



VANCOUVER  
HERITAGE  
FOUNDATION

# HISTORIC CHINATOWN

VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN  
MAP GUIDE



# VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN



Vancouver's Chinatown was recognized as a National Historic Site of Canada in 2011. One of Vancouver's oldest neighbourhoods, it is home to important cultural heritage assets and many community organizations with deep historical roots in Vancouver and Canada. Across 130 years of change, the district maintains a strong community and cultural identity, and is one of the most significant urban heritage sites in Canada. This map guide helps you explore key places within the Chinatown Historic District.



CVA 1376-506

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

We have numbered stops as a suggested route to explore the area but you do not need to follow the numbers to enjoy the sights. The introduction, chronology and highlighted boxes provide the context and background to the people, events and important information about Chinatown's history. A full walking tour will take 1-2 hours. There are food options, traditional businesses and public washrooms located along the way.

Chinese immigrants and their descendants have played an integral part in shaping the history of the province of British Columbia (BC). Decades before Vancouver's incorporation in 1886, Chinese labourers worked in the industries that developed BC while Chinese entrepreneurs established successful businesses. Vancouver's Chinatown grew up at the heart of the early city, providing housing and support to the community through the establishment of associations and societies designed for mutual help, cooperation and general welfare.

Between 1788, when the first migrants from China to what is now BC arrived, until well into the 1960s, Chinese immigrants to Canada came primarily from just eight small rural districts in Guangdong province in southern China. Speaking various dialects of Cantonese (a regional form of Chinese), and predominantly male, they organized long-distance networks that stretched across Canada and around the Pacific region. After Vancouver replaced Victoria as the main gateway for Chinese migrants into Canada, many Chinese labourers used Vancouver's Chinatown as a base for seasonal work which was available around BC in mines, farms, logging camps and canneries, returning between jobs to rest, and to send and receive letters to and from family in China.

Chinese Canadians were the target of racial discrimination and anti-Asian political movements from the first moment BC joined the new Dominion of Canada in 1871. They lost the right to vote in 1872, and suffered legalized discrimination such as the Head Tax of 1885 (a fee for arriving in Canada that only Chinese immigrants were forced to pay) which raised revenue that was split between the federal and BC governments. Between 1885 and 1923, they paid nearly \$23 million, worth approximately \$1.5 billion today. In 1923, after intense lobbying from the municipal government of Vancouver, the Canadian government passed the *Chinese Immigration Act*, in reality an exclusion act. Over the next 25 years, fewer than 100 new Chinese immigrants entered Canada, with devastating effects on the Chinatown community.

During the exclusion era between 1923 and 1947, when the exclusion act was finally overturned, Chinese Canadians also endured widespread segregation in housing and in employment, particularly in professions such as medicine, pharmacy and law. The City of Vancouver prohibited them from receiving City contracts and prevented City contractors from hiring them. It was not until 1952 that the first Chinese employee was hired by the City. Vancouver's Chinatown, however, was also the main headquarters for challenging such discrimination and the long struggle of Chinese Canadians against racism. The Chinese Benevolent Association

(CBA), an umbrella organization of local Chinatown associations and societies, was organized to combat anti-Chinese discrimination, and CBA Presidents such as Foon Sien Wong helped lead the decades long fight to gain equal treatment and voting rights. Chinese Canadians were finally granted the right to vote in 1947.

Vancouver's Chinatown today retains a close connection to its historical roots through food and cultural traditions, with Cantonese still widely spoken. After immigration reform removed racial preferences from Canada's immigration policies in 1967, increasing numbers of ethnic Chinese migrants came from around the world, with particularly large numbers coming from Hong Kong and other parts of southeast Asia. New Chinese migration in the 1970s and 1980s gave life and vibrancy to Chinatown, but by the 1990s the wide availability of Chinese produce and restaurants all around the Lower Mainland decreased the role of Chinatown as the main location for Chinese goods and services. But even as businesses have struggled with the challenge of Vancouver's demographic changes, Chinatown remains the historic and cultural centre for Chinese heritage and identity in Vancouver. As of 2018, over 90 active associations and societies are headquartered here, providing educational, social and recreational programs. Many provide seniors' housing and other community services including language lessons, martial arts classes and iconic cultural art forms such as the lion dance.

Chinatown faces significant challenges but remains a vibrant and unique heritage community. Although many of the older historic buildings have been protected since 1971 under provincial and municipal heritage legislation (24 are listed on the Vancouver Heritage Register), the future goals of Chinatown's community go well beyond the preservation of buildings. Official apologies for historic wrongs and discrimination against the Chinese Canadian community have been made by the Government of Canada, the Province of British Columbia and the City of Vancouver. Vancouver City Council adopted recommendations in 2017 to create a long-term plan for the conservation and management of Chinatown as a living cultural urban landscape. The broad scope of this plan recognizes that Chinatown's unique intangible cultural heritage is vitally important to its community, and to the City of Vancouver.

