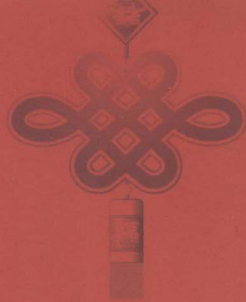


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# Yi Fao

Speaking Through Memory



A History of New Westminster's Chinese Community 1858-1980



JIM WOLF and PATRICIA OWEN

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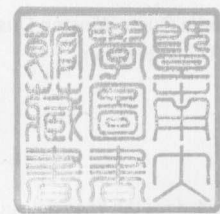
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VICTORIA • VANCOUVER • CALGARY

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## ❧ DEDICATION ❧

For Fannie Lee and all of the memories she possessed; she was our last link to the heart of Yi Fao. To Chung Koo for providing us with his “memory maps” and the opportunity to visit and visualize a moment gone by. Finally, to all the community members who spoke through memory of their lives and the lives of those who have passed. Collectively they gave voice to Yi Fao, its creation and its endurance.



## ❧ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ❧

This book began as a result of the exhibit *Yi Fao—Speaking Through Memory*, held at the New Westminster Museum and Archives in 2007 and jointly curated by Patricia Owen and archivist Kelly Stewart.

The exhibit and book would not have been possible without the ongoing financial support and encouragement of New Westminster City Council and the support of the citizens of the Royal City, who have shown great interest in Yi Fao and the special place that the Chinese-Canadian community holds in our history.

The authors thank museum manager Colin Stevens and all of the staff and volunteers for their assistance in bringing the story of New Westminster's Chinese community to life. Special thanks to Jason Haight, business operation manager of the New Westminster Parks and Recreation Department, for guiding this project to completion. The staff of the New Westminster Public Library reference department, including Anne Lunghamer, Wendy Turnbull and Sunday Scaiano, provided scans of historic photographs. Thanks also to Rod Nevison for his assistance in creating the maps of Chinatown.

Finally, the project would not have been possible without the truly remarkable families of Yi Fao who shared their memories with us. We are honoured that they entrusted us with their stories to allow Yi Fao to "speak through memory."





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## ❀ INTRODUCTION ❀

THE STORY OF NEW WESTMINSTER'S CHINESE-CANADIAN COMMUNITY, or Yi Fao, is fascinating and complex. No single chronicle of this community's 100-year history could ever capture its incredible range of individual experiences and stories.

A common belief is that the history of Chinese immigrants in the Royal City ended when Chinatown ceased to be part of the cityscape. However, the strength of New Westminister's Chinese community and its family ties is much more than just a collection of buildings. Yi Fao has evolved beyond the loss of New Westminister's old Chinatown and continues to be an important part of the city today.

*Yi Fao: Speaking Through Memory* explores the experiences of New Westminister's Chinese-Canadian community through its people's own stories and memories. The book title derives from the city's Chinese name, Yi Fao, or "second port," a reference to New Westminister's place as the second port of entry to British Columbia after Victoria. Over time, however, Yi Fao has come to mean the wider community of Chinese immigrants who made New Westminister their home.

This project seeks to honour New Westminister's Chinese community by preserving and celebrating the voices and personalities of these immigrants who made such an important contribution to the city's development. Descendants of New Westminister's Chinese settlers were sought out and interviewed, and four families became the focus for a museum exhibit and this book: the Law, Lee, Quan and Shiu families.

Within each family, children, siblings, grandchildren, grandparents and in-laws recount their memories of life in New Westminister. Their stories are grouped in the four main chapters of this book, accompanied by a historical narrative that helps to place their memories in a broader context.



Shared memories and family lore provide glimpses into history that are both compelling and poignant. The stories here reveal not just facts and dates, but also paint a picture of another era, colourfully revealed through the storytellers' personal experiences and emotions. Accounts from different generations of these four families provide us with a rare gift: an intimate insight into their own lives and a unique snapshot of the city's old Chinatown.

In order to provide a wider context for the family histories, this project also sought other voices from the past, as expressed in local newspapers, archival records and in the personal stories of other community members. However, this history endeavours to look beneath and beyond headlines and superficial facts, sensational though they may be, to focus on the authentic accounts that reveal the solid character and great strength that have been the pillars of New West's Chinese community from its beginning.

The story of Yi Fao is a history of struggle, adventure and achievement. Yi Fao has left New Westminster with a great legacy, as successive generations of Chinese-Canadians continue to enrich the culture of our city and nation.

A HISTORY OF

# Yi Fao

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## GOLD MOUNTAIN {1858-1880}

THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD ON THE FRASER RIVER IN 1858 BROUGHT the promise of wealth to immigrant Chinese labourers desperate to improve their lives in a rapidly changing world. News of the gold rush spread quickly through newspapers and journals, soon reaching California, the location of the 1849 gold rush and home to a large population of Chinese gold miners and merchants eager to pursue the next "Eldorado." Many of the Chinese in California were economic refugees who had fled rebellion, famine and unemployment in their homeland; overseas migration was an attractive prospect, especially for young men with few opportunities.

