplace development. City governments see lively international marketplaces as targeting immigrant integration, neighbourhood revitalization, and city branding in one fell swoop (Olsson, 2007; Miner, 2013). The cultural displays of ethnic neighbourhoods, from Little Italy to Chinatown, provide the perfect complement to the ‘buzz of the nearby city Central Business District’ (Collins and Friesen, 2011; Hackworth and Rekers, 2005; Rath, 2007; Pang and Rath, 2007; Shaw, 2007, p. 55; Yeoh, 2005).

Like other consumptionscapes, marketplaces have also been characterized by their emphasis on social mixing on the one hand, and the ‘exclusion of threatening social elements’ on the other (Clough and Vanderbeck, 2006; Tunbridge, 2001, p. 357; Flusty, 2001). Marketplace regeneration projects often lead to the exclusion of populations who may have relied previously on the space for access to cheap goods or a source of employment (Bromley and Mackie, 2009; Dines, 2007; Shaw *et al.*, 2004). Recently, Walby and Lippert (2012) emphasize the strategies of dispersion imposed on Ottawa’s homeless in order to cultivate a downtown public marketplace that prioritizes consumption. Like other urban development projects that pay lip service to social mixing, the marketplace is often accompanied by the displacement of the poor, and diminishing ‘levels of social mix, ethnic diversity, and immigrant concentration’ (Lees *et al.*, 2007, p. 293; Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Walks and Maaranen, 2008; Hannigan, 2010).

At the same time, other scholars note the social and economic inclusivity of marketplaces in immigrant receiving countries, where new immigrants have reinvigorated markets from Atlanta, Georgia (Olsson, 2007) to Otaru, New Zealand (De Bruin and Dupuis, 2000), to Carpentras, France (De la Pradelle, 1995). Such markets provide gathering and networking sites and places to buy and sell products from the home country. Marketplaces support the maintenance of cultural practices, and serve as spaces of information sharing, as well as nostalgia for ‘home’ (Nock, 2009, p. 315). Others note that markets also provide safety nets for precariously positioned groups (Stoller, 2002; L’Hote and Gasta, 2007) or in economically deprived neighbourhoods (Watson, 2009), by providing sources of supplemental income (Nock, 2009), or acting as a bridge between the formal and informal economies (De Bruin and Dupuis, 2000). On a broader level, it has also been suggested that markets serve as sites of ‘everyday sociality’ (Watson, 2009, pp. 1579–1581; Watson and Studdert, 2006), where people of diverse backgrounds meet on ‘common ground’ (Furnivall, 1939, p. 449), and become accustomed to sharing spaces of diversity.

Aside from a focus on the socio-cultural and economic roles of marketplaces, scholarly work also highlights a diversity of market design forms, such as open-air markets, swap meets, farmers’ markets, and street markets. Night markets, however, represent an altogether different form. Most closely associated with the post-World War II landscapes of Taiwan and Hong Kong, they add additional layers of complexity because of their temporal specificity (Yu, 2004) and their connotations of ‘red hot sociability’ (Chau, 2008). Yu (2004, p. 137) highlights that, as early as the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE, China), people sought social interaction with others after dinner in outdoor public marketplaces. This differed from the general Western wariness of the night, as well as more private and ‘individualistic’ notions of

leisure. In post-World War II Taiwan, evening markets were associated with migrant workers who flocked to Taipei to work in manufacturing (Chang and Hsia, 2011).

Night markets can also be described as a 'sensorially rich social space' (Chau, 2008, p. 489) created through the densely packed stalls, the hawking of food, shouting, bright lights, steam from cooking, and loud music. A number of scholars define night markets using the Taiwanese term *renao*, which translates as 'hot and noisy' (Yu, 2004; Warden and Chen, 2008, p. 217). As Warden and Chen (2008, p. 218) explain:

food acts as social glue that connects family and friends. Waiting in line, putting up with very crowded spaces, and enduring basic facilities... Queuing is a chance to socialize. Loud voices, blaring peddlers, and distorted music are invitations to join in and talk, yell, communicate... People are the key component of *renao*... Participating in the crowd is relationship – building behavior even though the specifics of the situation may be physically uncomfortable.

As much as a night market's success depends on consumption, social warmth and compactness of the crowd are also pivotal features not be overlooked.