Cover Image: Parade on Pender Street, 1945. CVA 586-3955

## CHINATOWN CHRONOLOGY

The site where Chinatown stands today was used for generations by local First Nations people. The path of Carrall Street was once a historic portage route that allowed canoes to and from False Creek and the Burrard Inlet. The area served as a transportation route and a gathering place, and was close to a seasonal village site at present-day Gastown.

**1788:** Chinese carpenters are recruited in Macau as ship's crew with British entrepreneur John Meares. They arrive in Nuu-chah-nulth territory on what is now known as Vancouver Island, building a fur trade fort before being driven out by the Spanish.

**Late 1850s and 1860s:** Large numbers of migrants arrive from around the globe as part of the gold rushes to BC. Chinese migrants were a significant proportion of the arrivals and many remained as labourers, miners, farmers, shop owners and merchants. They helped develop much of the agriculture and small business infrastructure of the interior of BC.

**1880-1885:** Chinese labourers were instrumental in building the difficult BC portion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), overcoming challenging and treacherous terrain and weather conditions in the winters.

**1885:** As the CPR is completed, a discriminatory *Chinese Head Tax* of \$50 per person is introduced for all new Chinese immigrants. In 1904, the tax was raised to \$500, the equivalent of two years' wages at the time. This was the direct result of lobbying from anti-Chinese and anti-Asian organizations in Vancouver. Despite the prohibitive expense, over 90,000 Chinese immigrants still entered Canada between 1885 and 1923.

**1900s:** As Vancouver grows and begins claiming its place as an economic centre in BC, many Victoria-based headquarters for various societies move to Vancouver. By 1901, the population of Vancouver's Chinatown had risen to almost 2,900 people.

**1907:** Following a rally organized by Vancouver's Asiatic Exclusion League and the Vancouver District Trades Council, a mob marched on Chinatown and the neighbouring Japanese Canadian district on Powell Street, smashing property and looting stores. In the aftermath of the riot and a commission led by federal Labour Minister Mackenzie King, Chinese and Japanese merchants were compensated for their property damage, but Japanese migration was curtailed by the 1908 Hayashi-Lemieux *Gentleman's Agreement*, migration from India was cut off by the *Continuous Passage* provision of 1908, and opium manufacturing was made illegal in 1908.

**1911:** Dr. Sun Yat-Sen makes one of his three visits to Vancouver in January and is welcomed by the Chee Kung Tong (known in English as the Chinese Freemasons). The

Chee Kung Tong would become one of the largest financial contributors to the 1911 uprising against the Qing Empire in Guangzhou.

**1923:** Immigration to Canada closes for the vast majority of Chinese people with the passing of the *Chinese Immigration Act* on July 1st by Canada. Chinatown struggled with families unable to reunite and an aging population. The number of Chinese men living in Vancouver overall declined from 45,000 in 1923 to just over 20,000 in 1947. Even after the Act was repealed, the effects continued and as late as the 1970s, Chinatown was home to many elderly Chinese Canadian men who had been unable to marry or have a family, living out their days in single resident rooms.

Although immigration measures such as the *Chinese Head Tax* and the *Chinese Immigration Act* were federal acts of legislation, many provincial and federal anti-Chinese laws would not have been passed without lobbying and strong political support from the City of Vancouver, including the then Mayor and Aldermen.

**1936:** Chinatown celebrates Vancouver's Golden Jubilee by erecting a temporary Chinese Village on the site of today's Chinese Cultural Centre. This marked a turning point in attitudes towards the district and the point where Chinatown leaders began to exert themselves in promoting the district. Quene Yip, a renowned soccer player credited with crossing cultural barriers through his athleticism in the 1920s and 30s wrote a booklet about Chinatown that took urban myths about Chinatown head on.

**1947:** The *Chinese Immigration Act* is repealed and Chinese Canadians regain the right to vote. The City of Vancouver allows them to vote in 1949. Acknowledgment of the service of Chinese and other minorities in the Armed Forces along with the support of societies, in particular the Chinese Benevolent Association and its President Wong Foon Sien, were instrumental in getting the federal government to repeal the Act.

**1950s to 1970s:** New and popular restaurants and businesses attracted citizens from across the city; popular nightclubs became part of the city's social scene.

**1957:** Canada's first Chinese-Canadian Member of Parliament, Douglas Jung (1924-2002), a World War II veteran, is elected in the riding of Vancouver Centre which includes Chinatown.

