Multiculturalism at Work: Pacific Mall in Toronto as a Case Study
Ho Hon Leung and Raymond Lau

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Located in Markham, at the border with the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada, the Pacific Mall is situated in the corner of the northeast side of Steels Avenue East and Kennedy Road, one of the busiest intersections in the area. It is also located in a very ethnically diverse region. In 2001, nearly half (49.5%) of the Toronto population was foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2007). Statistics Canada predicts that more than 50% of the population in Toronto will likely be a member of a visible minority in 2017 (Statistics Canada, 2005). The Pacific Mall is a shopping mall, an ethnic icon in the Chinese community in Toronto, and probably the most well-known and popular ‘Chinese shopping mall’ in Toronto, possibly in all of North America. This paper attempts to use this mall as a case study to illustrate the concept of multiculturalism at work. In the course of analysis, the paper examines how this intriguing ethnic shopping space has become what it is. We argue that its success is due to a set of internal (Chinese community) and external (the larger Canadian mainstream society) social, political, and economic factors. In addition, the unique operation system in the mall is another essential contributor to its success. The discussion of these dynamics yields a strong implication for the future directions of policy on multiculturalism that should function as facilitating integration of visible minority groups into the mainstream society. And, in turn, the integration offers an opportunity for the mainstream to interact with these minority groups. The narrative presented in this paper is constructed from in-depth interviews with Pacific Mall shoppers, retailers, shop owners, and some members of the management board. Their views are interpreted in the theoretical framework that includes Canadian immigrant context, architectural space, demographics of the users, and a business model. This paper also discusses this phenomenon that bears the implication for multiculturalism as a policy that is an attempt to manage ethnic / cultural diversity.

Multiculturalism in Canada
Canada was the pioneer in developing the concept of multiculturalism as an ideology and a practice in ways to manage ethnic relations. The adoption of multiculturalism at the federal level in 1971 was an initial response to the demands from primarily European immigrant groups and the challenges of Québécois
nationalism which has been seeking independence of Canada since 1960s. As the concept of multiculturalism developed, it was extended to support immigrant groups in order to retain ethno-cultural heritage, and to ensure not only individual rights, but also group rights such as the aboriginals’ (Goodnewardena and Kepfer, 2005: 671). In 1982, Canada was the first nation in the developed world to officially enshrine multiculturalism into its constitution (Kivisto and Faist, 2007: 36). The goal of Canadian multiculturalism is to maintain the unity of the nation faced with the challenges of Québéquois nationalism, the advocacy of the rights of the aboriginals, and the accommodation of the ethnically diverse immigrants. It is hoped that “ethnic diversity can be contained within an overarching sense of a shared Canadian identity and loyalty to the nation-state” (Kivisto, 2002:101)

Both the meaning of the concept of multiculturalism and the ways to implement the policy are very controversial. The word “multiculturalism” means different things to different people. Mitchell (1993: 289) went further and stated, “When examining who is saying what and why about multiculturalism, one can identify the different types of appropriations that are occurring in each setting.” However, Wood and Gilbert (2005) observed, “Multiculturalism is commonly understood as three different, yet related, notions: as a specific governmental policy of political pluralism, as a social reality of a demographically diverse society, and as a political ideology advocating cultural pluralism.”

In a much more elaborated framework, Fleras and Elliott (1992) discussed the concept in the following nine dimensions: 1) policy construct for restructuring government-minority relations, 2) economic resources in advancing national and minority interests, 3) collective process in reshaping Canada’s symbolic and social order, 4) fundamental component in Canadian nation-building, 5) distributive ideal in allocating rewards and resources, 6) political instrument for managing racial and ethnic diversity, 7) social experiment for promoting diversity as a unifying force, 8) ideology for national discourse and decision-making, and 9) key metaphor in shaping Canadian identity. This framework can be applied to different levels-- individual, ethnic and racial group, institutional and societal. The implications for the Pacific Mall will be discussed later in this framework.

