Nanaimo's Chinatown: Reconsidered and Remembered

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Bleached by the Sun: Perspectives on Chinatown
《陽光下的褪色：關於華埠的觀點》

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Fred Herzog, Kin Jung, Karen Tam 譚嘉文, Betty Wong, Jackie Wong, Charlotte Zhang 張卓加

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If you ask long-time Nanaimoites about the city's Chinatown, they might recall the names of a number of the restaurants—Puss-In-Boots, the Canton, or Nam King Low—as well, the fire that destroyed the community on September 30, 1960. A fire that "was a defining, era-ending moment in Nanaimo" (Holmes 2020).

Fast forward to 2026, Nanaimo's population grew dramatically from 14,000-plus in 1961 to more than 110,000 (BC 2025); relatively speaking, the city is one of newcomers. Mention Chinatown and people are likely to recall Victoria's and Vancouver's, the oldest and largest, respectively, in Canada. If asked to name another in British Columbia, you might hear the names Barkerville or Cumberland. Prior to Vancouver becoming the terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Nanaimo's was the third largest Chinatown in BC, after Victoria and New Westminster (Lai 1988). As well, it had more than one location (four, though #3 and #4 were adjacent to one another). Today, the memory of Nanaimo's Chinatowns appears faded by the passage of time.

There are fewer and fewer who have the lived experience of walking along Pine Street, stopping in to dine at one of the restaurants, or to hear the vibrant sounds of businesses and residents. Chinatown (#3) was located on the margins of the city limits at the time. After the fire and as the city grew, rather than a uniquely defined area, it became no different than surrounding properties—primarily residential. Unless you lived in these former locations, you might not realise that they had once been Chinatowns. This will change with the installation of Jackie Wong's

Lost Intersections (Nanaimo Temporary Public Art Program, 2025), neon public art works that will act as physical markers recognizing these forgotten places. Art will link spaces rooted in history and memory.

Chinatown, the word, can conjure memories—of an actual place, yet be an imagined space to others. Each is a perspective—a point of view. In the exhibition, *Bleached by the Sun: Perspectives on Chinatown*, it is the latter part of this title, which is reflected in the diverse works and viewpoints of the six artists presented here.

I have my own perspective as someone who moved to Nanaimo decades after the fire; I was aware that my new home was a place with deep roots within the Chinese Canadian community: home to miners, labourers, businesses, and families. My relatives had visited in the past—a stop en route to Cumberland's Chinatown (the Lim's point of origin as Canadians). I did not have to imagine what Nanaimo's Chinatown looked like from nothing; I had Denise Chong's memoir, *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* (1994), to sketch an image in my mind, supported by the extant photographs and paintings found in the Nanaimo Archives and Nanaimo Museum collections. I could readily envision Nanaimo's Chinatown—not just the physical terrain and buildings, but also the people and their lives. Nanaimo's Chinatown was the background, while Chong's family's story was the foreground. For those who do not belong to the community, the perspective is inverted; Chinatown, whether Nanaimo's or elsewhere, is the focal point. It is different, it is exotic. The people who inhabit the space are (or were) often perceived as characters, in fact, stereotypes.

I still recall walking in Vancouver's Chinatown with my cousin, who was in his late 70s–early 80s in the 2000s. A "tourist" eager to photograph him, stopped to ask his permission. What was the image she sought? A grizzle-haired "Chinese" man ambling along a Chinatown street. Though he had lived in Chinatown as a child, home was now in East Vancouver; a person of Chinese ancestry did not make him a denizen of Chinatown. To this individual, the image likely evoked one of the "bachelor" men that inhabited the late 19th and early 20th century Chinatowns.

During this early immigration wave, urban Chinatowns "[were] a place that the casual tourist dared not enter unguided, and a place where the unchaperoned slummer reveled in mystery and danger. It was the perfect milieu for sensationalist stories and picturesque photographs" (Teng 2002, 54). Though this statement is in reference to San Francisco, the sentiment reflects one of Chinatowns in general. Arnold Genthe's street scenes of San Francisco's Chinatown were renowned. To accentuate what differences there might have been, Genthe "sometimes cropped his images to remove evidence of Western culture, such as signs in English, emphasizing stereotypical attributes **imposed** on the neighborhood and its inhabitants" (emphasis added, MoMA 2025).