**1960s:** Plans to construct a major freeway through the heart of Chinatown and Strathcona are introduced in the 1950s and pursued in the 1960s. As part of an urban renewal and transportation plan, large sections of several historic areas are threatened with demolition, and some demolition and expropriation did occur. The *Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association* (SPOTA) and allies in Chinatown and from around Vancouver organize to resist the proposals and prevented more of the area from being lost.

**1971:** Chinatown is protected as a historic district along with Gastown under provincial legislation and recognized as an area of particular historic significance and a tourism asset.

**1973:** The first Chinese New Year Parade in Vancouver, now an annual tradition attended by thousands of spectators, is organized by the Chinese Cultural Centre (founded in 1973) with other local organizations.

**1979:** The Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee sponsors a streetscape improvement program. Chinese-style elements such as tile, red street lamps and specially paved crosswalks are added. This was the beginning of a number of investments in the historic and cultural value of the area.

**1986:** Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Chinese Classical Garden and the current Chinese Cultural Centre open.

**2002:** The Chinatown Millennium Gate is built at the western end of Chinatown and the City of Vancouver accepts the recommendations in the Chinatown Vision report. That same year the *Chinese Railroad Workers and Chinese Veterans Memorial* at the Chinatown Memorial Plaza is unveiled.

**2011:** Vancouver's Chinatown is recognized as a National Historic Site of Canada.

**2018:** The City of Vancouver offers an official apology for the Historical Discrimination Against People of Chinese Descent.

## **SOCIETIES AND ASSOCIATIONS IN CHINATOWN**

For over 100 years, members of the community have created aid associations and societies, often organized around common surnames or places of origin in China and designed for mutual help, cooperation and general welfare. The Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA), informally established in 1889, is the umbrella organization to which over 90 individual societies belong. Societies have helped new immigrants find employment, accommodation and other necessities and they continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of the community. They continue to provide cultural, social, educational and recreational services today.

While the societies have their roots in Vancouver's Chinatown, they are also part of a global network of societies established throughout the Chinese diaspora with branches not only in British Columbia, but throughout Canada and the rest of North America and southeast Asia as well.

By 1937, there were over 60 such organizations. Imposing headquarters on Pender Street dating from the early part of the 20th century are still owned by the societies that continue to serve their membership.



**STOP 1: CHINATOWN MILLENNIUM GATE**  
PENDER ST AT TAYLOR ST (2002)

Marking the western boundary of Chinatown, the Millennium Gate was designed by local architect Joe Y. Wai (1940–2017). Wai's work and contribution can be seen throughout Chinatown. This Gate recalls those you may find at the entrances to villages in southern China. Chinese characters on the eastern face read "Remember the past and look forward to the future." At the end of Shanghai Alley hangs a replica Western Han Dynasty bell, a gift to Vancouver from sister city Guangzhou and a symbol of the historic connection between the two cities and their urban settlements. Also on this corner is S.U.C.C.E.S.S., created in Vancouver in 1973 to assist new Canadians of Chinese descent to overcome language and cultural barriers. The organization is now one of BC's largest social services organizations with locations also in Taiwan and Korea.



**STOP 2: SOUTHEAST CORNER OF PENDER AND CARRALL STREETS**

**CHINESE FREEMASONS BUILDING - 3-9 W PENDER ST (1907)**

The Chee Kung Tong, a traditional Chinese fraternal organization, first appeared in Canada to provide welfare assistance to the earliest Chinese immigrants during the Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858. The Methodist church was the first to minister to the Chinese community in Vancouver (1888) and had a building on this site from 1889 until 1907. The Chee Kung

Tong constructed the current building and in 1920, the organization adopted the English name the Chinese Freemasons in order to forge links with European Freemasonry. Like many overseas organizations, it was deeply involved in Chinese politics. The Freemasons supported Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's efforts to bring democracy to China and hosted him in his Vancouver visits to raise funds and support for his revolutionary Kuomintang party. The building was even mortgaged to help fund Sun Yat-Sen's 1911 rebellion (see Page 11 for information about Dr. Sun Yat-Sen). It also served as the original home of the successful business, Modernize Tailors, one of many tailors in the area, and a profession available to Chinese Canadians in an era of employment restrictions. The building was repaired after a fire in 1975, then in the early 2000s a careful restoration was completed by Joe Wai for the Wong family.

Michael Norbury, John Atkin Collection



### **CHINESE TIMES BUILDING** 1 E PENDER ST (1901)

This two-storey brick building designed by architect W.T. Whiteway was commissioned by successful businessman and community leader Yip Sang. From

the 1930s to 1990s, this was home to *The Chinese Times*, an important source for local and Chinese political news, managed by the Chinese Freemasons. The printing presses could be viewed through the ground floor windows, and men gathered to read the paper pasted to the Carrall Street wall. When the newspaper moved in, a mezzanine floor was added to accommodate the typesetters who used the 5,000 different Chinese characters to create each edition. Since the typesetters sat all day the ceiling is only 6-feet high.