**The Development of Chinese Communities and ‘Chinese’ Shopping Malls**

The conceptualization of the Pacific Mall took place in the midst of flourishing establishment of ethnic malls and plazas in the late 1980’s in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada. These commercial developments consisted of Chinese shopping centers, Cuban strip plazas or Japanese malls. Qadeer categorizes this phenomenon as ‘a new genre of suburban commercial development’ (1998). According to Lai (2003: 332), there were 58 Asian-themed malls in December 1999 in Scarborough, and two other neighboring regions, Markham and Richmond Hill. Such economic development in these areas is a result of the most recent Canadian open-door immigration policy that recruits immigrants on the basis of merit rather than of the country of origin. The following section outlines the history of Chinese immigration in Canada.

*Chinese Immigrant History in Canada*
The Chinese have a long history in Canada. Its history can be categorized in three distinctive waves. Instead of coming directly from China, the first small wave of Chinese migrants came to Canada from the west coast of the United States around 1858 for the Gold Rush in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. The Canadian Census 1880-81 reported that there were about 5,000 Chinese present in Canada, and 22 in Ontario (Lai, 2003:313).

The second wave of Chinese migration was attracted by the mega-project of building an intercontinental railroad. Because of the challenge of building the railroad through the Rocky Mountains, Chinese laborers were recruited directly from China as railway workers (Li, 1998:16). Upon completion of the railway construction, the Chinese workers were dismissed because they were no longer needed. Because of the unusually poor remuneration, a direct result of racial discrimination, many of the Chinese workers could not save enough money for the return trip to China (Chan, 1983:67). In fact, despite getting help from the newly established Chinese Benevolent Association, no more than three thousand out of seventeen thousand were able to return to China (Chan, 1991:17). The rest were forced to seek work elsewhere, within Canada or outside Canada; some stayed in Victoria and Vancouver, while others followed the Canadian Pacific Railway route and moved eastward. Facing strong racial discrimination and prejudice, including an exclusion act and head-tax system, they could only take unwanted jobs in the Prairies and eastern Canada. Along the way, some established themselves as peddlers, grocers, and cooks, while others worked as laundromen and servants for white families. Chinatowns were then formed in cities and towns along the route (ibid.:28). Between 1881 and 1884, there were about 15,000 Chinese in Canada (Lai, 2003:314). The demographic characteristics of these waves of Chinese immigrants were those of poorly educated laborers.

The third wave of Chinese immigration was the largest of all. It was a result of the implementation of the new Immigrant Act in 1967, which recruited immigrants based on a point system, instead of their country of origin. The point system selected immigrants based on their level of education, occupational skills, knowledge of English and French and other merits. Along with many immigrants who came from a non-traditional European background, many Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and other overseas countries entered Canada under the ‘independent category’, which required a total of merit points exceeding 70 points out of a possible 100 points under this new system. As a result, the already ethnic diversity of Canada had become even more prominent. Unlike the previous two waves of Chinese immigrants, family reunion was permitted. This new policy has profoundly changed the Chinese demographic characteristics in Canada. These newcomers could establish their roots in Canada with their family members.

Sometimes this wave of Chinese immigration is also called the Hong Kong Tide. Between 1967 and early 1990, China exercised a closed-door policy, whereby emigration was tightly controlled and restricted. Chinese from Hong Kong have been the main source of immigrants in the Chinese population. Other than the fact that Chinese from Hong Kong have greater freedom to migrate to other countries than their counterparts in China, the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997 created a huge push factor that induced this third wave of Chinese
immigration. Their favorite destination was Canada, followed by the United States and Australia. Not only were these Chinese from Hong Kong highly educated, skilled immigrants, but many of them who entered Canada as entrepreneurs or investors were relatively wealthy. This development is a response to the Investment Canada Act in 1986. The purpose of the Immigrant Investor Program was to promote economic growth in Canada. There are three types of business migrants under this program: investors, entrepreneurs, and self-employed persons (Lai, 2003: 325). The business migrant must demonstrate that “…1) a migrant investor must maintain a residence in Canada and make a three-year investment of not less than Can$250,000, which would create jobs; 2) a migrant entrepreneur must have bona fide financial and managerial ability, and buy or start a business where he or she would gave an active managerial role, and create jobs for Canadians; and 3) a self-employed migrant must maintain employment and contribute to the economy or enrich Canada’s cultural-artistic life.” (ibid.: 325-6). These opportunities create a powerful pull factor that attracted many Chinese from Hong Kong and Hong Kong money to Canada. Many of these immigrants sought haven in Canada because of the 1997 sovereignty factor.

