



UNLEARNING THE MUSEUM IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Reflections from Curating B.C.'s
Chinese Canadian Heritage

A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia exhibit, Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver Chinatown.
Photo credit: Denise Fong.



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In light of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the recent rise in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, our current social environment is both challenging and exciting for museum professionals to consider diversity and inclusion in heritage spaces and places.

In her [recent keynote presentation](#) for the *Death to Museums* dialogue series on August 1, 2020, Dr. Porchia Moore made the following call to action: “*It is time for us to, in this moment, be willing to let go of the things that are no longer nourishing.*” She argues for a deliberate rejection of returning to a “new normal” and to interrogate those structures and processes that were once normalized, but actually impaired the discipline. What does this look like for museums, and other arts, culture, and heritage institutions, as they attempt meaningful ways to address the legacies of exclusion and lack of representation in their collections, exhibitions, and spaces?

During my time in graduate school at the University of British Columbia (UBC), I have participated in the curation of two Chinese Canadian themed museum exhibitions – [Across the Pacific](#) at the Burnaby Village Museum (BVM), and [A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia](#), co-curated by the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) and UBC. As a person of colour (PoC) working in the museum/heritage sector, I reflect on these projects and identify opportunities for institutions to consider diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in their exhibition, programming, and collections development.

“It is time for us to, in this moment, be willing to let go of the things that are no longer nourishing.”

— Dr. Porchia Moore

In 2019, the BVM launched the *Across the Pacific* temporary exhibition, which shares the experiences of five early Chinese Canadian families in Burnaby. The stories of these families are told by highlighting the racism, exclusion, separation, and trauma they experienced during their arrival and settlement, finding work, and raising their families. The exhibit includes photographs, belongings, and interactive displays, hands-on activities, as well as outdoor programming. *Across the Pacific* is located at the Stride Studios building and can be viewed for six final weeks starting November 21, as part of BVM's Heritage Christmas.

A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia, explores the historical and contemporary stories of Chinese Canadians in B.C. It emphasizes food and restaurant culture as an entry point, aiming to reflect the diversity of immigrant experiences, and the communities that they developed. Located at MOV and in Vancouver's Chinatown, the sister exhibitions feature stories, belongings, videos, interactive digital media displays, and art installations that reflect the experiences and voices of different generations of Chinese Canadians. [A Seat at the Table Chinatown](#) opened on August 15, 2020 at 27 East Pender Street, Vancouver, and will be followed by the launch of *A Seat at the Table* MOV in the Fall of 2020.



Across the Pacific exhibition interpretive panels, Burnaby Village Museum, 2019.
Photo credits: Denise Fong.



Building diversity and inclusivity into museum/arts/cultural experiences requires a commitment to interrogate and resist the impact of colonial legacies.

Acknowledge the Knowledge Gap and Commit to Long-term Change

Building diversity and inclusivity into museum/arts/cultural experiences requires a commitment to interrogate and resist the impact of colonial legacies. For many years, research on Burnaby's Chinese Canadian history has been limited to a handful of sources found in colonial records and anecdotal accounts. Very few records existed in the BVM's collection that could speak to the lived experiences of early Chinese Canadians in the municipality. In 2017, the BVM's curatorial department initiated a multi-year Chinese Canadian research project to address this knowledge gap in Burnaby's history. This project, guided by a community advisory committee, was supported by a small team of researchers and community volunteers. The project was put on pause during the peak of the pandemic, but has since restarted and will continue on as part of the City of Burnaby's broader heritage program.

The expansive scope of *A Seat at the Table* presented a different set of challenges. While it builds upon a vast corpus of existing research materials based on decades of academic and community research, targeted research and oral history interviews were much needed in order to address known gaps. A persistent, long-term commitment to better understand the past is necessary for building an inclusive future.

Expand Capacity through Collaborative Research

Expanding capacity can begin by looking within your organization, and fostering opportunities to engage and empower BIPoC/IBPoC frontline staff and volunteers to contribute ideas towards curatorial planning and program design. As part of the BVM's efforts to enhance staff capacity to interpret Chinese Canadian history in the museum space, regular workshops and resource/training guides have been developed through the collective efforts of the curatorial research team and frontline staff.

