

## Search for a better life takes patience in B.C.

IMMIGRATION | Mainland Chinese professionals who came here on the promise of better prospects have been disappointed by the slow economy, but some are hanging in, writes Wyng Chow

BY WYNG CHOW  
*Vancouver Sun*

In 2001, mainland China became the largest single source country for immigration to B.C., according to the latest Canadian census figures.

That distinction was short-lived. By mid-2002, China apparently relinquished top spot to India, although official statistics are not yet available.

Anecdotal evidence suggests many mainland Chinese - mostly middle-class professionals in their 30s who came here over the past several years in search of a better life - are persevering. However, a growing number are becoming frustrated and turning around and going home.

The major reason for those bailing out, according to Vancouver's largest social service agency, is that most of them find it tough to earn a living in B.C. Others can't even find employment, especially in their chosen field.

"Some of them have become disillusioned and are returning to China," said Vancouver lawyer Mason Loh. "But the majority are still settling down here, although there are those who shuttle back and forth."

Several new Chinese immigrants interviewed confirmed their prospects are poor, given B.C.'s economic climate and the fact their professional qualifications are not always accepted here. "The lack of recognition of credentials and learning in Canada alone represents almost \$6 billion in foregone income [in recent years]," said Kerry Jochen, a business and employment consultant who wrote an in-depth report on Chinese-Canadian workforce strategy. "Many mainland Chinese who came were deceived by some immigration consultants telling them the streets here are paved with gold," said Lillian To, chief executive officer of the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society, or S.U.C.C.E.S.S., a non-profit agency dedicated to assisting immigrants from all ethnic backgrounds.

"Many mainland Chinese who came were deceived by some immigration consultants telling them the streets here are paved with gold," said Lillian To, chief executive officer of the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society, or S.U.C.C.E.S.S., a non-profit agency dedicated to assisting immigrants from all ethnic backgrounds.

"Instead, we have professional engineers cleaning floors, working in supermarkets, or doing office jobs. One gynecologist is taking homemaking courses."

To said she knows of one immigrant involved in the information-technology field who returned to Shanghai after barely a year in B.C. "He's now working for a multinational firm for \$8,000 Cdn a month," To said. "There's no way he can make that in Canada. He looked around and found it very difficult to even find a job here."

Among recent newcomers to Vancouver, Daniel Lee, 37, is an entrepreneur who left behind an executive sales position back in China's capital city of Beijing. He is currently working at a casino in downtown Vancouver.

Li Ma, 39, formerly a chief structural engineer who also taught engineering at a prestigious university in the southern Chinese boom city of Guangzhou, has managed to work one month so far during his three years in Vancouver.

With such a short employment history, Li doesn't qualify for employment insurance benefits and he's getting desperate. "I brought some money here, but I've almost run out," said Li, who shares an apartment with his younger sister in New Westminster.

"So I have to find work. If I do not succeed, I will have to go to a different place. But my first choice is to stay here and get a job."

Li said he has applied for recognition by the Association of Professional Engineering and Geoscientists in B.C., but before he can gain acceptance, he is required to have at least one year of local experience.

"It's quite difficult to get experience if nobody will hire you," Li lamented, adding: "I don't like to change my profession."

In Lee's case, while he is thankful for his casino job, he would much prefer to get into sales, his forte. "But it's hard to find a job right now because of economic problems," Lee said. "Most [B.C.] employers require local experience."

Nonetheless, Lee said he and his wife, Holly Ye, who is "very happy" at her job as a mortgage specialist with CIBC, plan to stay in Canada.

The couple recently purchased a small, one-bedroom condominium in Vancouver's West End, within walking distance of both their workplaces.

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Meanwhile, restaurateur Tony He said while his popular Sea Harbour Seafood Restaurant in Richmond has become highly successful, doing business in B.C. is still hard work.

"I didn't know it would be so tough to make a living here," said He, who arrived in Vancouver with his wife, Jun Hong, from Zhongshan in southern China in 1996, opening their first restaurant two years later.

