

“Chinese Canadian history is BC history,” says Grace Wong, the chair of the Chinese Canadian Museum Society of BC.¹ Yet even with over two hundred years of residence and contribution, it can still seem like Chinese Canadians are fighting for their place in the canon. When 2020 brought a sudden spike in discrimination against Asians in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese Canadians were once again at risk

of being seen as outsiders. Luckily, a celebration of cultural pride was already in the works. In 2018, the Province of British Columbia and City of Vancouver pledged their commitment to establishing BC’s first Chinese Canadian museum.² With a collaboration between the Museum of Vancouver and the Initiative for Student Teaching and Research in Chinese Canadian Studies (INSTRCC) at the University of British Columbia, the Chinese

Canadian Museum (CCM) opened its doors in Chinatown’s Hon Hsing Building on August 15, 2020, with the inaugural exhibition: *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia*.³

This highly interactive exhibition uses food and restaurant culture to navigate the history of Chinese migrants and citizens in British Columbia. Chinese restaurants have become long-time staples in

A Seat at the Table

Chinese Canadian Museum
Museum of Vancouver

CCM & MOV

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the province, since discrimination against Chinese people in the job market forced them to open their own businesses.⁴ Examining BC’s history of Chinese restaurants reveals this racial prejudice, but it also depicts Chinese Canadians’ “ability to resist, organize, seek justice[,] and thrive.”⁵ However, the overarching theme of food by no means limits the vast range of perspectives that the exhibition spans; rather it offers access into other Chinese businesses, migration accounts, and facets of Chinese culture, while offering an opportunity to include some

mouth-watering imagery. On November 19, 2020, the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) mounted a sister exhibition to the one at the Chinese Canadian Museum. The pair will remain on view until January 2023.

Just before Lunar New Year, I took the opportunity to celebrate Chinese history and culture by visiting both exhibition locations. Upon entering the Chinese Canadian Museum on East Pender Street, visitors are greeted with a four-foot wok that hangs on a wooden partition. Within the wok

is a brightly painted scene of a multigenerational family enjoying dim sum—Chinese Canadian artists Stella Zheng and Elisa Yon’s *Family Dim Sum on Sunday* (2020, fig. 1). A sign to the left of the wok and entrance outlines the exhibition’s ethos: “We want this exhibition to be like comfort food—familial and familiar—not because you may already know something about Chinese Canadians in British Columbia, but because their stories are also our stories.”⁶ Like every written piece in the exhibition, the sign is displayed in three languages:

Figure 1. Stella Zheng and Elisa Yon. *Family Dim Sum on Sunday*. 2020. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Canadian Museum.



English, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese.

Spanning one storey and two rooms, the museum is intimate and casual with checkerboard parquet flooring and an exposed concrete ceiling. Additional partitions divide the four main pillars of the exhibit—food, culture, services, and activism—and more. Since videos are one of the exhibition’s predominant means of conveying information, the museum works within the confines of the smaller interior to provide semi-private listening hubs. Transparent domes with speakers hang in front of each video display, providing visitors beneath them with a clear auditory experience (fig. 2).

Near the beginning of my exploration, a young man outside begins hitting a large drum with a mallet, seemingly demanding the attention of the whole neighbourhood with each beat. Behind him, I catch streaks of yellow, purple, and orange. It’s a lion dance performance, meant to scare off evil spirits that might put the new lunar year in danger. The steady, pulsing beat feels as though I am witnessing Vancouver’s own heartbeat. As I watch the performance, surrounded by stories that have shaped the city’s character with a succession of its legacy just outside the doors, it becomes obvious why this location was chosen for the museum. CCM puts community at the

Figure 2. *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia* at the Chinese Canadian Museum, August 15, 2020 to January 2023. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Canadian Museum.



forefront of its rendition of *A Seat at the Table*. Each of the four main sections highlights several local businesses around BC, with small video screens that play various educational animations, interviews, and documentaries. In the back corner of the main room, a booth with a microphone allows visitors to tell their own stories. On the opposite side, you can listen to the recordings. While some speak in English, even more use Mandarin or Cantonese to share their thoughts. CCM thus offers a space that comfortably embraces all different ways of speaking and storytelling.

Midway down the left-hand wall is another highlight of CCM's exhibit:

the virtual reality film station. A visitor can put on goggles and be transported to the present-day Cantonese villages and the city streets of Hoiping (Kaiping) in southern Guangdong, China. As many Chinese men migrated to Canada in the nineteenth century without their wives and children, the videos offer a look at what they left behind; viewers are brought in front, inside, and even on top of the *diaolou* (watchtowers) that were constructed using the money that the men sent back. *Diaolou* contain a unique integration of nineteenth-century Chinese and European architecture—a sign of the owners' wealth and sense of culture from going abroad. While Kaiping *diaolou* and villages are now deserted of residents, neighbours continue to maintain the land, preserving this unique aspect of Chinese Canadian and Chinese migration history left in China.