Strong university-museum partnerships can also shape and deliver innovative curatorial research and public programming. Strategic university partnerships can create possibilities for accessing new research funding sources, while providing meaningful internship opportunities to students from non-heritage disciplines. At both the BVM and the MOV, student interns have contributed valuable skills to exhibit curation and programming, including multilingual digital media and film production, knowledge in cultural food assets and gardening, and Chinese language communications planning and social media outreach. [UBC's Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies program](#) recently partnered with both the BVM and the MOV to create Chinese vegetable gardens and related cultural food assets programming in conjunction with the aforementioned exhibitions. Interdisciplinary research teams can help diversify creative practices in museums.



Top: Museum Of Vancouver's Backyard Garden Student Coordinators Jennifer Lu, Wei Yan Yeong, Gillian Chan, and Winnie Kwan, 2019.

Photo credit: UBC ACAM 390.

Bottom: UBC students Wei Yan Yeong, Winnie Kwan, Liam Liu, and Debbie Liang planting seeds at the Museum Of Vancouver's Backyard Garden, 2019.

Photo credit: UBC ACAM 390.



UBC student team conducting oral history interview with former B.C. Supreme Court Justice Randall Wong, 2019.
Photo credits: Henry Yu.

Opposite Page:

Burnaby Village Museum Story Harvest Station student coordinators Jennifer Lu and Ashley Chien, 2018.
Photo credit: Denise Fong.



Recognize and Value the Input of BIPoC/IBPoC Contributors

BIPoC/IBPoC staff and volunteers can have extraordinary capacity to contribute - value their knowledge and empower them to play a role in shaping museum/arts/cultural research and building community connections. According to the 2016 Census, visible minority groups account for over 30% of B.C.'s population; in cities such as Vancouver and Burnaby, visible minority groups make up over half of the population. Create the infrastructure required to enhance language accessibility through multilingual outdoor signage and interpretive panels. Invest in high quality translation work for exhibit development by working with multilingual speakers who have expertise on the subject.

Across the Pacific and *A Seat at the Table* are presented in English, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese. Both exhibitions also include interactive audio displays featuring a selection of regional Chinese dialects. This was made possible through the collaborative work of curatorial staff, contracted translators, student interns, and community volunteers over the course of many weeks. The English word count was intentionally shortened in both exhibitions to ensure enough space was available to feature full Chinese content on exhibition walls, rather than printed on a separate brochure that can easily be missed. Translation cannot be an afterthought - plan for it and make it a priority.

Recommended Resources

www.burnabyvillagemuseum.ca/

museumofvancouver.ca/a-seat-at-the-table

instrcc.ubc.ca/

acam.arts.ubc.ca/

VIDEOS

A Seat at the Table: Cakes and More Cakes: youtu.be/Fbidd9K52XM

A Seat at the Table: Which dish tells your family story?: youtu.be/fwwZ2exhmPo

A Seat at the Table: Sunrise Tofu: youtu.be/0XMjzST5O6U

A Seat at the Table: My First Indigenous Friend: youtu.be/_QZoxMtKUm0

Museum Of Vancouver's Backyard Gardening: youtube.com/watch?v=_83J97E1r1I

Burnaby Village Museum's Backyard Gardening: youtube.com/watch?v=beYgkXDGY00

Burnaby's Chinese Canadian Market Gardens: search.heritageburnaby.ca/permalink/museumvideo4484



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Denise Fong is a 1.5 generation Chinese Canadian with roots in Hong Kong, Toisan China, New Zealand, and San Francisco. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of British Columbia, with a special interest in critical heritage and Chinese Canadian history. Since 2009, Denise has coordinated a number of research and public education projects, including Simon Fraser University's [*From C to C: Chinese Canadian Stories of Migration*](#) and UBC's [*Chinese Canadian Stories: Uncommon Histories from a Common Past*](#).