### **SAM KEE BUILDING** 8 W PENDER ST (1913)

Credited as "The world's narrowest (shallowest) freestanding building," the Sam Kee Building dates from 1913. The building's namesake, the Sam Kee Company was established

in 1888, and was one of the largest Chinese merchant firms in Vancouver. The company manufactured charcoal, operated a herring saltery in Nanaimo and contracted Chinese labour to various industries. It also imported and exported food products to and from China, served as agents for the Blue Funnel Steamship Line and possessed sizable real estate holdings throughout Greater Vancouver.

The Sam Kee Building is a result of expropriation, but for which successful business leader Chang Toy received market value. Toy had his lawyers negotiate a fair price for the piece of land which the City needed for road widening at Carrall and Pender Streets. This left him with a narrow strip. He hired architects Bryan and Gillam to design a steel-frame commercial building for offices, business and bath houses that extended under the sidewalk, maximizing use of the property. In 1986, the glass prisms that were set in a tight grid across the sidewalk to light the basement, were replaced with modern glass.



Photo credit: VHF

### **STOP 3: LIM SAI HOR (KOW MOK) BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION**

525-531 CARRALL ST (1903)

This earliest surviving association building was constructed in 1903 for the Chinese Empire Reform Association, whose focus was to bring about political reform in China, and was the most influential association in Chinatown at the time. At its height, it housed a school and published a newspaper. Its members included Chang Toy, Yip Sang and Alexander Won Cumyow (the first person of Chinese descent born in Canada). The Empire Reform Association's influence faded with the fall of the Qing Empire and the emergence of the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen-led republic in 1911. The newly formed Lim Sai Hor (Kow Mok) Association rented the space in 1926 and bought the building in 1945 to serve as headquarters for its members defined by common surname Lim or Lam. A 2017 rehabilitation project restored the exterior balcony details, lighting and other distinctive features that reflect the exchange between China and Canada, influencing the traditional village house style and blending it with modern western design trends. The use of green as an accent colour in the interior and exterior is a nod to the members' surname which means "forest." The building is home to an ancestral altar built in 1993 and used by society members.

Along Carrall Street you will see the white walls of the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden. The passage between the Garden and the Chinese Cultural Centre was once known

as Chinese Opera House Alley since it led to the Sing Kew Opera House, an important cultural venue in early Chinatown.



**STOP 4: DR. SUN YAT-SEN CLASSICAL CHINESE GARDEN**  
578 CARRALL ST (1986)

The first full-size classical Chinese garden outside of China, named for Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, sits on the site where Chinatown originated. Here, over the waters of False Creek was the Royal City Planing Mill built months before the City's incorporation in 1886 and where their Chinese workers settled. As the city grew, so did Chinatown. The original settlement was displaced in 1905 with the construction of the Great Northern train station. Almost a hundred years later, local architect Joe Wai and landscape architect Don Vaughan worked with the Suzhou Garden Administration and its chief architect, Wang Zhu Xin, to create this adaptation of a Ming Dynasty scholar's garden, opening in time for the 1986 World's Fair, Expo '86. Chinese gardens seek harmony between the man-made and natural worlds, and this garden seeks to be a bridge between cultures and a contemplative walled space within the downtown core.

**DR. SUN YAT-SEN (1866 – 1925)**

The influential nationalist leader in the early 20th century in China, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, lived in Vancouver for protracted periods and raised substantial sums in support of the Chinese Revolution that ended the Qing Dynasty in 1911. Sun Yat-Sen was appointed to serve as Provisional President of the Republic of China when it was founded in 1912. He co-founded the Kuomintang and served as its leader, and is considered to be "the father" of modern China.

The first classical Chinese garden outside of China was built in Chinatown in 1986 and is named in his honour to highlight the close ties he had here. In the first decade of the 20th century he travelled internationally to raise awareness, funds and support for his movement. He visited Vancouver three times for extended periods and received significant support from local Chinese communities in British Columbia and across Canada.

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## STOP 5: COURTYARD OF THE CHINESE CULTURAL CENTRE

555 COLUMBIA ST (1986)

This centre provides a home for Chinese heritage and culture. A competition-winning design by James K.M. Cheng Architects and Romses Kwan & Associates, the concrete building incorporates the elements of traditional Chinese post and beam architecture. In 1998, the Museum and Archives building was added, designed by Joe Wai in a style inspired by the Ming Dynasty with its flared eaves, screened windows and tile roof. It is home to the Chinese Canadian Military Museum. If you leave the courtyard and walk towards Pender Street you will pass by a relief sculpture by Ssu-Tu Jie honouring Chinese railway workers on the east wall and a plaque to honour Chinese Canadian veterans of World War II on the west wall.