Moving from the Chinese Canadian Museum to the Museum of Vancouver, there is a sense of growth—both in terms of physical space and breadth of stories. Where CCM's humble storefront acts as a hidden gem for passersby to stumble upon, the Museum of Vancouver's facade brandishes a red statement banner advertising *A Seat at the Table*. This bold pronouncement matches the museum's interior, where a commitment to restaurant décor and aesthetic immersion



Figure 3. Paul Wong. *Club Café*. 1997. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Vancouver.

is an evident distinction from its predecessor. One of the first sights is a corner space transformed into a diner. Almost overwhelmingly turquoise, the furniture and fake wooden wall immediately stand out in the dim lighting. A silkscreen print—*Club Café* (1997) by Chinese Canadian artist Paul Wong—is framed on the wall (fig. 3). Beneath English text and ancient Chinese characters, the print's turquoise background is likely the inspiration for the colour scheme. A recording of restaurant chatter plays from a small speaker, including workers speaking in Mandarin and Cantonese. Instead of a menu, however, a laminated sheet contains a spread of photographs of Chinese Canadians

from as early as the 1920s. The array of individuals—including some of the exhibition's own curators—immediately diversifies the idea of *Chinese Canadian*, challenging the oft-assumed fallacy of a cultural monolith.

To the left of *Club Café*, glowing, neon, display cases outline what seems to be the six pillars of the Museum of Vancouver's installment: aspiration, innovations, diversity, traditions, solidarity, and racism. Turning a few more corners in the maze-like layout brings you to another diner set-up. Lining the left wall is a counter and bar stools, with booklets containing stories of Chinese Canadian business



Figure 4. *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia* at the Museum of Vancouver, November 19, 2020 to January 2023. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Vancouver.

owners (innovations), their ties to other marginalized communities (solidarity), and familial sacrifices made for the next generation (aspiration). Lining the right wall of the room, three sets of booths sit back-to-back against one another, each with a screen on the wall beside them (fig. 4). To my surprise, a video titled *Bubble Tea* leads me to a short documentary about my favourite local bubble tea shop from when I was growing

up: Peanut's Bubble Tea (花生米), in the Richmond Public Market. Recognizing the familiar location and faces onscreen brings me back to my favourite red bean drink—my reward after every haircut I suffered through in the nearby salon. Seeing the owners speak about their family business in their native language, I end up learning about a snippet of my personal history.

A long, cushioned bench—reminiscent of a restaurant waiting area—leads into the final exhibition space, which replicates the interior of a Chinese restaurant. However, a few crucial details break the illusion: instead of being plain white, the tablecloths and chairs are covered in vibrantly coloured fabrics with pages from Chinese newspapers, advertisement posters, and handwritten letters. Instead of food on the tables, nourishment comes in the form of artifacts in transparent cases, booklets, and the stories inside them. Empty and stereotypical Chinese take-out containers hang above, perhaps contrasting surface-level media depictions of Chinese culture with its actual, tangible, and vibrant history. And like the wok greeting visitors with a family meal in CCM, two more painted woks bid visitors farewell in MOV with the messages “出入平安” (“travel safely”) and “Thank you! Come again.”

Regardless of which location a person visits, A Seat at the Table marks a victory for BC’s Chinese population; it is a claim to their integral presence in the province’s communities. While introducing the Chinese Canadian Museum’s goals, former City of Vancouver assistant city manager Wendy Au calls the space a “living museum”—able to reflect on the past while looking towards the future.⁷ This notion of growth is

evident in the exhibition’s social media efforts. With hashtags such as #SATlocal and #SATmyFamily, visitors can add social media posts reflecting on the exhibit to shared walls. These walls are also projected throughout MOV, allowing visitors to help curate the physical exhibition experience. Perhaps to mimic the mobility of Chinese restaurants, there are also plans to expand A Seat at the Table into other regions across the province. Soon, residents from all areas of BC will be able to interact with this facet of their history, and the exhibition will evolve with them as well.⁸

NOTES

1. "First Chinese Canadian Museum Set for BC," Province of BC, July 16, 2020, YouTube video, 2:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbjWolprOFE>.
2. Wall text, *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia*, Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver, BC.
3. Brenna Owen, "Chinese Canadian Museum of B.C. Opens First Exhibit in Vancouver's Chinatown," *Vancouver Sun*, August 13, 2020, <https://vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/chinese-canadian-museum-of-b-c-opens-first-exhibit-in-vancouver-chinatown>.
4. Gail Johnson, "A Seat at the Table Looks at Chinese Immigration—and B.C.'s Discriminatory Past—through Food and Restaurant Culture," *Stir*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.createastir.ca/articles/mov-a-seat-at-the-table>.
5. "A Seat at the Table—Museum of Vancouver Location," Museum of Vancouver, <https://museumofvancouver.ca/a-seat-at-the-table-mov>.
6. Wall text, *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia*, Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver, BC.
7. "First Chinese Canadian Museum Set for BC," Province of BC, July 16, 2020, YouTube video, 2:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbjWolprOFE>.
8. Ben Mussett, "Immigrant Stories to Be Highlighted at New Chinese-Canadian Museum," CBC, July 18, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/chinese-canadian-museum-bc-government-announcement-1.5654181>; Brenna Owen, Brenna, "Chinese Canadian Museum of B.C. Opens First Exhibit in Vancouver's Chinatown," *Vancouver Sun*, August 13, 2020, <https://vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/chinese-canadian-museum-of-b-c-opens-first-exhibit-in-vancouver-chinatown>.

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Wall text, *A Seat at the Table: Chinese Immigration and British Columbia*, Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver, BC.