Finally, because of the Chinatown Night Market's location in Chinatown, and its 'Chinese' theming more broadly, my analysis also invites a consideration of scholarship on Chinatown as a *consumptionscape*. Anderson's (1987; 1991) seminal analysis of Vancouver's Chinatown argued that it held a separate meaning for white society that was far removed from these internal dynamics. It was, as she noted, a 'social construction with a cultural history and a traditional of imagery and institutional practice' (1987, p. 581). As white Canadian attitudes towards the Chinese changed, so too did the material space of Chinatown. First a 'vice town', throughout the twentieth century, Chinatown was romantically re-imagined as a 'little Orient' and finally, as a 'civic asset' (Anderson, 1991, p. 177). Anderson's work was extensively critiqued for ignoring the agency of the Chinese by focusing strictly on white Canada's interpretation of Chinatown, as well as reinforcing the racial categories of Chinese and European (see Ng, 1999; Lee, 2007). While subsequent scholarly approaches to Chinatown continued to emphasize the Orientalist gaze, they have also been careful to highlight the agency and multiplicity of internal voices (Klein and Zitcer, 2012; Martin, 2004; Parker, 2000; Santos and Yan, 2008; Santos *et al.*, 2008; Yeoh and Kong, 1994). These analyses focus on the ways in which individuals assert agency despite the constraints of white hegemony/Orientalism, rather than considering the ways in which the latter structures themselves are shifting. This fixed notion of structure is just as problematic as the omission of agency because it also reinforces the very representation of Chinatown – as fixed, cliché, Other – that they seek to challenge. In my analysis, I offer a more nuanced interpretation that considers shifting meanings of Chinatown that allow it to be more than 'historically fixed or homogeneous' (Katz *et al.*, 2010, p. 529).

It is clear that the marketplace does not always foster positive exchange beyond the economic. Marketplaces, whose ethnic cache is played up to attract consumers, are not likely to be inclusive spaces, or sites for the working out of social difference. The Chinatown Night Market has the potential to breathe new life into harmful Orientalist representation of Chinatown and Chinese space and to encourage white consumption of the 'Other'. However, it also introduces new specificities of temporality and sociability into our understanding of marketplaces and their inclusive possibilities.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this project involved an ethnography of the Chinatown Night Market during the 2010 and 2011 market seasons. Ethnography is a methodology focused on understanding the situatedness of social behaviour and lends itself well to analyses of the everyday interactions of people and culture. Although there are many forms and approaches to ethnography, fundamentally it involves observing and writing about people, capturing what they ‘say they do and why, and what they are seen to do and say to others about this’ (Cloke *et al.*, 2004, p. 169). I undertook intensive participant observation of the focal points of the Chinatown Night Market during the 2010 and 2011 seasons. These areas include the entrances, the stage and entertainment area, the main vendor corridor, and the tables and stools on the sidewalks behind the vendors’ booths that function as informal seating areas. In 2011, with the assistance of a Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking interpreter, I also conducted forty-six semi-structured interviews with vendors (fourteen in total), consumers (twenty-two in total), and key-informants (ten in total). In addition, I conducted a general survey of media coverage of the night market in *The Vancouver Sun* between 1 January 1996 and 31 August 2012. These articles were imported using QDA Miner and content analysis was performed using Wordstat, a content analysis software tool.

### **The Story of the Chinatown Night Market**

The Chinatown Night Market materializes in a matter of minutes. Before 6 o’clock, Keefer Street appears to be an ordinary street in Chinatown. At 6 o’clock exactly, the street is closed to traffic. Tents are brought out and assembled in seconds. Pylons at each end close the street to cars, and set the market boundaries. Several private security guards patrol the perimeter (see figures 1 and 2). When they are not fielding questions from market-goers, they also enforce rules on the market’s clientele. Not everyone is welcome. As one of the security guards explained frankly, his job is simply ‘to keep out the homeless drug addicts and answer questions’.

#### Figures 1 and 2

Booth rental fees range from \$2,300 to \$3,450 for a four-month season, although shorter-term rental contracts are often available due to decreased demand. The crowd of approximately 1,000 per night consists of several main groups: tourists going through a checklist of free things to do and see in Vancouver; residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods of Gastown, Strathcona, and Chinatown; suburban families, and young hipsters. A significant contingent of elderly Chinese residents comes for the entertainment at the main stage, conducted almost entirely in Mandarin.

The Chinatown Night Market was a project dreamed up in 1996 by the area’s merchants to ‘put Chinatown [back] on the map’ of the lower mainland (Vancouver Chinatown Merchant Association director, Charles Lee, cited by Chow, 1997). Chinatown had always been historically central to Vancouver’s nightlife and night-time economy and it prospered through the 1970s. But, beginning in the 1980s, a series of factors precipitated its decline. The neighbouring Hastings Street retail landscape collapsed in the face of new suburban mall development, while other areas of the downtown experienced an ‘investment boom’ (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2001, p. 9). Low-income residents of the nearby Downtown Eastside (DTES) lost access to long-term, affordable housing, ‘expelled’ to make way for new developments leading up to and following Vancouver’s 1986 World Expo

(Haggerty *et al.*, 2008). As Hastings declined, the drug scene exploded, alongside deepening poverty, addiction, and mental illness. Of further detriment, were the City's efforts to 'centralize' nightlife in the Granville Entertainment District by increasing the number of liquor licenses and extending bar hours on the Granville strip alone (Woolford, 2001).