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## STOP 6: CHINESE CULTURAL CENTRE, VIEW ACROSS PENDER STREET (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT)

**MING WO BUILDING** - 23 E PENDER ST (1913)

Built for Wong Soon King in 1913, a real estate developer and co-founder of the Chinese Board of Trade, the building is actually known for Ming Wo, a business that has operated since 1917. Founded by Wong Chew Lip, Ming Wo started as a general store that supplied Chinatown's businesses and evolved into a restaurant supply business that has numerous cookware stores in Metro Vancouver. The Wong Chew Lip family descendants lived above the store, working here after

school in their youth, and now continue to run the family business.

### **WONG'S BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION / HON HSING ATHLETIC CLUB - 29 E PENDER ST (1910)**

Designed by architect R.J. MacDonald for the Wong's Benevolent Association, it is home to the Hon Hsing Athletic Club, a Chinese martial arts school established in 1938. Martial arts are a crucial element of intangible cultural heritage in Chinatown, forming the basis of many youth classes that pass knowledge down from older generations, and a fundamental part of the performance of the lion dances that anchor the annual Chinese New Year Parade.

### **YUE SHAN SOCIETY - 33-39 E PENDER ST (1920)**

This three-storey brick building was designed in 1920 by architect W.H. Chow who also designed many others for the community from 1908 to 1922. In 1943, it became home to the Yue Shan Society, an organization formed in 1894 for people from Poon Yue county near Guangzhou. The Society also owns the two-storey brick building to the right (dating to 1889) and the three-storey residential building at the rear of the property facing Market Alley.

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### **WING SANG BUILDING 51 E PENDER ST (1889)**

Part of the Yip family complex, the original two-storey brick structure is the oldest standing building in Chinatown which served as the office and ticket agency of Vancouver businessman Yip Sang. Founded in 1888, the Wing Sang Company was engaged in a variety of enterprises including labour contracting and a trans-Pacific import and export business, and was the Canadian Pacific steamship ticket agency for travel to China. The door you see on the second floor opened to the upstairs warehouse; goods were hoisted in and out through that door.

The complex grew to accommodate a growing family and business with an expansion on top and beside the original building in 1901. The upper floors were the family residence while the ground floor was home to a variety of businesses including a saloon and cigar store. In 1912 a six-storey building was added to the complex facing Market Alley to accommodate the growing extended family. Yip Sang was instrumental in a number of social endeavours including bringing the CBA to Vancouver and establishing a Chinese hospital, and he was a lifetime governor of the Vancouver General Hospital.

Today this address houses offices and the Rennie Museum.



## **STOP 7: NORTHEAST CORNER OF COLUMBIA AND PENDER STREETS**

### **QUEEN ANNE ROOMS - 102 E PENDER ST (1911)**

Built in 1911 for property developer, Loo Gee Wing, the building has been owned by the Lung Kong Tin Yee Association, formerly the Lung Kong Kung Shaw Association, since 1926. The top three storeys now house the residential Sun Ah Hotel. Designed by R.T. Perry and R.A. Nicholais, the coarse brick texture was intended to reflect the hand-built nature and aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement, a modern and popular style at the time of construction.

### **CHINESE BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION OF VANCOUVER (CBA) - 104 -108 E PENDER ST (1909)**

Vancouver's branch of the CBA was formed in 1895 and built this building in 1909. The CBA was an organization created to support railway workers after the completion of the railroad. It evolved into a vocal representative of the Chinese community in BC, organizing protests against repressive legislation such as wage discrimination as well as advocating for community social and physical well-being by sponsoring Chinese language schools and a medical clinic. The architectural style is a good example of the influences from southern China, with recessed balconies, ornate ironwork and decorative tile. The stone fire walls and imposing four floors topped with a pediment wall add to the prominence of the structure. The CBA continues to be active in Chinatown through the sponsorship and support of a seniors residence as well as acting as an umbrella organization, uniting the community.

Next door at 112 East Pender Street you'll see the Freemasons Building, a modernist interpretation of a society building using a late-Victorian structure as the base and altered in 1967 with the large arches and the inclusion of a balcony.



## STOP 8: WONG'S BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION (MON KEANG SCHOOL)

121 E PENDER ST (1908/1921)

The Wong's Benevolent Association adapted this structure in 1921 as the headquarters for the newly amalgamated association that was formed out of three existing organizations. The original two-storey building was developed in 1908 by Loo Gee Wing, and the Wong Association later had the top floor removed and replaced with two new storeys designed by architects G.L. Southwell and J.A. Radford. The Mon Keang School was established on the second floor in 1925, teaching the Chinese language and customs to the *tousang*, or children born in Canada to Chinese parents. In 1947, after the repeal of the *Chinese Immigration Act* and the reunification of many families, the school began offering the first high-school level Chinese classes in Canada. Today, Saturday morning Cantonese classes are again offered in the school room. Look for the decorative stained glass window above the door.

