

HIDDEN FIGURES



Learn about the real life stories of celebrated
Chinese Canadians.

HIDDEN FIGURES

For Teachers and Educators

The idea for this collection of real life stories came from a conversation with some Elementary school teachers. They noticed a lack of easily accessible materials for students who wanted to research notable Chinese or Asian Canadians for an Asian Heritage Month project. The Gr 5 students found it difficult to find information that was clearly laid out and at an appropriate reading level.

In 2020 and 2021, our Garden blog series called 'Hidden Figures' highlighted well known - and lesser known - Chinese Canadians, many with a Vancouver link. We decided to use those posts as a basis for an accessible source of information for students.

We hope this collection of stories will motivate students and encourage them to do further research on these fascinating and inspiring people. We also hope teachers and educators are able to use these as a starting point for many interesting classroom discussions and lessons.

With many thanks to:

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JOE WAI:

ARCHITECT AND ACTIVIST



Born in Hong Kong but with deep roots in Canada, Joe Wai's work as an architect helped shape Vancouver's Chinatown and Strathcona neighbourhoods.

Joe was often described as a soft-spoken man with a gentle but fierce personality. He was a community leader, activist and volunteer. During his lifetime he lead initiatives and projects that promoted and protected Chinatown's unique culture and character.

In the 1970's Vancouver City wanted to build a large freeway that would have destroyed Strathcona and much of Chinatown. Joe and other community groups fought against it, and eventually, the City did not build the freeway. Chinatown was saved, and the work of Joe and the other activist organisations made the City realise the importance of the neighbourhood. In 1971, it was named as a special historic district and given special protection.

Joe's architectural work includes Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, the Chinatown Millennium Gate, the Chinese Cultural Centre Museum and the Chinatown Plaza. He was known for his new and innovative ideas. Joe was also involved in the restoration of the neighbourhood's Historical Society buildings.

Joe played an large part in building the Vancouver we know today and his life reminds us of the importance of diversity and inclusivity.

VIVIAN JUNG: INSPIRING TEACHER



Not only was Vivian Jung Vancouver's first full-time Chinese Canadian teacher but was also a dancer and active community member.

In 1940's Vancouver, Chinese people were not allowed to swim in public pools at the same time as white people. In 1945, Vivian, who needed a lifesaving certificate to complete her teacher training, was told she could not enter the Crystal Pool to attend the lifesaving class. In solidarity with Vivian, her instructor and classmates refused to get into the pool until Vivian could join as well. This courageous joint protest helped end the discrimination surrounding access to public pools.

After teaching at Tecumseh Elementary school for 35 years, Vivian enjoyed an active retirement as a student and teacher of Tai Chi, traveling with loved ones and serving as a volunteer for many local community groups including the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, the Vancouver Whitecaps, and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden. Vivian was also a proud member of the Chinese-Canadian Military Museum Society.

Vivian's active, inspirational life shows us how important it is to build community and encourage acceptance.

ROY MAH: FIGHTING FOR A CAUSE



Roy Mah was a pillar of the Chinese Canadian community. Roy was born in Edmonton in 1918 and grew up in Victoria and Vancouver. During his youth, he and the other members of the Chinese community faced many instances of racial discrimination, including segregated seating in cinemas and being banned from swimming in public swimming pools at the same time as white people.

Roy served in the Canadian army during World War II and encouraged hundreds of others to do the same. Roy believed that brave wartime service by Chinese-Canadians would bring about the end of the Chinese Immigration Act. This law prevented Chinese people from becoming Canadian citizens or having the right to vote. Roy was correct: after World War II, and with intense pressure from the Chinese community and returning soldiers, the Government finally got rid of the Chinese Immigration Act. In 1947, Chinese people in Canada were given full rights as citizens.

In the early 1950s Roy started the Chinatown News, North America's first English-language news magazine for the Chinese community. He said: "I always want to fight for a cause, especially for a just cause. Fight for civil liberty, fight for equal rights, fight for a fairer society". He wrote about issues such as the need to end discrimination.

Roy went on to organize the first public celebration of Chinese New Year in Canada, in 1963. He was the founding member of many important organisations such as the Chinese Cultural Centre and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, and was a recipient of the Order of British Columbia.

His life inspires us to stand against hate and discrimination, fight for human rights and celebrate kindness.