At the same time, Chinatown was also quickly losing its place as the centre for the City's Chinese community. The end of Canada's white immigration policy in the 1960s precipitated a tripling of Vancouver's Chinese population between 1971 and 1986. This increase coincided with spatial dispersion: by 1986, 30 per cent of Metro Vancouver's Chinese population lived in the suburbs. This shift was catalyzed by the Canadian government's 1986 creation of a new immigrant investor class to encourage the migration of wealthy business owners and entrepreneurs from Hong Kong following the Sino-British Declaration of 1984. Between 1986 and 2000, immigrants from Hong Kong comprised one-fifth of the total number of incoming immigrants in British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> They were attracted to the suburb of Richmond, in particular, because of its lower property values compared to rising prices in the central business district, as well as its spaciousness, physical beauty, and amenities (Burnley and Hiebert, 2001; Ley *et al.*, 2002, p. 711).

The Vancouver Chinatown Merchants Association (hereafter, VCMA) saw the Chinatown Night Market as a way to attract these new wealthy, hyper-mobile and hyper-transnational immigrants back to Chinatown, and away from the suburbs. The knick-knack stores that catered for tourists, the hair salons, or the images of horses and buggies would not attract these new waves of immigrants from Hong Kong who wanted banks with opening hours geared towards trans-Pacific transactions and other features of modern Asia (Ley, cited in Bertrand, 2008, p. 45; Lui, cited in Chow, 1996). The VCMA hatched a plan to recreate a temporal and cultural form of a modern Asian cityscape. The hope was that people would come back to Chinatown in search of a public culture of pedestrian streets and bustling markets. 'There's no substitution for authenticity, and that's Chinatown', then VCMA director, Charles Lee told *The Vancouver Sun* (Chow, 1997). This social authenticity was seen as something the suburbs could not replicate.

The Chinatown Night Market reclaimed a section of Chinatown and was initially seen as evidence of positive change in Chinatown. It was hoped that the event would attract \$11 million to Chinatown and the surrounding area (Chow, 1997). In the market's first few seasons, the VCMA expanded the event from one city-block to three, hosting over 200-tented vendors' booths, which flanked both sides of Keefer Street. A stage with a small seating area was located at the west end of the market. In 1998 its organizers estimated attendance of 20,000 customers per night, most of whom were Chinese-Canadian (Stainsby, 1998).

The enthusiasm for the Chinatown Night Market was short lived. Chinatown's longstanding association with danger, fear, and crime resurfaced in the late 1990s. It again came to be portrayed, by the media, as a neighbourhood 'run down and ravaged by crime' (Mickleburgh, 1999). There were reports of bodybags carried out of restaurants and drug overdoses in public washrooms. The cruise ships warned people to stay away (*Ibid.*). At the same time, the market also faced competition from the Richmond Night Market, which launched in the summer of 1999 to cater for the growing suburban Chinese population. The Chinatown Night Market was reduced to one city-block and roughly 100 booths (vendor, personal communication, 2011). Chinatown merchants began hiring their own neighbourhood security patrol.

## **A Song for Vancouver**

Kei Lee was born in Guangzhou, the People's Republic of China, in 1972 and immigrated to Canada in 2005. She lives in Chinatown and has attended the Chinatown Night Market almost every weekend since 2006.<sup>2</sup> She often brings her friends, all of whom have all immigrated to Canada from Mainland China in the last decade. The night market reminds her of West Lake night market in her home province, although, as she laments, 'that market is much bigger, and there, the markets are open until midnight and four seasons, not only in summer time'. She has tried all the food on offer over the years and sometimes shops for clothing. But mostly she comes just for something to do. 'If the market were not open, we would have nowhere to go', she says.

When I interview Kei Lee, she is sitting in the stage seating area during an intermission of the Chinatown Happy Singer's Group performance. Their motto, 'We sing to make people happy', is displayed prominently in the background. The MC returns to the stage, addressing the audience in Mandarin. A middle-aged man gets up on stage and announces in English, 'I am going to sing a song I wrote for Vancouver. I hope you enjoy' before beginning to sing in Mandarin in a style reminiscent of Frank Sinatra. Mechanical toys, the shouts of food vendors, the sizzle of grilled meats, and the buzz of adjacent outdoor patio lounges compete for monopoly of this soundscape (see figure 3).

### Figure 3

Besides Kei Lee and her friend, most of the audience is older, and some are quite elderly. Off to one side of the stage, an elderly Chinese man with a walker mouths the words to every song. Since the market's opening in 1996, the event has become a safe space for the neighbourhood's aging Chinese population. In the three surrounding Census Tracts, 22.9 per cent of the population is over 65 (compared to 13 per cent of the population of Metro Vancouver). Age also intersects starkly with socioeconomic status in Chinatown, where 49.1 per cent of households are low-income (Census, 2006; Li and Li, 2011). On any given night at the market, a group of seniors occupies the entire seating area in front of the stage. Men play mahjong at long tables at the northwest corner of the market while their wives watch the entertainment, most of which is conducted in Mandarin, but sometimes in Cantonese.

