



Alley was known as... Victoria's Chinatown trade to the interior

當時維多利亞... 貿易往內陸的跨太平洋

This 1901 fire insurance map shows Victoria's Chinatown at a time when it served as an major hub for Chinese pioneers around the Pacific. Pioneers worked in all major industries, including on the Canadian Pacific Railway, which contributed to the building of British Columbia.

1901年維多利亞唐人街的火災保險地圖顯示，當時維多利亞唐人街是華裔先驅者環太平洋地區的重要樞紐。先驅者從事各行各業，包括在加拿大太平洋鐵路工作，這為卑詩省的建設做出了貢獻。

# Peering into the Past

## Creating Innovative “Living Museum” Spaces in Historic Chinatowns

Tzu-I Chung

Chinese Freemason  
獨一無二的



此物為...  
與1830-1940  
州罕見之  
文物  
為保護文物

走馬燈圖  
最上層各處都  
融入國術社會  
中華各處是書  
如：森林中  
其中，”此類  
層次的含義，  
看紅絲路的開  
功的道路。

下層各處各均  
名字已經有歷  
在長期定章的  
區的范围。

Chinese Freemason  
走馬燈  
走馬燈  
走馬燈

The Chinese Freemason membership list from  
the year 1830-1940. This is a rare find  
and is a valuable historical document of Chinese  
Freemasonry.

According to the Chinese Freemason  
membership list, the Chinese Freemason  
membership list is a rare find and is a  
valuable historical document of Chinese  
Freemasonry.

Due to the high value of the original  
document, a copy has been made for your enjoyment.

Chinese Freemason  
走馬燈  
走馬燈  
走馬燈

Chinese Freemason  
走馬燈  
走馬燈  
走馬燈

ROYAL BC MUSEUM

The Victoria Chinatown  
Museum Society

SALIENT

此類  
本展覽是皇家不列顛哥倫比亞省博物館  
或多利唐人博物館和Salient集團合作  
在  
或多利中華會館  
澳門民治堂  
連耀德社  
中山編善堂  
台山會館  
嘉賢會  
周和信社基金  
峨城發展分會  
華埠女聯會  
的慷慨支持。  
特別感謝不列顛哥倫比亞省和加拿大  
多元文化社會所有的社群團體。

The Peering into the Past pop-up exhibition in Fan Tan Alley courtyard, Victoria, Canada.

**Tzu-I Chung** is Curator of History at the Royal British Columbia Museum, located in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.  
tchung@royalbcmuseum.bc.ca

**C**hinatowns, in the Americas and other continents, are important sites of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. They were shaped as ethnic enclaves when, because of racism, Chinese residents faced hostility and severe restrictions on their activities. Yet, Chinatowns also hold a special place and charm close and dear to the hearts of many who want to preserve their aura and architecture. North American Chinatowns continue to serve as cultural hubs for immigrants, but face myriad challenges,<sup>1</sup> including urban redevelopment, gentrification, economic changes, and population shifts. The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these problems and created increasing uncertainties.<sup>2</sup>

This article is a case study of a 2020 outdoor exhibition, *Peering into the Past*, mounted in Victoria, British Columbia's Chinatown. The installation envisions a way of reconciling the desire to preserve that Chinatown's past while maintaining it as a vibrant commercial center.

Founded in 1858 in what was then a British colony, Victoria's Chinatown has some of the oldest original surviving structures of any Chinatown in North America; it was designated a Canadian National Historic

Site in 1995. In this article, I document the process of creating a short-term exhibition that animates and enriches an unconventional outdoor space and address the context and challenges. This pop-up exhibition was the experimental first step of a community partnership that aimed to turn Canada's oldest Chinatown into a "living museum" site. The long-term vision is to work with more Chinatown businesses and organizations to create innovatively designed spaces and street corners to invite visitors to "peer into the past," as well as allow more integrative space for living functional sites and engaging museum displays. The flexibility of working with unconventional or outdoor space is key to such planning. In addition, this pop-up exhibition represents an effort to test how new approaches to exhibitions beyond the museum gallery may reinvigorate a vulnerable community and revitalize a site which is deeply meaningful for community history.