WAYSON CHOY:

A CHINATOWN LIFE



Wayson Choy was born in 1939 and spent his childhood in Strathcona and Chinatown. He was a lively child who loved telling stories and putting on puppet shows for other children. He became the first Chinese Canadian to enroll in a Creative Writing class at University of British Columbia. After completing his studies, Wayson moved to Toronto where he began teaching at Humber College and volunteering for various community literacy projects and LGBTQ groups.

In 1995 Wayson released his novel about growing up in Chinatown, *The Jade Peony*. It received widespread acclaim and awards, making Wayson a significant figure in Canadian literature. This success was followed by his memoir *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, where he wrote about his childhood within the Chinese Canadian community in Vancouver. He wrote about the discovery that he was adopted, and his process of coming to terms with being gay.

In June of 2015 Wayson was awarded the George Woodcock Lifetime Achievement Award for an outstanding B.C. literary career. In 2005, he was named a member of the Order of Canada.

On April 28th 2019, Wayson Choy passed away. His life tore down barriers between cultures and generations. In his memory, people can visit the corner of Pender St. and Gore Ave. to see a pair of plaques in the shape of bookmarks that display an excerpt from *The Jade Peony*. His stories continue to surround and connect us all.

L of the drycleaning chemicals mixed with the bolts of cloth and bags of material lying everywhere around Gee Sook's shop, and we had fun watching the long blasts of steam shoot into the air as we threw handkerchief-sized rags at the machine and they rose like kites against the large picture window. Sometimes Liang and I just sat mesmerized looking at the fire lit in

MARGARET JEAN GEE:

A LIFE OF 'FIRSTS'



Margaret Jean Gee's life represents the strength and resilience of a whole community.

Born in Vancouver in 1927, Margaret grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown where her parents ran a bookstore. Growing up during the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923–1947), which prevented Chinese-Canadians from enjoying many of the rights and freedoms we now take for granted, she faced racial discrimination. Yet she refused to let it stop her dreams of a bright future.

At that time, the Law Society of British Columbia banned Chinese Canadians from the legal profession. Three years after that ban was lifted, Margaret enrolled in law school at the University of British Columbia and became the first woman of Chinese descent to graduate in Law. In 1954, she became the first woman of Chinese descent to be admitted to the bar in Canada, which meant she was allowed to argue legal cases in Court. When she opened her law office at 510 West Hastings Street, Vancouver in 1955, Margaret also became the first Chinese-Canadian woman to practice law in British Columbia.

These impressive achievements were not her only "firsts". Margaret was also the first Chinese Canadian female Pilot Officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force Reserves.

Her legacy shows us that with strength, resilience, and passion we can reach for the stars.

FOON HAY LUM: POWERFUL ADVOCATE



Foon Hay Lum, a vocal advocate for the rights of Chinese Canadians, passed away in 2020 at the age of 111 after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

Foon Hay was born in 1908 and, unusually for girls at that time, was taught to read and write by her father who was a teacher. At age 18, she married Nam Jack Lum who worked in Canada. But Jack had to go back to Canada just after their wedding to keep his immigration status. At that time Chinese people were not allowed to immigrate to Canada because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, and so Foon Hay was not allowed to go with her husband. Other than a 3 year visit during which time they had 2 children, Jack and Foon Hay stayed separated for more than 30 years. They kept in constant contact with letters and gifts and Jack sent money home to Foon Hay and their family.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947. In 1959, Foon Hay finally moved to be with her husband in Toronto.

After her husband died, Foon Hay became one of the founding members of the Chinese Canadian National Council and became an activist, standing up for a better life for Chinese Canadians. She fought for over 20 years for the Government to apologize for the Chinese Exclusion Act and Head Tax (money that Chinese immigrants such as her husband had to pay to enter Canada before 1923).

One of her proudest moments was being in the House of Commons in 2006 when the official apology was read out. Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister at the time, apologized to those who paid the Head Tax and those families who were affected by the Exclusion Act.

Foon Hay's bravery in taking action against something that is wrong is an inspiration to us all.

BESSIE LEE:

COMMUNITY LEADER



Born in 1924, Bessie Lee grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown and attended Strathcona Elementary School and Vancouver Normal School. Her family operated a general store that was a much-loved gathering place for the community. From her mother, an herbalist, she learned how to prepare traditional tonics from roots, leaves and bark.