## THE REVITALIZATION OF LOCAL BUSINESS

Chinatown continues to evolve. 1960s and 70s immigration brought Hong Kong-style cafes, clubs and restaurants to the area that attracted customers from across Vancouver and today, along with traditional businesses, new restaurants and shops continue to serve the community and draw new visitors to Chinatown. At 148 East Pender Street you'll find New Town Bakery and its dim sum steamers over the door, serving Chinese and Filipino food since 1980 and on Keefer Street, Gold Stone Bakery offers its award-winning egg tarts.

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## STOP 9: MAH SOCIETY OF CANADA

137-139 E PENDER ST (1913/1921)

The Mah Society purchased this building in 1921 for the purpose of mutual assistance for people with the family name Mah or Ma. To this day people with this surname are invited to stay here if they don't have a place to live or if they need introductions for where to find work. An extra floor was added for an assembly hall as well as lounge and socializing space for residents. Constructed in 1913 with ground floor retail and three floors of rental rooms, the building provided the Mah Society with a steady revenue stream. In 2017, the society undertook an extensive restoration and upgrade which included new windows to match the originals, reinstating the elaborate cornice with its lanterns and the restaurant's storefront. The Mah Society of North America's building continues to provide much needed affordable housing in the neighbourhood.

## SOCIETY BUILDINGS: FORM AND FUNCTION

Typically, associations began informally with no fixed building of their own but at some point a more permanent location would become necessary. Societies and associations in Chinatown either commissioned a building using architects and designers that reflected the current architectural styles, or purchased one, often by selling shares to their members and remodeling it to their needs. Most buildings have undergone changes in construction and usage over the years.

The architecture of the society buildings often reflects a larger pattern of urban shophouses built by Cantonese merchants and common in urban market areas in Guangdong Province and throughout southeast Asia. There was an affinity for a particular hybrid style that developed in the 19th century in Guangzhou with multiple floors and recessed balconies. Designed for ventilation, the balcony also indicates the location of the principal assembly room. Building design elements used by Cantonese merchants were blended with European and classical architectural elements and construction techniques in many of the buildings, and design influences were shared both ways across the Pacific as people moved back and forth.



**STOP 10: CHIN WING CHUN TONG SOCIETY OF CANADA**  
158-160 E PENDER ST (1925)

Popularly known as the Chan Society, the impressive assembly room of this society building follows the Arts and Crafts style. It was designed for the society in 1925 by R.A. McKenzie. The name refers to the surname Chin, Chan or Chen whose ancestral birthplace was Wing Chun village in Hunan Province. Today a faithful recreation of the original 1950s neon sign for the Sai Woo Chop Suey restaurant which operated here from 1925 to 1959 advertises the modern reincarnation of the restaurant.

Beside the Chan Society building is the Soo Yuen Benevolent Association. The false front of the facade hides the last of the original houses built in the 1880s that once lined both sides of the street. Reflecting the common origin of the Louie, Fong and Kwong families, the Soo Yuen Association comprises members from all three family names. The Soo Yuen was founded in 1846 in Hoy Ping (Kaiping) County.



**STOP 11: MAY WAH HOTEL**  
254-262 E PENDER ST (1913)

The May Wah Hotel, with its impressive classical pilasters designed by W.F. Gardiner, opened in 1915 as the Loyal Hotel. After four name changes it was named the May Wah in 1980. More than 100 low-income seniors, mostly women, as well as a few businesses call the single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel home. Today, the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation operates the building as affordable and seniors housing for the neighbourhood.



## STOP 12: KUOMINTANG BUILDING

529 GORE AVENUE (1920)

This building by W.E. Sproat for the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist League of Canada) may seem orphaned on the corner but the other side of Gore Avenue was once the site of society buildings and wholesale grocers, and businesses ran the length of Pender Street into the residential neighbourhood. Much of this area was expropriated as part of the plan for urban renewal and was demolished in preparation to build a freeway in the 1960s. The design once featured an open balcony on the Gore Avenue façade, and a corner pagoda on the roof. The balconies were closed in during a restoration in the 1980s.

In 1913, the Kuomintang party was formed in China with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen at its head but the party was removed from power in a coup. In 1917, they established a rival government in Guangzhou, and the Kuomintang became a powerful political force in all the overseas Chinese communities (see Page 11 for more on Dr. Sun Yat-Sen).