<p>"You don't have the population mass here as in Asia, and there's a lot of competition."          To ensure profitability, He said he and his head chef, Liu Zihua - also from Guangdong province, where the parent group owns or franchises out some 30 outlets - run a tight ship.          "We've built up our clientele here to a reasonable level and are looking for a second [Lower Mainland] location,"          "You don't have the population mass here as in Asia, and there's a lot of competition."          To ensure profitability, He said he and his head chef, Liu Zihua - also from Guangdong province, where the parent group owns or franchises out some 30 outlets - run a tight ship.          "We've built up our clientele here to a reasonable level and are looking for a second [Lower Mainland] location,"          Hong said of the 200-seat Sea Harbour on No. 3 Road that specializes squab, chicken, abalone and other seafood dishes. "We constantly change our menu to suit our customers and we are prepared to meet our competition."          While He has not yet established another eatery in the Vancouver area, he has expanded to southern California. In January, he opened a 250-seat outlet in Rosemead, while a 320-seater is slated to open later this month in Rowland Heights.          Both communities are suburbs of Los Angeles, which has an Asian market exceeding one million people, compared to about 350,000 in Greater Vancouver. He is also exploring future expansion to Las Vegas and San Francisco. According to federal government figures, a total of 9,518 people from mainland China moved to the Lower Mainland in 2001, compared to 1,861 from Taiwan and only 623 from Hong Kong. In the early 1990s, Hong Kong and Taiwan ranked first and second in terms of immigration to B.C., with most newcomers qualifying in the investor or entrepreneurial categories.          Between 1986 and the mid-1990s, when Ottawa cancelled the Immigrant Investor Program, business-class immigrants - mostly from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia - poured an estimated \$4 billion into the Canadian economy.</p>	<p>While the bulk of the total investment went to other provinces, the majority of the people settled in Greater Vancouver, which offered a much more preferable environment and lifestyle than other parts of Canada, as well as closer proximity to Asia.          Many of those affluent immigrants purchased expensive homes, particularly on Vancouver's tony west side and Westwood Plateau in Coquitlam, as well as Burnaby and Richmond. In 1996, an.. analysis of land title records indicated about three-quarters of all west side residences priced over \$1 million was purchased by people with Chinese surnames.          In addition, those well-heeled Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants drove luxury cars, bought expensive furniture and frequently dined at upscale restaurants.          The new wave of immigrants from among the People's Republic of China's 1.3 billion people don't have nearly the same economic impact, as they are generally far-less affluent than their counterparts from Hong Kong or Taiwan.          In 2001, annual per capita income in Hong Kong exceeded \$36,000 Cdn, while in Taiwan, it was about \$26,000. In mainland China, the figure was less than \$6,500.          S.U.C.C.E.S.S. identifies 75 per cent of recent immigrants from China as middle-class professionals, including engineers, high-tech types, those who work in financial services such as accountants, as well as doctors, nurses and other health-care professionals. Largely in their 30s or early 40s, they qualified in the "independent" category, compared to immigrants from India, made up of 80 per cent "family class," To said.          Among the contemporary mainland Chinese newcomers, about seven-toeight per cent of them are investors, with about another 10 per cent being family-class. Vancouver realtors say while some wealthy mainland Chinese investors are buying pricey detached west side houses, most newcomers can only afford lessexpensive townhomes or condos in east Vancouver, Burnaby, or Richmond. Many are just renting.</p>	<p>"The working class is disillusioned," said George Wong, of Macdonald Realty. "It's a shattered dream."          Among its various immigrant services, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. operates seven employment centres around the Lower Mainland.          "We help 80 per cent of new immigrants to find jobs," To said. "The big problem is, they may not be getting the types of jobs they're qualified for."          While there are no official updated government figures since the 2001 census available, tracking by S.U.C.C.E.S.S. - which maintains an office at Vancouver International Airport, greeting each newcomer - indicates India overtook mainland China as the top source of immigration to B.C. in the second quarter of 2002.          "That's very discouraging," To said. "In the last few months, there has been a drastically reduced number of people coming and fewer applications [from China]."          Jothan's comprehensive 65-page report, submitted last July, documents what the author called the various key challenges and barriers to immigrants participating in B.C. 's labour market to the greatest possible extent.          The barriers include:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent and youth bias towards professions and university education.</li> <li>• Inadequate access to career education.</li> <li>• Immigrant youth cultural and language barriers.</li> <li>• Access to English-as-a-second-language training.</li> <li>• Barriers to credential recognition.</li> <li>• Barriers to learning recognition.</li> <li>• Racism and discrimination.</li> <li>• Global competition for talent.</li> </ul>         "We're losing our young talent," lip said. "It's sad because we need young people to build up Canada, especially with a declining population.          "The hope is, they will come back"    <a href="mailto:wchow@png.canwest.com">wchow@png.canwest.com</a></p>
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