Although the notion of Chinatown is well known in North America, the term is elusive as it involves the social construction of racial boundaries to demarcate part geographical place and part social and cultural space. Much of what has been written on North America Chinatowns tends to focus on their internal organizations, or the way Chinese have developed a wide range of social institutions to result in a self-sustaining community in the face of racial hostility. Thus, the external forces of racial exclusion and discrimination created the conditions of segregation, but the ability of the Chinese to mobilize cultural and organizational resources enabled them to survive and often thrive in a hostile social environment. However, many changes have come about since the emergence of Chinatowns in North America in the 19th century, both in conditions external to the Chinese minority and in the internal composition and organization of the Chinese community. The purpose of this paper is to use the case of Vancouver Chinatown to show how shifting race formation in society has altered the social position of and opportunity for the Chinese, which in turn, changed the nature as well as the social and geographical boundaries of Chinatown. The analysis also suggests the need to modify the theoretical understanding of Chinatown.

Chinatown as an Ideological Construct and a Self-Sustaining Community

Chinatowns form parts of the urban landscape of North America that can be typically found in the outskirts of core business areas in several contiguous city blocks. Their emergence was intimately connected to the hostile racial environment to which the Chinese were subjected in 19th-century America, but their sustenance was partly connected to the prevalence of a racial ideology and

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partly to the capacity of the Chinese immigrants to develop a self-sustaining community. The early Chinatowns provided a refuge from the harsh conditions of life in larger society, allowing the early Chinese immigrants to seek social, emotional and material support and at times, protection from racial hostility. Yuan (1963) describes Chinatown as a form of voluntary segregation involving involuntary factors, since discrimination and racial prejudice were forces to which the Chinese had no choice but to submit, and since the use of mutual help and other cultural vehicles were chosen defensive mechanisms that enabled the Chinese to partially insulate themselves from external hostilities. However, Anderson (1988; 1991) argues that Chinatown cannot be seen as a mere cultural response of the Chinese because the social construction of Chinatown and the negative stereotypes it conveyed were part of the white ideological creation. In other words, Chinatown represented a geographical articulation of a racial ideology to which the Chinese had to adapt. The adaptation in turn extended the life of racial domination and further structured the race-definition process. It is also for this reason that Kwong (1979; 1992) argues that the emergence of Chinatowns in America was not voluntary, since they were created only several decades after the Chinese arrived as a result of racial exclusion and not immediately after their initial arrival.

Anderson (1991) has argued that the historical Chinese urban quarters known as “Chinatown” assumed a strong inferior racial content. The term “Chinatown” was developed in the 19th century as a European concept to represent an undesirable neighborhood festering in unsanitary conditions, steeped in repulsive vice and populated by an inferior race. The concoction of such a concept reflected the cultural hegemony of European settlers in abstracting the unequal conditions facing the Chinese to build a racial ideology about the Chinese race and their perceived moral threat to Canadian society. The term “Chinatown” was widely used in the 19th century in the media and public discourse, often with a negative and sometimes exotic connotation. Over time, the stereotypic symbols and racial mystics associated with “Chinatown” became entrenched in the ideology of white Canadians, and both the Europeans with the power to define the ideological meanings of Chinatown and the Chinese to whom those meanings were applied, came to accept the label as legitimate and proper.

Despite the frequent image of Chinatown as a ghetto (Yuan 1963), many studies have shown that it had a high degree of social organization, not disorganization, as is evident in the complexity of the internal organization and the completeness of social institutions. Lai (1988: 3-4) points out that old Chinatowns formed in the 19th century were ethnic Chinese-based and self-contained neighborhoods that incorporated residential, institutional and commercial arrangements. Indeed, many ethnic institutions have been reported in studies of Chinatowns including businesses, Chinese presses, clan-based and community