At the eastern end of the market, a completely different scene plays out. A group of young white women in their mid-twenties walk through the vendors' row, enjoying the social atmosphere created by the smell of frying food, steam, and the crowds of people. The street is lined with vendors on both sides, who occupy tables set up underneath red-tented booths selling cheap, mostly overstock clothing imported from Asia, toys, cheap jade jewellery, and underwear. Food vendors sell recognizable North American Chinese food: bubble tea and Chow Mein noodles. Some of the stranger merchandise includes knives with Nazi insignia or T-shirts emblazoned with LED lights. When the women reach the end of the vendor's row, they stop abruptly at the stage. They look at each other and laugh. One says: 'let's go', and they continue past. A security guard walks up and down Keefer, conversing with various customers, giving directions to the washrooms and the nearest ATM. He asks a white homeless man to leave after he is spotted asking for change. He nods to a Chinese man at least in his eighties who peeks into the garbage can and retrieves an empty pop bottle, adding it to the collection he is carrying.

Despite night-time Chinatown's negative reputation, the market has remained a popular stop for tour buses, advertised on the cruise ships that dock in Gastown, and in the lobby of

the nearby youth hostel. *Frommer's* guide for Vancouver for example, describes the market as 'great fun' 'whether you're hoping to sample steamed dumplings, pick up a tin of oolong tea, or just poke around a fascinating scene ... styled after Asian marketplaces where shopping is personal and haggling is the name of the game'. According to *Lonely Planet*, which describes the market as a 'colourful downtown bazaar', the event is 'like a walk-through buffet of noodles, fish balls, and bubble tea'. These endorsements are, of course, accompanied by warnings that the market is adjacent to a 'skid-row area troubled by alcoholism and drug use ... [and that] there's a good chance you'll cross paths with a down-and-outer here and there' (Frommers, 2012).

Consequently, significant numbers of tourists come through the market each summer. They are generally highly visible because of their backpacks and maps of Vancouver. Talia, for example, a woman in her forties, was travelling with her mother. They live in Israel where Talia teaches Qigong therapy. She came to Chinatown to buy Chinese medicine and costumes that are not available in Israel. They heard about the night market while on a guided daytime tour of Chinatown. Similarly, Andy and Beth, an older couple visiting from Scotland, read about the night market in a guidebook and were persuaded to visit because of the description: 'Just the fact that it was something a little bit different. It [*Frommer's*] described it quite exotically ... the hustle and the bustle and all the food. Because Vancouver is a multicultural city, I thought it would be quite nice to see this side of it'.

The Chinatown Night Market has also become a convenient seasonal food court for residents of nearby Strathcona; Alicia, for example, a 19-year old, second-generation Chinese student, goes to the market with her parents or her boyfriend for 'snacks' at weekends. They always run into people they know because, according to Alicia, 'everyone comes down [to the market] before dinner or after dinner'. Other non-Chinese Chinatown market-goers see themselves principally as consumers. A recurring theme of the interviews, however, was the high degree of familiarity of consumers with the food offered in the market, which includes Sichuan noodles, chow mein, bubble tea, Hong Kong style waffles, grilled meats, and deep-fried octopus balls. This consumptionscape was hardly seen as exotic. Rather, most participants considered the offerings 'highly familiar' or even mundane. Eric, a forty-something Filipino-Canadian resident of East Vancouver explains, 'there's nothing here we don't see all the time living in Vancouver'. Another participant lamented the lack of more exotic fare: 'where's the imitation shark fin soup?' Another commented: 'there's nothing really inaccessible. It's really easy North American style Chinese food. I recognize everything here'.

#### Figure 4

Despite this recurring narrative of the market's mundane food offerings, there were also clearly discernible lines around 'indigestible difference' (Parker, 2000, p. 80). This line became evident in statements concerning the 'unhealthy' nature of the food and suspicion surrounding the hygiene of the food preparation. Families of various ethnicities also attend the night market from all over the Metro area as a fun, summer evening family outing. But, Firouzeh, an Iranian-Canadian, who had travelled from Surrey with her family to attend the night market, explained: 'I am just here for the atmosphere with my kids. I would never eat this food. It's probably not safe, like, do they clean the oil? I don't know'. Purchasing goods in the night market was also framed as risky, and the vendors untrustworthy. Eric, who attends the night market routinely with his family confessed: 'I don't let my kids play with

any toys from here ... it's just not safe, I don't trust it'. Both these sets of concerns can be placed within a persistent construction of Chinatown through discourses of 'vice' and 'microbes' (Anderson, 1991, p. 5).