When her home was threatened by demolition and freeway development in 1968, Bessie became a community organizer and civic activist. The City of Vancouver wanted to build a freeway that would have demolished many of Vancouver's inner-city districts, including Chinatown, and displaced many of its residents. She helped found the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA). This organization mobilized several neighbourhoods to work together to stop the freeway. In the end, they won and the freeway was not built.

In an interview, Bessie said: "We have to remind the city that when they decide to change things in a community they must always consider the social planning of that community and the concerns of the people who live in it."

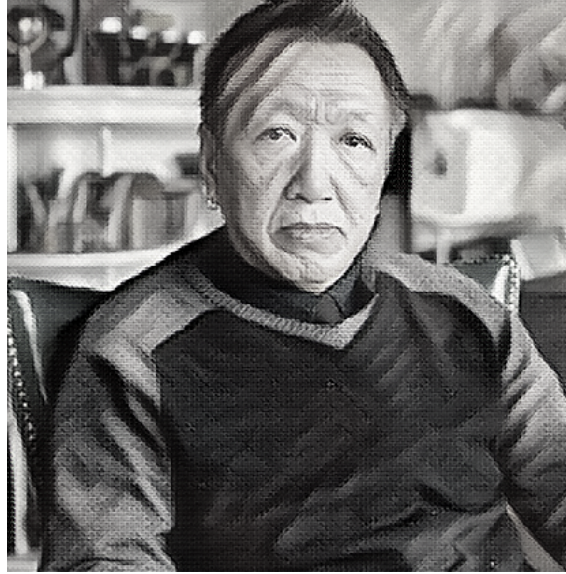
Bessie also led efforts to build affordable housing for families and seniors. She worked tirelessly to improve access to health and social services for Strathcona families.

Bessie was also a founding member of the Britannia Community Centre and a board member of the Strathcona Community Centre. She was soft spoken yet determined and persuasive, and family and friends remember her as a "kind, generous, and devoted mother who welcomed everyone into her house."

In 2014, two years before her passing, she won the BC Community Achievement Award, honouring her lasting legacy which encourages us to be true to ourselves and fight for our beliefs.

PAUL WONG:

ART AND ACTIVISM



Paul Wong was born in Prince Rupert in 1954. Feeling like he somehow didn't fit in, Paul used art and his unlimited imagination to escape reality and immerse himself in his collages and drawings.

When he was just 18, Paul received his first professional commission from the Burnaby Art Gallery. During the 1970s and 1980s, he started experimenting with multimedia art.

In 2018, Paul launched Pride in Chinatown, a loud, proud and bold celebration in the heart of Chinatown. As a queer Chinese-Canadian artist, Paul, who struggled for a long time to take pride in his identity, sought to increase LGBTQ+ representation in one of Vancouver's most vibrant, colourful and historical neighbourhoods.

Paul is also a community activist and founder of several artist-run groups. His artworks are thought-provoking and tackle issues such as death, race, and inequality. He believes in the power of art to engage and provoke people.

Paul has won prizes such as the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts and the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts. Whether he is storytelling through photography, video or installations, his talent is one that deserves a standing ovation from all of us.

DAVID LAM: BUSINESSMAN AND BENEFACTOR



David Lam's dream about being remembered as “a man who preached harmony and goodness and understanding” became a reality.

Born in Hong Kong in 1923, David See-Chai Lam worked in the family's coal business as they struggled to survive during World War II. In 1967, he moved to Vancouver with his wife Dorothy and their three children. “We never dreamed there could be a place like this” he said during a 1988 interview. Following his arrival, he founded the Hong Kong Merchants' Association of Vancouver, which helped immigrants from Hong Kong make the transition to life in Canada. He became a successful real estate developer in Vancouver. David could see Vancouver had many ties to Asia and worked hard to create business links with Hong Kong, Singapore and other important Asian cities.

Upon his retirement in 1983, he established the David and Dorothy Lam Foundation and the Floribunda Philanthropic Society. The two charities donated millions of dollars a year to worthwhile causes. He also played a key role in the founding of the Canadian International Dragon Boat Festival and helped to finance the restoration of Stanley Park in 2006.

David made history when in 1988 he was appointed lieutenant-governor of British Columbia, becoming the first person of Asian ancestry to hold such a post in Canada.

Often referred to as a “bridge builder”, David Lam described this responsibility as being a “healer of wounds, a matchmaker of sorts between people of different views, and one who offers encouragement and inspiration.”

David Lam passed away in 2010, leaving a legacy of kindness, generosity and solidarity. In 2015, 1000 cherry trees were planted in his memory in gardens around Vancouver.