Wayson Choy's nationally significant book *The Jade Peony* (published 1995) is set in 1930s Chinatown. The fictional *American Steam Cleaners* was located in the Kuomintang Building (see the Bookmark plaque at the southeast corner).



## BBQ MEAT SHOPS

Barbecued and roasted meats are part of the culture of Chinatown and a staple of Cantonese cuisine. Of the dozens of shops that existed in the 1970s, just a handful remain

but there are still lineups around the block at Chinese New Year. Look out for these stores, they are well worth a visit.

In the past, inspections and other informal methods were used by the City to restrict and control Chinese businesses and workers. However, in 1975 inspectors temporarily shut down five Chinatown BBQ meat shops for failing to comply with a bylaw that said perishable meats must be kept above 60°C or below 4°C. Other BBQ meat shops in the area shut their businesses and shop workers protested in the streets. The Chinese Benevolent Association organized the *Vancouver Chinese BBQ Meats Merchants Association* to take on the federal health department which had joined the Vancouver authorities in trying to ban the sale of these traditional BBQ meats. The protests continued with a trip to Parliament Hill and did not wane until scientific proof showed that these age-old cultural recipes and cooking methods were hygienic and safe.



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## STOP 13: EAST GEORGIA STREET BETWEEN GORE AND MAIN STREETS

East Georgia Street was home to many of the pioneer Chinese wholesale vegetable dealers which provided much of the fresh produce available in the city, mostly grown on Chinese farms around the Lower Mainland. And today, the street is where many traditional retailers remain. This is a wonderful area to look for fresh local fruits and vegetables, fish, poultry and tea. While visiting, keep a look out for the variety of restaurants and art galleries. Keep an ear out for the click-clack sound of mahjong being played at some of the societies on the street.

Chinatown is part of a diverse area, the historic East End, home to many other immigrant communities and businesses including Italian and Japanese. Just a block south, along Union Street, you can learn about the history of Vancouver's Black community with information about sleeping car porters outside the Union Restaurant and a Vancouver Heritage Foundation *Places That Matter* plaque marks Hogan's Alley at the lane east of Main Street.



#### **STOP 14: CHINATOWN MEMORIAL PLAZA**

At the northeast corner of Keefer Street and Columbia Street, the *Chinese Railroad Workers and Chinese Veterans Memorial* at the Chinatown Memorial Plaza recognizes those who built the Rocky Mountain and Fraser Canyon portions of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1881-1885) and those who fought in World War II (1939-1945). On Remembrance Day, a ceremony for Chinese Canadian veterans takes place at the site. To the north of the plaza, the empty lot was the site of the Chung King Theatre (1916-1960s), the largest Cantonese opera house outside of San Francisco and a gas station owned by the Lee brothers, veterans of World War II and members of the elite intelligence unit Force 136.

Across the street is the Chinatown Plaza Parkade, designed by architect Joe Wai on the site of the Vancouver Gas Company which produced coal gas from the 1890s to the 1920s. The Chinatown neon sign is a recent addition to the building.

## ABOUT VANCOUVER HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Vancouver Heritage Foundation promotes the appreciation and conservation of our city's historic places for current and future generations. Through events, tours, lectures and workshops, as well as online and print resources we create opportunities to learn about Vancouver's history and heritage places. With grant programs and other resources, VHF supports efforts to restore and reuse historic buildings and places for all to enjoy. For more information about Vancouver Heritage Foundation, please visit our website at [vancouverheritagefoundation.org](http://vancouverheritagefoundation.org)

Photo credit: VHF



## RESEARCH AND SOURCES

The research for this map guide draws on text created in 2009 for the Vancouver Heritage Foundation *Vancouver's Chinatown Historic Society Buildings* map guide created in partnership with the City of Vancouver. This revised edition includes information from the *Society Buildings in Chinatown* report (2005), the *Chinatown Historic District application for National Historic Site Designation* (2009), the *Changing Vancouver* website and *Preliminary Research on Historical Discrimination Against Chinese People in Vancouver* (HDC 2017).

## THANK YOU

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Thank you to sponsor:



## IMAGE CREDITS

All images (unless otherwise noted):

Martin Knowles Photo/Media

Archival images: City of Vancouver Archives

Other map guides available:

Historic West Hastings Street

Historic Kitsilano Northeast

Historic Japanese Canadian District (Paueru-gai)

Mid-Century Modern Downtown

Carrall Street Greenway

Strathcona Markets

Mole Hill

Historic Chinatown (Chinese-language)

- 1 pg 8 Chinatown Millennium Gate
- 2 pg 8 SE Corner of Carrall & Pender Streets
- 3 pg 10 Lim Sai Hor (Kow Mok) Benevolent Association
- 4 pg 11 Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden
- 5 pg 12 Courtyard of the Chinese Cultural Centre
- 6 pg 12 Chinese Cultural Centre, View of Pender Street
- 7 pg 14 NE Corner of Columbia & Pender Streets