For almost a decade, Hong Kong led the list of birthplaces for newcomers, with 96,500 of 1.24 million recent immigrants (Statistics Canada, 1994: 13). However, the tide has ebbed because Hong Kong’s future is becoming less uncertain. In addition to this Hong Kong tide, Chinese immigrants from other places such as China and Taiwan have increased at the same time. Among the immigrants who came to Canada between 1981 and 1991, Chinese was the most frequent reported ethnic origin at 236,810. Among all immigrants, the Chinese, have become the second largest ethnic group in Canada at 425,800, just after those from Britain. (ibid.: 22).

While Hong Kong was the leading immigrant group within the Chinese community, China has taken up the lead recently. This is a result of two factors. One is that China has implemented a much more open-door policy that allowed more freedom of migration. The second factor is that more Chinese from China are more highly educated and affluent than before; therefore, they are qualified to apply for immigration to Canada. This current development in Chinese immigrant population not only has changed the demographic characteristics of the Chinese community in Canada again, but also has induced a rapid growth of the Chinese population in Canada. From 1986-90, there were 74,905 Chinese from Hong Kong, and 42,320 from China. From 1991-96, these two groups were almost equal in numbers--130,790 and 107,420 respectively. From 1996-2001, 184,780 Chinese came from China, while only 54,655 came from Hong Kong. Although the number of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan is also increasing, their share of the Chinese community has always been small (ibid., 26). The Chinese population has added a huge piece of ethnic fabric to the already ethnically diverse Canada. Because of different push and pull factors in the past and present, a great diversity, in terms of educational, socio-economic, cultural, political, linguistic and dialectal backgrounds, within the Chinese population has also been created.
Development of ‘Chinese’ Shopping Malls

These changes in the Chinese population impacted the formation of Chinese communities in suburban areas such as Scarborough, Markham, and Richmond Hill, and the development of these shopping malls. According to Lai (2003), in the early 1980’s, several Chinese investors started to construct some of these indoor malls and open plazas, and many non-Asian developers also took these opportunities to develop shopping malls and sell the individual units to Hong Kong and Taiwan investors. This type of mall is operated in the scheme of condominium corporations that is not found in the mainstream shopping malls.

Our study interviewed the developer of the Pacific Mall. He said that the units were mainly sold in Hong Kong within two weeks. Very few of them were sold in Toronto. These businesses indicate two points. The size of the Chinese community has reached a critical mass. The flourishing ‘Chinese’ shopping malls are intended to meet the everyday needs of the rapidly increasing Chinese residents in the areas. Another point is that some Chinese immigrants gained their status through these business opportunities under the Immigrant Investor Program. One of the veteran retailers in Pacific Mall said that a good number of investors started their businesses here to fulfill the requirements in the Immigrant Investor Program. Some resold their units to other immigrant applicants after fulfilling their requirements. The same unit might have changed hands many times under this circumstance.

In short, the development of these new Chinese communities in suburban areas is due to a set of internal social, economic, and political factors in the immigrant receiving country (Canada), and the same set of external factors in immigrant sending countries (mainly Hong Kong and China). On the one hand, the current Canadian immigration policies are the response to its low birth rate, market and economic needs, and the continuing non-discriminatory and non-racial based multicultural politics. On the other hand, immigrants from Hong Kong and China seek greater political freedom, better living environment and economic opportunities. However, these developments also create tremendous conflict between the Chinese communities and the mainstream society, and conflict within the Chinese communities which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The Exterior and Interior and Its Operation