WONG FOON SIEN: CIVIL RIGHTS CHAMPION



Wong Foon Sien's devotion to civil and human rights was instrumental in fighting for Chinese Canadians when it came to immigration and family reunification issues.

Born in 1899, he moved to Cumberland, BC with his family at the age of nine. After completing high school, he moved to Vancouver and became one of five Chinese students to enrol at the University of British Columbia. Though he graduated, he had to work as a legal interpreter and translator. This is because only people who had the right to vote could be a lawyer and Chinese people did not have the right at that time.

An exceptional communicator, Foon Sien was a strong advocate for the civil and human rights of Chinese Canadians for nearly fifty years. He founded the Chinese Trade Workers' Association in 1942 and in 1944 he drafted and signed a petition pleading the right for Chinese Canadians to vote in elections in British Columbia, sending it to both the Government of BC and the Government of Canada.

He worked for the New Republic Chinese Daily newspaper in Victoria in 1945 and led countless civil and human rights organizations. Foon Sien also campaigned for less restrictive immigration policies toward Chinese citizens when the Chinese Immigration Act was repealed in 1947. Because of his work, hundreds of people in Canada were able to be reunited with family members in China. "Our appeal is that the Chinese Canadian may have his family with him – a complete family, not one part in Canada and the other part in Hong Kong or China." he said.

With a life devoted to the development of a more tolerant and compassionate society, Foon Sien passed away in Vancouver in 1971.

He is considered a Person of National Historic Significance by the Government of Canada. To this day, he is remembered as one of the most influential people in the history of Vancouver's Chinatown.

NORMAN KWONG: SPORTSMAN AND STATESMAN



Norman was born in Calgary in 1929 to parents that had immigrated from Guangdong Province in China. By the time he died in 2016 he was not only known as a being highly talented football player but also as a businessman, politician, advocate for multiculturalism, Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta, husband, father and grandfather.

In 1947, Chinese Canadians were finally given the right to vote and not long after that, the world of professional sports opened up to them. Norman, a talented high school football player, was picked to play for the Calgary Stampede in 1948. In 1951 he was chosen to play for the Edmonton Eskimos (now Edmonton Elks) until he retired from football in 1960. He was the first Chinese Canadian to play for a professional Canadian football team. During his career he won the Grey Cup four times.

After his sports career ended, Norman went into business as a realtor. He was the General Manager of the Calgary Stampede from 1998 - 91 and, for a while, part owner of the Calgary Flames. The Flames won the Stanley Cup while he was manager and he is one of only a few Canadians to have won both the Grey Cup and the Stanley Cup as a player, manager or owner.

Norman was the national chair of the Canadian Council on Multiculturalism and he supported many charities and non profit organizations. He was named a Member of the Order of Canada in 1998 and in 2005 he became the first person of Asian heritage to be Alberta's lieutenant-governor. Despite all of his success, friends and colleagues always knew him for his sense of humour and kindness.

Norman was an outstanding role model and, as was said at his public memorial service in 2016: "his legacy is immense and will continue for many years to come."

USEFUL RESOURCES AND LINKS

Find out more about Chinese and Asian Canadians:

The Canadian Encyclopedia: Asian Heritage pages has a wealth of information including article on various notable Asian Canadians:

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/collection/asian-heritage-in-canada>

The website of the Chinatown Storytelling Centre in Vancouver includes stories about prominent Chinese Canadians:

<https://www.chinatownstorytellingcentre.org/stories/>

Gold Mountain Quest: an interactive video game that allows students to interact with characters and learn their stories. Developed by UBC, SFU and other community partners.

<http://www.catstatic.com/projects/gmq/>

Chinese Canadian Stories: a vast collection of sources from the UBC and SFU libraries, the City of Vancouver archives and more.

<https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/chinesecanadianstories>

Chinese Canadian Stories YouTube hub:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/chinesecanadianubc>

Field trips:

Tours and programs in Chinatown are offered at these locations. Please contact the individual organizations for more details.

Dr Sun Yat Sen Chinese Garden:

<https://vancouverchinesegarden.com/schools/>

Chinatown Storytelling Centre

<https://www.chinatownstorytellingcentre.org/>

Chinese Canadian Museum

<https://www.chinesecanadianmuseum.ca/>

Dragon Boat BC

<https://dragonzone.ca/paddle/>