### **A Living Museum Idea, a Critical Moment**

Various members of Victoria's Chinatown communities and stakeholders have long wanted a museum in the heart of their historic Chinatown.<sup>3</sup> In 2018/2019, an opportunity arose when the Government

of British Columbia (BC) consulted various Chinese Canadian individuals and special interest groups about creating a Chinese Canadian Museum. During the consultation, concerned organizations united to advocate for a regional hub in Victoria and formed the Victoria Chinatown Museum Society (VCMS). In 2020, the government announced its support for a Chinese Canadian Museum, recommending a regional “hub-and-spoke model,”<sup>4</sup> with the main hub in Vancouver.

The VCMS shoulders the cumulative aspirations of generations of community members. Its current vision is a living museum – one that could preserve the function and feel of the old Chinatown’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Its establishment would be a significant moment for Victoria, especially as many Chinatowns in North America have been struggling to survive and maintain their identities. Having worked with local core Chinese Canadian communities on preserving and sharing their history, I understood how important this opportunity was for them, and how important it was for us, as professional museum staff members at the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), to model community heritage best practices in a collective attempt to find a sustainable way for Victoria’s historic Chinatown to move forward.<sup>5</sup>

Based on early conversations among its stakeholders, the VCMS wished to create a “living museum” – which is very different from a “living history museum.” These stakeholders include different levels of government, business and property owners, Chinatown organizations, and residents. Living history museums, such as Canada’s

Fort Langley National Historic Site and Barkerville Historic Town & Park, recreate a historic past that is frozen in time and furnished with artifacts and props in preserved, restored, or reconstructed historic buildings. A living museum, on the other hand, adds innovative museum elements in unexpected corners throughout a living neighborhood to provide glimpses into its history. This is the model that the VCMS, and we as their professional partners, sought

---

**This pop-up exhibition was the experimental first step of a community partnership that aimed to turn Canada’s oldest Chinatown into a “living museum” site.**

---

to pursue in this project. We wanted to retain the historic fabric as much as possible, and also facilitate the continued operation of Chinatown businesses, promote the cultivation of arts, culture, and heritage projects, and provide for the needs of future development and local residents. Existing core Chinatown communities, led by the historical Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and clan associations, would never prevent non-Chinese businesses from moving in, but almost everyone in the community agrees that that arts, culture, and heritage initiatives need to coexist in this area.

**Fig. 1.** The site before the exhibition installation.



**Fig. 2.** Fan Tan Alley entrance to the courtyard from before the pop-up exhibit with previous wayfinding signage.



There are challenges. For example, the longest continuously running Chinese-owned Chinatown business in the Americas is Loy Sing Guen.<sup>6</sup> Since it was established in Victoria in 1889, this butcher shop has rented space from the CCBA. While the shop's original 1889 Chinese business sign, a traditional black plaque with golden Chinese characters of Loy Sing Guen in calligraphy, still hangs in the shop, the current (and fourth) owner is planning to sell the business and retire. There has been some interest in using the shop space for other businesses, but no one has come forward to purchase and continue the centuries-old butcher and barbecue business. The VCMS has been working to find a way to ensure the continuation of a fully functioning business serving traditional Chinese food and, ideally, an unconventional interpretive design to show its history inside and outside. Concern for this shop's future instigated the first considerations for a longer term living museum model for the entire Chinatown. Given the complex business requirements, this remains an idea in process.

### **A Creative Opportunity**

In November 2019, the Salient Group (SG), an urban development company interested in revitalizing heritage buildings, offered the VCMS and the Royal British Columbia Museum a 103-square-foot space in a courtyard off Fan Tan Alley, a historic landmark famous for its history and for being the narrowest street in Canada. The space, with large windows facing the courtyard, had most recently been a pasta factory. The SG was considering using the space to host live demonstrations of intangible cultural heritage, such as the making of Chinese noodles or crafts.