The architectural design of the mall is a mix of red bricks, steel beams, and glass. The impression Wallman Clews Bergman, the architect of the mall, wanted to create was “a ‘fabulous transparent building as different as possible from its surrounding’ (Wallman email interview) [quotes in original]. Rather than a typically internalized shopping mall, the architects had modeled a contemporary and innovative market building with extensive glazing at the exterior walls” (Chen, 2005: 95-6). However, the developer of the mall, a non-Chinese business person, stated, “Yet here is Canada, a mixed [ethnically diverse] country, not China, not Hong Kong. The architectural style should not resemble Chinese at all. I don’t want it to stand out too much. It blends into the neighborhood.” Both views are a correct description of the mall. Anyone driving by the intersection of Steels and Kennedy Road immediately notices the mall. The glazed structure and
its size give a sense of fabulous transparency and distinguish the mall from its surroundings. The lot is huge with nearly a thousand outdoor parking spaces. Yet, aesthetically, it harmonizes with its surroundings, in ways that the red brick color and the large pieces of glass panels resemble the typical construction materials in Toronto. If the huge sign of “Pacific Mall” were replaced with “Willow Mall,” for example, and the vertical signs of “Heritage Village” and “Golden Regency Restaurant,” as a traditional way of Chinese writing, with English translation below were removed, passersby might think that it is a mainstream suburban mall. In other words, it is a typical North American construction with Chinese signs.

The interior design of the mall is a different story. Although shoppers can see the exposed roof truss, pipe work and roof decks that reveal no ethnic characteristics, and resemble mass production, cost efficiency, fast construction of shed typology, it reminds them, particularly those from Hong Kong, of some typical Hong Kong malls in Wan Chai or Mongkok, which have shops with very limited floor area, except for the fact that the Pacific Mall has high ceilings and wider corridors. The mall has about 400 shops in 270,000 square feet with store units varying from 300-800 square feet. Compared with a Toronto mainstream mall, Yorkdale Mall has about 1 million square feet with just over 200 stores (Chen, 2005: 95). Yet the grid-like corridors in the Pacific Mall are of North-American street layout. Each corridor is given a street name. Those running from north to south are named after some famous street names in Hong Kong like Hollywood Avenue, and Queen’s Avenue and Nathan Avenue for example. Those running from east to west are named in numerical fashion, North-American style, such as 218th Street, 188th Street. These numbers are chosen in order to carefully align with the meaning of ‘affluence’ in Cantonese pronunciation, which bears the belief of being blessed with affluence. Most of the shops are located on the first floor. But the center of the mall is no different from any other mainstream mall. A huge space, with a cathedral-like high dome ceiling, is allocated for elevators and a stage that can host different cultural programs and trade fairs.

The north side of the second floor consists of a food court, entertainment centers, shops, a Chinese tea-house and a medical office. Heritage Village was added to the south side on the second floor in 1999. The developer commissioned artists and clay architects in China to custom-make the decorations that include huge Bas-Reliefs (dragon pictures). On top of the Bas-Reliefs, there are elaborated roof tiles where two dragons vying for a real pearl of the dragon. Other artifacts include 300 elaborate lanterns, an emperor’s chair, dragon panels, a wood-work bridge set at the entrance of the village across a fish pond with rocks and plants and similar features. The atmosphere resembles a market where people can eat, shop, rest and wander. Later on, several terra-cotta soldiers were added to the Town as a permanent display. The mall shows a “Hong Kong flavor with stereotyped Chinese artifacts and images,” as a retailer observed.

The operation of the mall is unique not only in Canada, but also in North America. Unlike the mainstream malls, the Pacific Mall is operated by a system called “commercial-condominium”. This term means that the shop units are sold to different owners as if a tenant bought a unit in a residential building. Unlike the
The operation of other mainstream malls, the owner can decide the types of merchandise sold, the business hours, and resale of the unit for profit. Like a residential condominium, the shop owners elect representatives to form a management board which oversees the overall operation of the mall. The developer claimed that the Pacific Mall was the pioneer in this operation in all of North America.

