



INTEGRATION

West-coast bilingualism

Once a symbol of Canada's flawed immigration policy, a Chinese-only mall awaits the wrecking ball » by TERRY O'NEILL



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Until the 1980s, Richmond, B.C., was widely considered to be the very model of Canadian multiculturalism. But that all changed amid a massive influx of immigrants starting two decades ago. Where social integration was once common, an unofficial cultural apartheid spread into the 1990s, separating Chinese-speaking newcomers from established English-speakers. The rift produced tension and national headlines. Today, however, there are signs that Richmond's two cultural solitudes may finally be coming closer together.

The Vancouver suburb, located on a sea-level island at the mouth of the Fraser River, has long boasted a large Japanese-Canadian community whose pioneering ancestors were drawn to the area in the early 1900s by the fishing and cannery industries. After the Second World War, interracial marriages became increasingly common, schools reported little racial tension and Richmond's Japanese heritage was generally seen as something that gave the community a unique and positive character.

However, the city's cultural harmony has been severely tested as a result of Canada's great immigration influx over the past 20 years. The community's population soared from 96,000 in 1981 to

160,000 today, and where only 1% of school children had been enrolled in English-as-a-second-language classes in 1988, half are now receiving ESL instruction. In all, only 50% of current Richmond residents were born in Canada, 48% are immigrants and 2% are non-permanent residents. About 15% of the newcomers hail from Hong Kong and a further 7% from mainland China.

In response to the tidal wave of Hong Kong emigrants, businessman Thomas Fung, himself a Hong Kong expatriate, decided to build a shopping mall in which the newcomers would feel at home. Mr. Fung, chairman and chief executive officer of The Fairchild Group (which also owns several Chinese-language media outlets), says his original intention was to have a mix of Chinese specialty stores and established Canadian outlets. But those older retailers saw the venture as too risky. Mr. Fung proceeded anyway, and when the Aberdeen Centre opened in 1990 it was filled with Cantonese-speaking merchants, store signage featuring large Chinese characters, and a distinct lack of non-Asian customers.

Mr. Fung stresses that development of the shopping centre was based on a simple business decision to take advantage of a niche market. However, the more successful the mall became, the more notoriety it drew for its exclusively Asian character. "There was not much we could

do," he confesses. The Aberdeen Centre soon became a lightning rod for opponents of Canada's liberal immigration system. Too much was changing too fast, critics said with some justification, and businesses such as the Aberdeen Centre were only encouraging a form of discordant apartheid.

Several more Asian specialty malls followed the Aberdeen Centre, to the point where motorists now driving along the north

end of the Number 3 Road in Richmond might be forgiven for thinking they are in Hong Kong. However, where the Aberdeen Centre was once the symbol of much that was wrong with the country's immigration policy, Mr. Fung's newest project may yet become the symbol for a new, more integrated and harmonious culture. That is because the 50-year-old entrepreneur has announced he will begin demolishing the mall next spring and, in its place, build a new shopping centre that will not only be three times bigger, but will also be far more international in scope.

In fact, Mr. Fung hopes to use the mall as a tool to encourage Chinese-speaking newcomers to assimilate more quickly than they have been doing. "They have the heart to do it, but if their [English] language is not fluent, it's a difficult job to achieve," he says. To further his goals, he will ensure that all shopkeepers in his new mall are bilingual (Chinese and English), that the mall advertises in English-language media, and that in-house promotions and events are not conducted exclusively in Cantonese. Also, he is sure that this time, the shopping centre will attract many long-established Canadian retail outlets.

But while Mr. Fung may yet succeed in his new enterprise, more general assimilation is still a long way off. The high concentration of Chinese speakers, and the existence of Chinese-language newspapers and radio and TV stations make it easy for the newcomers to lead most of their lives without having to use English. A Richmond ESL coordinator recently told the *Globe and Mail* that he once recommended to a group of Chinese-speaking parents that they place their daughters in the Girl Guides to help them learn English, but was taken aback when he

learned all the girls in the local troop were Asian.

The jury is still out on whether a new municipal party, designed primarily to reflect the concerns of Asian newcomers, is a sign of even more cultural division or an indication that by becoming involved in local politics, the Asians are becoming more comfortable and have begun to settle into the community at large. Party organizer Hansen Lau, a former radio current-affairs host, is of the latter view, and thinks Canadian multiculturalism is working quite well. "I'm talking to you in English right now," he points out. "But if I turn around and babble to my secretary in Chinese, there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with saving our culture."

Mr. Lau points out that, while the new Richmond Canadian Voters party is aimed at giving Chinese newcomers a stronger voice in municipal politics, membership is open to everyone. Indeed,



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CEO Fung: From apartheid to assimilation.

non-Asian Anna Bloomfield ran unsuccessfully for the party in a recent by-election. A mother of four, Mrs. Bloomfield sees an increasing amount of integration and assimilation in Richmond, especially among its youth. "Are there two solitudes?" she says. "I don't believe so. I think there's an artificial segregation that, for whatever reason, some people are trying to keep. In general, I think our community has become very well blended."

But more can always be done, Mrs. Bloomfield says. For one, non-Asians could spend more time in the Asian shopping centres. Selection of merchandise is varied, prices are good and, according to her daughter, "They've got the best Hello Kitty stores in those malls." ■



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The mall's fountain: Changing times.