The night market is also attractive to a segment of East Vancouver 'hipsters' who, while revelling in the market's kitsch, gaudy, and out-of-the norm experience, are highly educated and extremely critical of cultural consumption. Laura, for example, has a degree in humanities, is in her mid-twenties, lives in East Vancouver and attends the market several times a season. As she explains, 'I don't view it as a cultural experience. I view it as strictly consumerist, cheap food, and cheap objects. But that's fine. I'm not here for cultural exchange'. Similarly, Jason argues, 'you might learn that they [the Chinese] have different types of food. You're probably not going to learn any language between now and 10:30'. When I ask these two consumers if they feel they can learn anything about Chinese culture, their answers take a sarcastic tone:

*Laura:* Oh yes. I learned amazing karaoke dancing [rolls eyes].

*Jason:* [Gesturing to mainstage area] I don't know, is that popular? Would I consider that good? I don't know how to contextualize this performance.

But at the same time, this group of consumers is attracted to the market because it *is* different. These participants revel in feeling out of place. That they were brushing up against somewhat exclusive spaces such as the stage or back area of the market where Chinese men gamble at long tables, was part of the appeal. This sentiment is evident in Jason's description of the gambling area: 'There was that booth of people playing that game. We were really interested in what it was, but we weren't going to go over. It was all older Chinese people'.

The vendors are mostly Chinese from the PRC and have immigrated in the last 10 years. The VCMA has sought to build the reputation of the night market as a nursery for small-businesses (VCMA, 2010). For example, Pam and Timothy, a Chinese couple in their thirties, immigrated to Canada in 2008. They rented a booth in the Chinatown Night Market, selling women's clothing and accessories, as a way of finding their bearings in Vancouver's retail sector. According to Pam 'this is my first time running a business. Before I came to Canada, I worked for a company as manager. My friend suggested we try to vend in here, and if we do well, then we will start a small business'. Vendors see the market as freeing them from the financial risk posed by stringent retail agreements in other retail environments. Mary, for example, immigrated from China in 2007 and sells women's clothing. As she puts it, 'with malls or other retailers you have to sign a contract for three years. You have to be there everyday. This is one season. You get to back out if it doesn't work out'.

Alex and Wan, who sell souvenirs, stressed how important English proficiency was to running a business in Vancouver. Their English skills pose serious limitations on the possible locations for their business. As Wan explained: 'We don't speak very good English so it is very challenging for us to run a business in downtown or other places... English is our major barrier to get into mainstream society'. Similar sentiments are expressed by Jane, who was born in Hebei province of the People's Republic of China, and immigrated to Canada in 2007. 'Life was very tough as a newcomer here, and I had to start over completely. My education in China was not accepted here and so it is hard to find a good job now. I had to go back to college'. Mei was hired by an online surf, skate, and swim apparel company to sell overstock from its warehouse in the night market. 'It gives me a chance to practice my English while I'm earning some money'. She takes accounting course during the day.

Although there is evidence that the market provides a soft landing for newcomers to Vancouver's economy, a common admission of the vendors is that they are there to dump overstock. Zhi, for example, has been selling toys and shoes in the night market since 2002. In 2003 she opened a permanent retail location in Vancouver. She continued to run her booth in the night market, for the sole purpose of cleaning out aged stock, which she sometimes sells at less than cost. Zhi tells her friends: 'come here to clean your aged stock, but don't expect to earn money'. Mei's booth similarly targets white customers with overstock apparel in plus sizes or with unpopular designs. Many other vendors also have business plans that target white tourists specifically. Wei, for example, sells Hong Kong-style barbecued meats mainly to non-Chinese customers. According to her: 'the fewer Asian consumers, the better for business. Asian customers bargain too much. Whites are more willing to spend'. Other cultural calculations also have specific profit motivations, such as 'international students are willing to spend money' and 'local people are very careful with their spending'. This strategy reflects the multiple lines of exoticization in the night market, where whites are cast as dupable, frivolous, and even large.

### **Calculated Transformation: The Night Market Enters the Era of Revitalization**

As Chinatown's economic and social issues intensified, the City of Vancouver instituted the Chinatown Revitalization Program (hereafter, CRP) in 1999, as part of the broader Downtown Eastside Revitalization Program. A public consultation process led to City Council's 2002 adoption of the Chinatown Vision, that:

The future Chinatown should be a place that tells the area's history with its physical environment, serves the needs of residents, youth and visitors, and acts as a hub of commercial, social, and cultural activities. (City of Vancouver, 2002)