The Divisive and Integrating Forces of Pacific Mall

*Divisive Forces*

Preston and Lo’s study (2000) documents well the controversy caused by the mall development in the suburban Richmond Hill area. The controversy was sparked by the proposal for a Chinese indoor mall in the Milliken area of Markham, which is the current Pacific Mall (Toronto Star, 1993). The opposition to the proposal did not just come from the Markham general public, but also from the Chinese community in the area. The opposition can be summed up in the following key points: parking, traffic volume, the architectural style of the proposed replacement to Cullen Country Barns, which had a long history in Markham, and the challenge to deal with many different owners in the condominium-style mall. Later in 1995, the then Markham Deputy Mayor Carole Bell stirred up the controversy by saying that the growth of theme malls catering to the Chinese community was driving some Markham residents away (Toronto Star, 1995a). Her remark did not just aim at the development of the Pacific Mall, but also toward a total of 15 retail condominium developments covering 1.7 million square feet either proposed or in place (ibid., 1995b). Bell continued to argue, “If everything built right now is catering to the Chinese community, the greater community – the 85% -- are [sic] really not being served” (ibid.). Some called Bell’s opposition “racist and discriminatory” (ibid., 1995a). However, Bell’s concern was echoed by Chinese and non-Chinese. Some of the opposition from both groups was the concern whether these Asian-theme mall inhibited integration of these Chinese into the neighborhood (ibid., 1995c; see Preston and Lo, 2000).

This type of controversy is not new in Canada. A similar incident, but focusing on ‘monster homes’, took place in Vancouver. Many white upper middle class residents complained about the newly constructed ‘monster homes’ in the late 1980s. They were against the architectural style of these houses which are boxy, clumsy, unappealing and not contextual to the long and well-established neighborhoods (Mitchell, 1993; Li, 1994; Smart and Smart, 1996). Some of the longtime white residents often associated the construction of these houses with the influx of wealthy immigrants from Hong Kong. Both protests against Pacific Mall, ‘Chinese’ shopping malls in general in the areas, and the monster homes in Vancouver reflect an ethnic tension expressed in the conflicting use of social and economic spaces and landscape. Li (1994) raises a very important question in ethnic relations that echoes with the concept of systemic discrimination. Fleras and Elliott (1992: 318) explain systemic discrimination:
Unlike discrimination that is personal and intentional, systemic discrimination exists at institutional levels. Systemic discrimination reflects policies and procedures that seem neutral on the surface and are applied equally to all persons. But these seemingly neutral rules have the unintentional and unconscious effect of mounting barriers that impede the access, representation, or equitable treatment of certain minorities.

Whether the protests from the mainstream society are about the aesthetic, pricing, zoning, control of the neighborhoods (neutral on surface) or about the fear of changes, rightly or wrongfully perceived, generated by an ethnic minority group (unintended consequence against a minority group), it is difficult to determine. Bell’s comment on ‘Chinese’ shopping malls reflects the same issue, whether the case is about “unneighborly malls” or “unwelcome Chinese”.

**Integrating Forces**

The Pacific Mall opened in 1996. It has been in business and in the neighborhood for slightly more than a decade. The controversy surrounding the mall has gradually abated. The business in this mall continued as usual, but it did offer much promise for the future. According to a man who has been working there since day one, he said, “After the mall opened, the business did not look good. Not all the shops were occupied. The retailers even had time to chat in the hallways; their kids played outside the shops. The management board tried different strategies to boost the business, ranging from side-walk sale, to rent out booths located in the common area in the middle of the mall. But these did not work all the time.”

One of the best strategies was to convert the empty space on the second floor to the “Heritage Town” in 1999. Heritage Town attracted new mall visitors. Provided with an all-season shopping environment, in-door parking, popular commodities that kindle nostalgic feelings among many Hong Kong immigrants, the business of the mall has been improving. Other strategies developed later also boosted its popularity and business.

Since the Pacific Mall has added Heritage Town, the board wanted to make it a tourist attraction. It applied for the exemption that would allow it to open during statutory holidays such as Christmas and New Year. In the late 1990’s and when Pacific Mall was still the only mall of its kind and scale in Scarborough and Markham, and many Chinese immigrants complained that they had no place to go and to shop during the statutory holidays, it was common that they often said to each other during those holidays, “Go to ‘Tong Yin’ mall [referring to Chinese shopping mall in Cantonese].” The Pacific Mall represented a typical Chinese shopping mall in many Chinese immigrants’ minds.