The RBCM had been working for years with this Chinatown community – out of many diverse communities in British Columbia – to preserve its cultural heritage, including tangible archival and object collections and community history. After meeting on-site to discuss the offer, the representatives of the Salient Group, Victoria Chinatown Museum Society, and the Royal British Columbia Museum confirmed their commitment to facilitate the community's aspiration for a living museum. Local business people were keen to attract tourists and the RBCM welcomed an opportunity for community collaboration and for the creative use of unconventional space (fig. 1).

---

**The RBCM had been working for years with this Chinatown community...to preserve its cultural heritage, including tangible archival and object collections and community history.**

---

The space is located opposite a courtyard on the southeast side of the Fan Tan Alley (fig. 2), which itself has narrow entrances easily missed by casual visitors. The Salient Group wanted the space to catch the attention of visitors and draw them into the courtyard, where there were existing arts and crafts shops. In February 2020, the RBCM proposed two options for the space.



Fig. 3.  
The Chinese  
Freemasons Lantern.

The first option was to reimagine a historic, traditional, running-horse Chinese lantern in the RBCM collection as a newly designed, three-dimensional replica. The original artifact (fig. 3), which measures 46" high by 33" wide by 28" deep (117 × 83 × 72 cm), had been commissioned in the 1930s by the Chinese Freemasons in Victoria. The Chinese Freemasons are an influential organization whose first lodge in today's Canada opened in 1863 in the gold rush town of Barkerville in the Cariboo region of BC's interior. Today, their Canadian headquarters is located just north of Fan Tan Alley. The proposal was to hire an artist to recreate this historic lantern, which features exquisitely crafted calligraphy and art work on its six sides. The artist would work on the replica as a live art-and-craft project in the space. The second option was to showcase a digital animation of the original artifact.<sup>7</sup> Given the budgetary and time requirements, the VGMS and SG chose

the second option in order to take advantage of the anticipated busy tourism season in the summer of 2020.

This project was an expression of local inspiration to find new ways to revitalize and reimagine the future of Chinatown(s) through an outdoor exhibition. Its result was *Peering into the Past*, a dynamic, urban pop-up exhibition visible through the alley (intro image). It includes several interpretive elements. The lantern itself is interpreted through digital animation (fig. 4), which shows all the intricate moving parts of the original fully functional running-horse lantern. Bilingual captions (English and traditional Chinese original to early Chinatown uses) on the windows of this closed space explain its connection to Chinatown history. Panel displays on nearby walls supplement this narrative. An archival image of children in early 20th-century



Fig. 4. The Chinese Freemasons Lantern presented in image (right) and digital animation (left) in the pop-up exhibition.





Chinatown serves as background to frame one window (fig. 5). On the courtyard wall, an interpretive panel provides contextual wayfinding around Chinatown via a reproduction of an 1891 fire insurance map of the Chinatown (fig. 6).<sup>8</sup> An upper window in the courtyard features an image of the oldest children of the influential community leader Lee Mong Kow of the early 1900s, whose family is the subject of existing murals in Chinatown neighborhood (fig. 7).

*Peering into the Past* honors the perspectives, connections, and productivities of Chinatown through a juxtaposition of a historical artifact in digital format with archival images. This allows the historical building facade to speak for itself within that interpretive context. We strove to engage visitors not with stereotypical ideas of old Chinatowns, but with glimpses into the past in small corners to pique their interest. And we introduced the “now” with wayfinding signage (at the entrances to Fan Tan Alley and outside the building) that was contemporary in graphic look and feel (fig. 8). An intersection of place and its people then and now (as spectators) exemplifies a living community. Instead of making Chinatown into a simulated historical town, we hope to establish the

aesthetics and philosophy of integrating the modern and the historical, of blending business and interpretation.

The traditional, core Chinatown organizations in Victoria united to sponsor this exhibition when it opened in July 2020 under pandemic safety protocols. The Victoria Chinatown Museum Society scheduled four openings with staggered arrivals in the same afternoon to accommodate the COVID requirement of physical distancing for the invitees, who included all stakeholders. Among them were leaders of Chinatown associations, business partners, and representatives from the planned Chinese Canadian Museum and different levels of government. As a result of the pandemic restrictions on tourism, it was challenging for visitors from out of town to see it and for us to evaluate the impact and success of this exhibition based on visitor experiences. As a result, the partners decided to extend this pop-up exhibition until March 2022.