One of the major strategies of the CRP has been to use the public realm as a key area of municipal government leadership in Chinatown's development. As one planner explained, 'we want to work with businesses but we also don't want to dictate or control everything. The public realm is one of the most useful tools we have used to improve the area ... it provides a stage for activities to happen' (personal communication, 2010). Many of these public realm changes concern the look and feel of Chinatown's streets by night. A great deal of attention has been devoted to lighting, including character street lamps which serve the dual purpose of complementing Chinatown's historic character and making the streets feel safer (personal communication, 2010). The Chinatown Pedestrian Lighting Improvement Project, for example, installed heritage lampposts and awnings throughout the area. The 'Silk Road' project involved the development of a well-lit pedestrian corridor connecting Chinatown to the downtown core. The City also funded the installation of neon signage in Chinatown, such as the Chinatown Parkade's giant 'welcome' sign, which overlooks the night market. Other public realm projects are intended to contribute to the overall 'sense of security', such as the Chinatown Active Storefront Program, which provides incentives for property owners to place tenants in ground floor apartments.

The municipal government also sees the public realm as an important 'avenue' through which to steer the types and composition of businesses in Chinatown. Herbal shops, hair salons, and 'knick-knack shops', for example, are not seen as having the 'twenty-first century sense of doing a good business'. As one planner puts it, these businesses are 'still relying on a very old model of: we can sell this to the tourists, mentality. That is not what Chinatown

should be anymore. It is better for Chinatown to be attracting the young or others to come back to the neighbourhood' (personal communication, 2010). The Chinatown planners feel strongly that Chinatown will not survive if it continues to rely on the packaging of 'traditional' Chinese culture for tourists. Instead, the neighbourhood must show that Chinatown is also 'for the young and will cater to and care for their needs' (personal communication, 2010).

The Chinatown Night Market occupies a rather problematic position with respect to CRP objectives. The market is wholly organized and operated by the VCMA, and thus the City has no direct or official role in its management or objectives.<sup>3</sup> The Chinatown planners see the market as a potential venue to showcase Chinatown and its entrepreneurial roots:

Chinatown has always been a very entrepreneurial neighbourhood. We started off with a bunch of people with entrepreneurial spirit and I think the night market, as a kind of open market, hawkers stands ... they really represent the entrepreneurship and people who have some good ideas. They want to give it a shot, but setting up a retail storefront is kind of pricey. So this is a very good way to show innovation and entrepreneurship. (Senior planner, DTES, personal communication, 2010)

The market is also seen as a potential way to put Chinatown in conversation with the global and, in doing so, attracting young people. As an international phenomenon, the market connects Vancouver's Chinatown to Asian cities, as well as North American Chinatowns both materially (through goods sold) and symbolically. The market's iconography is seen as a powerful symbol for young Chinese Canadians who have global identities. According to one City planner:

these days there are a lot of different subjects competing for the young generation's interests, you know, from global warming, to globalization, so how can Chinatown be part of that? The market could take the dialogue about Chinatown out of a very typical ethnic enclave type of discussion, and out into the global. (City planner, personal communication, 2010)

But, the night market is also problematic from the CRP perspective. Many of the vendors come from outside of Chinatown, and thus, it is unclear whether the market benefits the neighbourhood outside of its short, weekend, seasonal hours:

When you look at things like the night market, does it really fill in that gap of the vibrant businesses and needs for the community? I don't know. It is maybe one way of looking at it. But ultimately it is not speaking to the whole need of the whole community. It is also very business-focused. It is not really driven by the local community itself, other than for economic benefits and reasons. (Multicultural planner, personal communication, 2010)

Perhaps most difficult, from the CRP's perspective, is the fact that the market creates *additional* retail space at night, in a retail landscape where existing businesses are already struggling. The market is thus in direct conflict with the Active Storefront Program which supports the transition of empty storefronts into residences.

### **Gentrification and Chinatown's Night-Time Consumptionscape: A New Phase for the Chinatown Night Market**

Despite the ambivalence of city planners towards the Chinatown Night Market, it has undoubtedly contributed to the re-imagining of Keefer Street, where trendy bars and fusion restaurants are materializing. The Bao Bei Brasserie opened on Keefer Street in 2010. Its

front windows overlook the night market and the brasserie capitalizes on its buzz and ambiance from May to September. At Bao Bei, one can eat potstickers while sipping a ‘Chino Margarita’ made with tangerine-peel infused tequila, ginger, and chilli salt. The clientele is young, stylish, urban, and multi-ethnic. It is illustrative of the type of development the City would like to see in Chinatown:

Bao Bei is a very good example because it’s so fresh, and serves slightly different clientele from the traditional Chinatown clientele. I think it will be interesting to see Chinatown serving a very eclectic group ... no matter if young or old, or just diverse cultural groups. We are starting to see that happening gradually now. (Senior planner, personal communication, 2010)

Bao Bei’s owner, Tannis Ling, has become the poster-child for the CRP. She is thirty-something, hip, well travelled, and Chinese-Canadian. She holds a certain amount of nostalgia for Chinatown, where her mother used to shop for groceries at the weekends before Richmond’s T&T supermarket opened. Ling speaks the language of authenticity, drawing on Chinatown’s history to create something new and hip that will speak to her generation. The iconography of old Chinatown is referenced in the brand, from the décor to the menu design. The hand of the state is obvious. The restaurant’s neon marquis illuminates the faces of the crowd of twenty-somethings lined up at the door. The marquis was supported by the City of Vancouver, reminiscent of the old days of purposeful Orientalism. At the same time, this is Chinatown with a new spin: younger, hipper, more global, and more diverse.