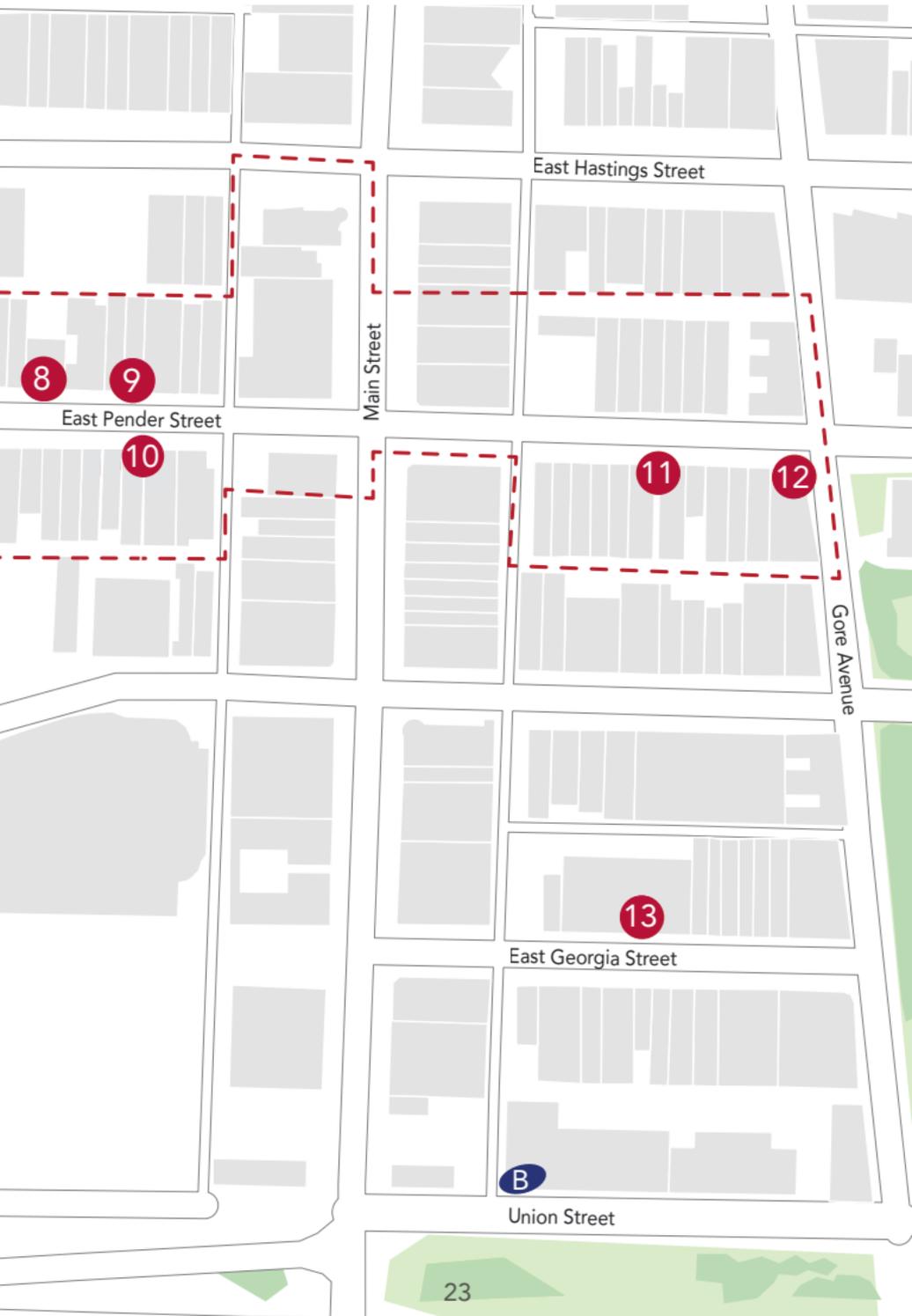
- A - Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden
- B - Hogan's Alley

VHF's Places That Matter plaque project celebrates Vancouver's 125th anniversary of incorporation as a city and raises awareness about the people, places and events that tell the stories of Vancouver's history.



- 8 pg 15 Wong's Benevolent Association (Mon Keang School)
- 9 pg 16 Mah Society of Canada
- 10 pg 17 Chin Wing Chun Tung Society of Canada
- 11 pg 17 May Wah Hotel
- 12 pg 18 Kuomintang Building
- 13 pg 19 East Georgia between Gore & Main Streets
- 14 pg 20 Chinatown Memorial Plaza

--- Boundary of Vancouver's Chinatown National Historic Site of Canada



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