### **Many-layered Challenges**

Community engagement best practice is as diverse as the differing needs of any community, and as any given museum professionals’ relationships with the

**Fig. 5.** Historical image of children at Chinese New Year in Victoria's Chinatown, February 1900.

**Fig. 6.** The fire insurance map featured in the *Peering into the Past* pop-up exhibition in Fan Tan Alley courtyard.

**Fig. 7.** The Lee Mong Kow children's image on the upper window in the courtyard.

diverse communities that they work with. The driving principle for my professional work at the RBCM during the past decade has been to advocate for the interests and preferences of previously marginalized communities and to take account of the historical and ongoing divergence of community perspectives. Today, the stakeholders in North America's Chinatowns are not only the local Chinese communities, but also diverse residents and business owners, governments, and the tourism and cultural sectors in the

case of Victoria. Over the past decade, my close affiliations with local Chinese Canadian communities has taught me that long-standing underrepresentation in the broader community, coupled with historic discrimination, has resulted in a need to present a history that highlights accomplishments and contributions to society as a whole, despite the challenges.

To respect the core communities' sentiments, I consciously did not include content within this inaugural pop-up



**Fig. 8.** Fan Tan Alley entrance to the courtyard after the pop-up exhibit with new wayfinding signage.

exhibition project that interrogated what Chinese Canadian community historians self-critiqued as a Chinatown malady – gambling. This topic could have been considered a natural for the exhibition, since the “fan tan” in the name of Fan Tan Alley was a common gambling game in early Chinatowns, and Fan Tan Alley did host gambling dens. The term “fan tan” is explained in the alley but, instead of focusing on this aspect of the geography of Chinatown life, I chose to feature an 1891 fire insurance map. The map highlights the diversity of Chinatown businesses and building uses and the vitality of the communities within the broader context of their connections to the trans-Pacific trade.

Addressing the “difficult histories” from a community history approach continues to interest and challenge me as a historian and a curator. One of RBCM’s core galleries displays a rare artifact: a salmon-processing machine from the early 1900s, with its official name, “Iron Chink” – a derogatory term for Chinese people – forged on the machine itself. This exhibit is a testament to the racism which underplayed the central role of Chinese workers in the coastal cannery industry. Two visitors, one Chinese Canadian and one Chinese American, expressed the view that it evoked unpleasant memories of the racism experienced by their ancestors. In response, I emphasized our commitment to further consultation and future development of appropriate context in order to make it an educational moment, instead of hiding/erasing it. The same challenge will be faced when local Chinatown communities seek to build their own museum hubs and create narratives about discrimination. Such approaches require much consultation, thoughtful deliberation, and consensus- and momentum-building. It will be a productive and exciting challenge

for public historians like me who work with communities. Trust-based relationships need to be established before we can move into the difficult, more in-depth dialogues on the darker parts of the history, and we also need to work with communities at their pace, where and when they are ready.

Another major challenge has been the pandemic. While we were planning the exhibition in late 2019 and early 2020, no one could have predicted the COVID lockdown and how it would change our lives. North America’s Chinatowns are contested sites where historic and contemporary racism have been informed by complex economic, social, and cultural factors. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems at an immeasurable rate, and the long-term effects remain to be seen. In addition, anti-Asian racism has intensified, despite the many pleas and educational work against it.<sup>9</sup>

Adversity, though, does not stop forward positive momentum. The Victoria Chinatown Museum Society is currently championing support for a more permanent space in Chinatown, the Royal British Columbia Museum continues to provide museum expertise where needed, and the major Chinese Canadian associations and organizations remain active. In the long-term plan, the VGMS will ideally collaborate with the City of Victoria and other local partners to present a consistent signage design portfolio, one that works with city requirements and implements innovative revitalizing measures. As previously mentioned, we have piloted some signage that integrates the historical with modern design. There are always possibilities and uncertainties. Each will need to be met with action over time.