In addition, the Pacific Mall also promotes its attractions to other Chinese communities not only in Canada, but also in the United States. It puts promotion pamphlets at airports and tourist information centers in major North American cities. According to its manager, the Pacific Mall was introduced in a short film format by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 2002. It also appeared in several mainstream magazines in Toronto. It earned its appearance in The New
York Times in March, 2002. The manager continued, “Many Chinese tourists in the U.S. visit Toronto for two things, The Niagara Falls, and Pacific Mall, as they told me.” Visitors to the Pacific Mall can see tourist buses loaded with tourists parked outside the mall. A woman who sold Chinese traditional artifacts in the Heritage Town overheard a conversation between her Chinese-American customer and her young son, “If you want to see China, come here.” Frequent visitors to the Pacific Mall also find that more and more non-Chinese visit the mall. Anywhere they turn, and at any time, non-Chinese visitors can be seen. Another shop owner who operated a shop on the first floor explained, “in order to keep up the business, we need more than Chinese customers. We should reach out to the non-Chinese customers who are the majority in Toronto.” It is fair to conclude that the Pacific Mall has become a shopping icon in both Chinese community and the larger Toronto community. It also has become one of the tourist hot-spots in Toronto.

**Implications of the Mall in the Framework of Multiculturalism**

The intellectual debate of multiculturalism can be found in many writings; however, the empirical study of how it actually functions has been relatively neglected (see Levine-Rasky, 2006). This paper attempts to provide, using Pacific Mall, a case study to illustrate how multiculturalism can be an integrating social force, as opposed to what other criticisms against multiculturalism claim (Bissoondath, 1994; also see Belkhodja et al., 2006). The main argument of the opposition stresses that multiculturalism divides the nation and weakens the cohesion of the nation. The implication of this mall in the context of a multicultural city like Toronto will be discussed.

One can see that the Pacific Mall emerged under a ripe set of economic, social and political conditions. The success of the Pacific Mall can be measured by the good business of the shops, increased flow of customers, its fame in both Canada and the United States, and the increasing number of non-Chinese customers. The development of the mall reflects some of the multicultural spirits highlighted in Fleras’ and Elliott’s framework (1992). The mall represents economic resources in advancing interests of a minority at individual and group levels and the resulting benefits for the larger community. The concept of condominium-corporation in a shopping mall is an experiment that leads to good business opportunities where different ethnic and racial groups share cultural experiences, and the prospect is positive in ways of distributing rewards and resources.

The development of the mall, however, is not without struggles. These struggles in both social and political terms at the community level and economic survival of the mall bear some important implications. Minority groups should be able to enjoy the rights to socially, politically, and economically participate in a society as a citizen (Bloemraad, 2000), if multiculturalism works as a political instrument for managing racial and ethnic diversity. However, the struggle in terms of negotiation of use of space (Wood and Gilbert, 2005) such as land use, traffic, and parking is a fact. However, if the negotiation takes place in any context of explicit or systemic racism where an ethnic group cannot exercise its rights and participation, it violates the spirit of Canadian multiculturalism and the concept of citizenship.
It is true that at the time when the mall was conceptualized, no one knew whether it would be a successful case or not. But faith, patience, effort and determination of the shop owners, and open-mindedness among the non-Chinese customers have demonstrated that the then mayor of Markham was wrong. What this case study suggests is that the development of the mall is not necessarily the business model that could facilitate integration between minority groups and the majority group. It indicates that a fair and equal ground for negotiation in an ethnically diverse society must be a guaranteed condition where unifying forces and a national identity can be nurtured.

References


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Due to different historical and political development in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong during the 20th and 21st century, Citizenship and Immigration Canada developed different immigration policies toward immigrants from these regions. Even after the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China from the British in 1997, different immigration policies toward the regions remain.