

REAL ESTATE

# UBC students tackle issue of 'Blaming the Mainlander'

Vancouver's housing affordability issues share similarities with those in Hong Kong and Singapore

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Jane Shi, an undergrad student at the University of B.C., was visiting Hong Kong last week, trying to take on "the question of who and why people are blaming mainland Chinese investors for the housing crisis in Vancouver and Hong Kong."

In past years, students taking a UBC summer history course on Chinese migration have compared heritage buildings or night markets in various Asian cities.

This year, with debate on skyrocketing real estate prices sparking racial and generational rifts, two groups in the class chose a topic that is newly binding Vancouver to cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore: housing affordability, what to do and who is at fault.

Shi and her classmates are making last minute edits and in a few days will release a short film called *Blaming the Mainlander*.

It's their look at "what is 'foreign,' and how and why when we say foreign right now, we mean (mainland) 'Chinese,'" said their instructor, UBC professor Henry Yu.



ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES FILES

In Hong Kong, 48 per cent of residents live in government-subsidized housing. In Vancouver, that number is just three per cent.

Shi said "visiting Hong Kong (for the first time) and learning more about its history ... helped shape the conversation a lot better, as resentment against mainland Chinese in Hong Kong can't be exclusively explained (by race)," said Shi. "So there's nuance that gets lost in responses to the conversation on 'blaming the

mainlander' in Vancouver."

Another group interviewed students, academics and policymakers in Hong Kong to make a video comparing affordable housing solutions there to ones in Vancouver.

The housing affordability ratio (median housing price divided by median income) in Hong Kong is 17, the highest in the

world, while Vancouver is now at 10.6, the second highest. The higher the ratio, the less affordable the housing.

The students detailed that while three per cent of residents in Vancouver live in government-subsidized housing, the number in Hong Kong, at 48 per cent, is much higher.

"It was a profound comparison

to see how people perceive government-subsidized housing," said student Adam Gold. "There is a stigma associated with it in Vancouver. In Hong Kong, it's normalized and not just for low-income people."

The students find themselves posting their findings as the Chinese government's top representative in Vancouver made the unusual move of speaking candidly about who to blame and what might be done to handle the current real estate market.

Consul-general Liu Fei told the *Globe and Mail* this week that it's "wrong" for local residents to be pointing fingers at wealthy Chinese buyers for driving up housing prices.

While Liu acknowledged there is demand for Vancouver real estate, she called for government officials in Canada to regulate buyers, sellers and developers with quotas for affordable housing and for luxury houses, adding Beijing itself has strict housing policies in mainland China.

To date, Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson has asked B.C. Premier Christy Clark to bring in a speculation tax against those who buy and sell real estate to make a profit in a brief amount of time. The province has said it has no plans to do so, citing a reluctance to hurt the home equity of existing owners.

On Wednesday, Eveline Xia, who created the Twitter hashtag #donthave1million, was getting ready to address a second rally to bring attention to housing costs and the challenges for millennials in Vancouver. In a prepared speech, she asks: "Will it actually take someone like the Chinese envoy to Vancouver to suggest government action is needed, before our own politicians finally wake up?"

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