Perhaps one lesson from this case study of Victoria’s Chinatown – and its new approach to revitalizing a community at risk through unconventional museum work – is the understanding that bringing all stakeholders to the table takes commitment and relationship building in the long-term. Time and resources must be allocated for genuine conversations to take place, for government support to fund the work, and for practical business planning towards future financial sustainability. Thus far, all of our partners are committed to working with stakeholders to find a viable approach to make this collective history and space sustainable and worthy of its history and memories: the Chinatown that we all cherish. ■

### Acknowledgements

*I acknowledge and appreciate that I have been living and working on the Traditional Territory of the Lekwungen (Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations). My sincere gratitude to Exhibition editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier, the anonymous reviewers, Patricia E. Roy, and Janet MacDonald for their invaluable feedback on this piece, and to Alan Lowe, Robert Fung, and Erika Stenson for their review of it. My special thanks to Ken Johnson, Kim Gough, and Chris O’Connor, to all the other professional staff at the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives, and to all in the wider communities including the partners at Victoria Chinatown Museum Society and the Salient Group, for working together towards a positive collective heritage future.*

1 Alana Semuels, “The End of the American Chinatown,” *The Atlantic*, February 4, 2019, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/02/americas-chinatowns-are-disappearing/581767/>.

2 Semuels, “The End”; Claire Wang, “A year of loss, heartache, looming eviction – and rescuing itself – for Chinatown,” *NBC News*, December 14, 2020, [www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/year-loss-heartache-looming- eviction-rescuing-itself-](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/year-loss-heartache-looming- eviction-rescuing-itself-)

chinatown-n1249556; Mike Howell, “Investigation: Is Vancouver’s Chinatown dying?” in *Vancouver is Awesome Local News*, June 17, 2021, [www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/investigation-is-vancouver-chinatown-dying-3882162](http://www.vancouverisawesome.com/local-news/investigation-is-vancouver-chinatown-dying-3882162).

3 The wider “communities” of Chinatown include core Chinese Canadian associations, organizations, general residents, and businesses and developers. The core “communities” of Victoria’s Chinatown, that we work closely with, are the traditional knowledge holders of established Chinese Canadian associations and organizations, under the umbrella of Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.

4 The Province of British Columbia, “Chinese Canadian Museum – Results,” *govTogetherBC*, November 1, 2020, <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/impact/chinese-canadian-museum-results/>; the Province of British Columbia, “New museum to tell story of Chinese Canadians in B.C.,” *BC Gov News*, July 13, 2020, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020TAC0035-001302>.

5 While I am of Chinese descent and speak Mandarin Chinese, it has taken long-term work and genuine efforts to establish relationships with the local Chinatown communities led by historic core Chinese Canadian organizations, such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. While some speak Mandarin, many from those communities speak Cantonese and other dialects, such as Toisan and Say Yup. Each community is diverse and different, and their cultural sentiments and norms all require long-term relationship building to communicate and work with.

6 See Royal British Columbia Museum Learning Portal, “Bonita Mar and Lena Lee,” at <https://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/pathways/tradition-felicities/bonita-mar-and-lena-lee/> for the story of the shop told by the descendants of first shop owner.

7 This lantern went through a complete professional conservation treatment for stability during the run of a previous exhibition. This original artifact remains fragile and in need of constant care, thus the need for the digital animation to show it in its fully functional glory. See Tzu-I Chung, “Multicultural Museum Education in and beyond Exhibit: Local and Transnational Synergies from Canada’s Oldest Chinatown,” *The International Journal of Museum and Society* 13, no. 2 (March 2015): 221–236, <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v13i2.327>.

8 Kendra Crighton, “Fan Tan Alley exhibit connects Victoria visitors with history of Canada’s oldest Chinatown,” *Victoria News*, July 23, 2020, [www.vicnews.com/news/fan-tan-alley-exhibit-connects-victoria-visitors-with-history-of-canadas-oldest-chinatown/](http://www.vicnews.com/news/fan-tan-alley-exhibit-connects-victoria-visitors-with-history-of-canadas-oldest-chinatown/).

9 Semuels, “The End.”