In an interview conducted by *This Space* in 2011, Ling explains her reasons for returning to Chinatown:

I had this dream for a long time that I would open a Chinese restaurant that I would want to hang out in, that had good drinks and wine, and friends. Chinatown seemed to be quite distinct and *genuine and authentic*, and it seemed to be missing a really good Chinese restaurant for some reason. I came here quite a bit when I was young, but you know, then all the Chinese people started to move out to Richmond ... so we stopped coming and didn’t come here for a long time until I moved back from London and rediscovered the area. It seemed like *no man’s land*. But now ... it seems like we’re heading in the right direction, the perfect combination of the new generation and the Chinese culture ... I think it would be cool if the neighbourhood expanded in that kind of direction, bookstores, shoe-stores, designer shops, as well as bars and restaurants, a nice combination of everything. [emphasis added]

As this quote illustrates, Ling is embedded within the particular political, economic, and cultural opportunity structure created by the CRP. She also rather uncritically espouses much of what the anti-gentrification movements work against: the proliferation of boutique stores in low-income areas, and the ‘no man’s land’ discourse typical of revitalization projects and new-build developments. This conflict is summed up by a satirical flyer circulated at the 2012 Downtown Eastside Women’s Housing March (a focal point yearly for anti-gentrification activism in Vancouver). The flyer, handed out in front of Bao Bei and similar businesses, warns that the restaurants’ featured ‘marinated pork with lychees’ comes with a side dish of ‘condo towers’, racism, and ‘increased policing’ (Wood, 2012).

Bao Bei’s success is indicative of the broader wave of change happening throughout Chinatown, as grocers and knick-knack stores are replaced by businesses that cater for middle-class, young professionals. A series of new developments also mix cosmopolitan chic with nostalgic Chinatown. A German beer and currywurst sausage shop is scheduled to open down the street. Caffée Brixton, at the corner of East Georgia and Main Street, references London’s Brixton district, an area that typifies the ‘middle class gentrification of inner London’ over recent decades (Butler and Robson, 2001, p. 2145). As Butler (2007, p. 173)

notes, the area has been particularly attractive to middle classes seeking out ‘alternative multicultural hedonism’ because of its large African Caribbean population. Vancouver’s Brixton, replicates this aesthetic while offering patrons Sake Sangria (albeit with a shot of ‘soho lychee liquor’). Meanwhile, the 10-storey condominium tower slated to open at 189 Keefer Street invites potential buyers to ‘move or invest in Vancouver’s next up and coming neighbourhood – Historic Chinatown. Vibrant, walkable neighbourhood – rich in culture and history – an emergence of new retail shops and dining establishments’ (Solterra Group, 2012).

Since January 2013, the Chinatown Night Market has come under its own revitalization plan, led by none other than Tannis Ling. She and a new team composed of young creative types – an arts administrator, a filmmaker and pop-up food curator, a marketing specialist, and an artist/designer – have taken over the Chinatown Night Market Committee for the VCMA. The market’s newly launched blog promises an ‘all new night market’, featuring arty filtered portraits of a new class of conspicuously young, white, creative vendors selling vintage clothing, artisanal soap, honey, pies, and hand-dyed linen. More conspicuous are the changes to the entertainment line-up. Gone are the ‘Happy Singers’, replaced by ‘Hip-Hop Karaoke’ night, a Street Fighter II competition, and ping pong tournaments.

### **Concluding Discussion**

The Chinatown Night Market’s new spin has already generated considerable media attention. After the market’s first week of the 2013 season, a review in *The Globe and Mail* announced that the ‘once pitiable Chinatown street fair has energy again’ (Gill, 2013). *Flare* magazine recently ran a feature on Tannis Ling in its online magazine, where she is lauded as ‘taking on, oh, just the reinvigoration of an entire neighbourhood, starting with the Chinatown Night Market’ (Georgijevic, 2013). As these quotes illustrate, the perception of Chinatown is also produced through Vancouver’s critical infrastructure, the array of individuals – food critics, travel writers, publishers, advertisers, and ‘lifestyle gurus’ – that mediate the consumption of culture (Zukin, 1991, p. 201). They appraise new cultural products and experiences and set the ‘boundaries of legitimate taste’, deciding what is in vogue (Bell, 2007, p. 12; Rath 2007) and what is out.

