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Review of David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*

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REVIEWS

David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada*
(Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988. Pp. xvi+347. \$29.95)

In the past, a Chinatown was “a self-contained urban enclave” where nearly all Chinese people, their businesses, and their social institutions were confined. Today, however, a Chinatown “is an ill-defined perceptual area because its characteristics, structure, images, and townscape have changed over time.” Lai classifies Chinatowns into four types, one of which, an old Chinatown, is the topic of most of the book. He summarizes the history of Old Chinatowns as involving four stages: budding, blooming, withering, and reviving. For example, Chinatown in Victoria experienced these four particular stages during the following periods: 1858-1870s, 1880s-1910s, 1920s-1970s, and 1980s. The Chinatowns that did not survive (i.e., were not “revived”) entered an alternative fourth stage, that of extinction. Because the development of each Chinatown was greatly affected by immigration, the text is organized historically by periods of migration policy. Within these periods, changes in Chinatowns are related to numerous regional conditions (such as immigration policies, white racism, and demands for labor) and local situations (for example, land values, population characteristics, and social attitudes). Although these interrelationships are described in considerable detail for all Canadian cities, they are discussed in greatest depth for Victoria.

In addition to the long section on extinct and surviving Old Chinatowns, the text also more briefly characterizes each of the four contemporary types of Chinese concentration. Old Chinatowns remain where the following exist: at least one active traditional Chinese association, ten Chinese residents – who tend to be “Chi-epies” (elderly Chinese people) and/or “Chi-lippies” (low-income Chinese people) – a restaurant and grocery store whose operators own the property, and a location within a city having a Chinese population of a hundred. A second contemporary type – a Replaced Chinatown – is a planned replacement for a former Old Chinatown. Like an Old Chinatown, it is a Chinese residential, commercial and institutional area; but, in contrast to an Old Chinatown, its structures are modern and it forms an attractive inner-city neighborhood. A Reconstructed Chinatown, located in the area of an extinct Chinatown and designated as a heritage site, is a restoration of the original streetscape. This third type generally lacks “the activity of many Chinese pedestrians, the odours of Chinese merchandise and food, and the sounds of various Chinese dialects.” A New Chinatown, the fourth type, is a commercial area of Chinese businesses, often financed by recent entrepreneurs from Hong Kong and patronized largely by “Chi-yuppies” (young, upwardly-mobile Chinese professionals) and located along a street or in a shopping plaza in suburbia. Although not a residential area, it is usually close to Chinese neighborhoods. A New Chinatown may compete financially with an Old Chinatown (as, for example, in Toronto and Vancouver).

Although the multitude of facts (including a thousand endnotes) may overwhelm the reader, these data can have wider applicability than just documenting the history of Chinese settlement in Canadian cities. For example, the effects of chain migration are clearly illustrated by the table showing the home country of families in Nanaimo, B.C., in 1885. The potential benefits of heavy documentation and detail, however, may extract time-costs from the reader who becomes bogged down in the mass of *minutiae*. Persons primarily interested in the *general* patterns of this phenomenon may wish to read only the first and last chapters, which provide the geographic essence of the topic.