Stereotypes. The men of Chinatown were not bachelors by choice. In 1885 a head tax of $50 was levied on almost every Chinese person en-

tering the Dominion of Canada, rising to $500 in 1903 (Chan 2016). In that same year, in Nanaimo, a "four room cottage and lot on the upper side of Milton Street" was available for $325 cash (*Nanaimo Daily News* 1903, 4). Through legislation, beginning with the Chinese Immigration Act, 1885, to the 1923 *Exclusion Act*, Chinese were actively stymied from immigrating to Canada (Parks Canada 2025). The latter policy basically closed the door to Chinese until its repeal in 1947.

Similarly, choice was often not a consideration as to where Chinese lived. Fire insurance maps show that Chinese, as well as other racialized communities, were located on the margins, or separated from the city or town proper (Leduc 2025, 8). My father's birth certificate notes his place of birth: Chinatown, *near* Cumberland. The lands occupied by the Chinese were frequently less desirable—wetland, or industrial. And, in some cases, restrictive covenants were placed on properties from the 1900s, up to the 1950s (LTSA 2023). From a West Vancouver example: "No person of the African or Asiatic race or of African or Asiatic Descent (except servants of the occupier of the premises in residence) shall reside or be allowed to remain on the premises" (Weichel 2022).

These restrictions were the result of how Chinese were perceived. They were an "undesirable class," often described as dirty or even a health hazard. Chapter titles from the *1902 Royal Commission* section on Chinese Immigration are instructive: "Their Unsanitary Condition," "Crime Statistics," "The Moral and Religious Aspect of the Case" (Canada 1902, v–vi). The table of contents makes obvious to the reader that the Chinese were a "serious" problem that required active remediation.

The manner in which the government, not only federal, but also provincial and municipal, engaged with this early immigrant population reinforced the perceived "foreignness" and reputed "unassimilable nature" of Chinese among the wider populace. This perception is reimagined in Charlotte Zhang's *Pine Street, Now and Again* (2019) by depicting the Chinese Chicken Oath.

Discrimination was open and blatant. Anti-Asian sentiment led to rioting in Vancouver's Chinatown and Paueru-gai (Powell Street) in 1907. As well, the Ku Klux Klan arrived in 1925 to actively recruit and promote its "truth"—advertising in the Vancouver Daily Province (Russwurm 2018).

Violence and hate reemerged during COVID-times. Through art, Karen Tam's Ruinscape (2020) reminds us of this history of anti-Asian racism (Tam 2021). The images of both people and places are under attack, reflecting past and contemporary attitudes. Those perceived as Chinese were nameless, identifiable only by how they appeared. In a similar vein, the Chinese miners of the No. 1 Esplanade Mine disaster, a third of those who were killed, are known only by numbers. Jackie Wong's *Just Numbers* (2025) mirrors this sense of anonymity.

That invisibility echoes in the images of nameless bachelors once photographed on the streets of Chinatown, whether during Genthe's (1896–

1906) or Herzog's (mid-1950–1960s) time. Herzog's black and white streetscapes in this collection are notably "empty" of life—a single figure is seen—only the colour photograph of a girl offers the possibility of recognition. However, the place is knowable as Chinese: Chinese calligraphy is visible in two of the images, signalling that this is Chinatown. In a similar fashion, the name Wah Hing Land Co in Betty Wong's watercolour indicates, again, a Chinatown streetscape. Yet Wong also makes herself practically an "invisible" part of the image with how she places her signature inside the picture rather than on the margins; she is part of Chinatown.

The photographs taken by and of Kin Jung shift the focus to community, featuring Jung as an individual, as well as to the people that mattered to him; they speak to relationships beyond Chinatown. They inform the viewer of lived lives—children, families, play, work, celebration—this is no longer the bachelor society in which Jung and Wong resided during their youth and early adult lives.

Through this exhibit, six artists recover memories of Nanaimo's Chinatown from a variety of perspectives—from those who lived in Chinatown and those who experienced it from afar. Brought into focus, Chinatown is reconsidered and remembered.

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