Through the experiences of consumers, vendors, and the discourses of city planners, this ethnography illustrates how Chinatown is produced for consumption to serve revitalization goals. The night market once appeared as a brightly lit oasis, claiming a section of Chinatown’s quiet night-time landscape with security patrols, sound, and the social warmth of the crowd. In its original inception, the market supported a distinct set of overlapping social worlds, including Chinese elders, young hipsters, tourists, suburban families and recent immigrants from Mainland China. These groups used the consumptionscape in different ways – watching Chinese opera; feeling nostalgia for home; strolling through the crowd; people watching; eating convenient and inexpensive fast food; brushing up against difference; or looking for a soft landing in the city’s retail economy. This scene recalls Robinson and Butler’s description of gentrifying neighbourhoods as ‘tectonic’ spaces, across which ‘social groups or “plates” overlap or run parallel to one another without much in the way of integrated experience’ (2003, p. 78). Despite discourses of cosmopolitan mixing, this fabric of adjacent ‘plates’ is always unsteady under the surface and displacement is the rule. In the night market’s first iteration, however, although people had very different reasons for participating, they nevertheless *shared* the space.

While there was some evidence that the night markets provided a ‘living tableau of queerness’ (Anderson, 1991; Parker, 2000; Said, 1979, p. 103; Santos and Yan, 2008), most consumers did not see the market as exotic. For tourists, the market was associated with fascination and the search for authenticity in the form of traditional costumes, cultural performances, and exotic foods. Most local non-Chinese consumers, however, were simply there to participate in some element of Vancouver’s outdoor summertime nightlife and framed the event in relatively mundane terms. They expressed high degrees of familiarity with its assemblage of food, music, and goods. That the market was Chinese-themed was not what made it attractive, but rather, the unsettling of cultural codes that provide ‘unpredictable spaces of freedom for the consumer’ (Valentine, 1998, p. 201). For non-Chinese participants, like Laura and Jason, feeling somewhat out of place was part of the appeal. In short, much like Brixton’s market described by Butler and Robson (2003, p. 77), in the Chinatown Night Market, ‘there is no norm’.

The city’s agenda is primarily economic, concerned with selling space in order to bring new capital into the neighbourhood. Its ‘Chinatown Vision’ is a strategy to create secure commercial space that protects the economic value of Chinatown as a *product*. Culture and the Other are accessories to Chinatown’s economic value. If Chinatown’s streets are clean and frequented by upper-middle class consumers, the risk to potential developers and investors is minimized. In the lore of Vancouver’s planners, gentrification is couched as revitalization. Chinatown is in fact a tool in remaking the central city for the new middle class (Ley, 1996). The long-term inclusivity of the night market has been overlooked in the hopes of future economic success.

At the time of writing, it is too soon to draw conclusions about the impact of the Chinatown Night Market’s revitalization on its social and economic inclusivity. It is clear, however, for whom the gentrifying spaces lining the street are intended. They are not serving the low-income Chinese elders who use the night market as a gathering place, or the community’s increasingly low-income and homeless residents. Nor are they serving the suburban families who bring their children to the night market at weekends. Bao Bei, for instance, capitalizes on the visual aesthetic and soundscape created by the night market, in order to draw in the new target market: younger, hipper, middle class urbanites. This group is also the answer to the CRP’s central dilemma: ‘what is Chinatown when the Chinese no longer live there?’ (Senior planner, personal communication 2010). Such a dilemma also raises serious doubts about the reconcilability of a socially just, inclusive street market in this contested downtown space. We are left with a market that is materially at the crossroads of Canada’s poorest postal codes and its wealthiest and figuratively at the crossroads of Chinatown’s past and its future.

#### NOTES

1. The Sino-British Declaration of 1984 signalled Hong Kong’s handover to China in July of 1997. The Tiananmen Square tragedy of 1989 generated the peak of immigrant applicants from Hong Kong – 50,000 for that year (Li, 2003).

2. The names of all interview participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

3. They are nevertheless connected through the Chinatown Business Improvement Association (CBIA), which relies on the City for support in the City Council approval process. The BIA must be approved by City Council in order to charge its funding levy to area property owners, without which it cannot operate. The City sees the BIA as a key partner in the promotion and organization of activities and events that support the ‘overall vision’

for Chinatown (City Planner, DTES). It is important to note that the interests of the BIA often conflict with the Social Planning Department, which is responsible for the Downtown Eastside as a whole. In the past, conflict has arisen between the competing objectives of economic development in Chinatown and protecting the highly vulnerable low-income community of the Downtown Eastside which includes Chinatown in most designations.

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Figures 1 and 2. The Chinatown Night Market. (*Photos*: author)

Figure 3. The mainstage of the Chinatown Night Market and the Chinatown Parkade marquis. (*Photo*: author)

Figure 4. Consuming in the Chinatown Night Market. (*Photo*: author)