Through the tightly connected world of Asian-American shipping interests and Chinese merchants who acted as labour contractors, news of the latest gold strike spread back to China. British Columbia became known as Gim Shan, or "Gold Mountain." For many Chinese in dire need of work, it was a place that could change their lives and enhance the wealth and prestige of their family, or *jia*. But raising the funds for ship's passage was a challenge. Many young men obtained their fares through the "credit-ticket" system offered by wealthy merchant labour contractors in BC, whereby the contractor paid for an immigrant's travel expenses and recovered his investment through that person's labour in the goldfields. Many labourers struggled to repay this debt and, at the same time, send meagre payments home. However, even during the long years away from their families and homeland, the workers were sustained by the dream of one day returning home wealthy to marry and have children.

The initial wave of Chinese workers to BC came directly from California; as many as 2,000 men made the journey north in the first two years of the gold rush. The majority passed through the port city of Victoria before loading onto boats bound for the Fraser River and the interior goldfields. By 1863, 4,000 Chinese people were working on the mainland. New Westminster, which Queen Victoria had designated the capital city of the new Colony of British Columbia, became home to a growing population of pioneer Chinese immigrants.

New Westminster struggled to establish a port during its early years, but eventually it became the second port of entry to the province after Victoria and was known to Chinese immigrants as Yi Fao, or "second port." As early as 1860 it was reported in the city's local newspapers that a large number of Chinese people were camped on the public square known as Victoria Gardens. By 1861 the arrival of 52 Chinese immigrants directly from China was local news; speculation about another 200 arriving from San Francisco was seen as an indication of the colony's progress. Chinese businesses, including Hi Sing House, a laundry business opened in 1861, and the Colonial Bakery, operated by Ah Gee, were quick to seize on the business opportunities that presented themselves in the new capital city. The citizens of New Westminster welcomed and patronized these new services.

However, the presence of so many newcomers brought heightened tensions too. Racism pervaded newspaper reports of the day. One writer for the *New Westminster Times* dismissively commented that the fledgling Chinese community had little to offer the city but would "... no doubt add to the business of the place so far as the consumption of rice is concerned."<sup>1</sup>

By 1864 the gold rush had turned into a bust. With the exodus of miners, the entire economy of the region collapsed. New Westminster faced an economic crisis too, which ultimately led to the loss of its status as the capital in 1866, when Victoria was made the capital of the expanded Colony of British Columbia, which now included Vancouver Island. Most Chinese immigrants returned to China; it was estimated in 1866 that only 1,705 remained in the colony. A few remained at work in the goldfields, working at claims long abandoned by others and with incredible determination and perseverance,

<sup>1</sup> *New Westminster Times*,  
November 24, 1860.

finding gold and making a profit. Others followed their labour contractors to coastal cities to work in other industries.

The labour of these pioneers was invaluable to the economy and infrastructure of the young colony and pivotal to the growth of New Westminster. One example of their early achievements was the construction of the telegraph line between New Westminster and Quesnel. The Western Union Company employed over 500 Chinese workers to clear the line, erect thousands of poles and string telegraph wires between them.

A few Chinese immigrants were able to find work in New Westminster by working as servants for wealthy families in need of household assistance. The tradition of employing young female servants from the British Isles became nearly impossible to uphold, because as soon as young women arrived in the colony, they became the object of innumerable marriage proposals. Soon the Chinese houseboy was not merely a standard fixture in many homes, but an indispensable support for overworked housewives and a valued member of the family. These personal relationships were the foundation for strong and enduring ties between the local Caucasian and Chinese communities.

Other Chinese immigrants, ones who had freed themselves from their debt to labour contractors, established small businesses, doing laundry or cutting wood. These entrepreneurs were important to the city's economy and to the established families and businesses that relied on these services.

By 1867 the Chinese population of New Westminster—66 men and 37 women—was reported to be one-tenth of the city's total. But the actual number of residents was likely much higher, especially during winter, when Chinese workers flocked to coastal cities to escape the snow and cold temperatures of the Interior.

The presence of Chinese women in the colony was a strong sign that Chinese families were establishing their permanent homes in British Columbia. One of the colony's pioneer Chinese families was headed by Won Ling Sing, who had originally emigrated from China's Canton Province to San Francisco, where he entered into an arranged marriage with Wong Shee. The young couple came to BC in 1860, founding a business at Port Douglas and moving it to New Westminster's Chinatown in the early 1870s. This



family would make its mark on the city and the country. Their first-born, a son, was Won Alexander Cumyow, who was born in 1861 in Port Douglas and later claimed to be the first Chinese-Canadian born in BC. Their daughter, Won Elizabeth Cumyow, born in New Westminster in 1871, was the first Chinese-Canadian female born in BC. Another son, Won Joe Quoy, lived his entire life in the Royal City and became a noted sportsman. A successful jockey, he was the first Chinese-Canadian to break race barriers in the sport of horse racing.

The Won family was just one of many prosperous Chinese merchant families to recognize the growing need for stores, housing and businesses, not just for their own compatriots, but also for the general population. These stores and businesses formed New Westminster's first Chinatown, which took shape on land that was primarily leased from Caucasian landowners, including the estate of former governor Sir James Douglas, on the eastern end of Front Street. This section of the city, bounded by the rocky, undeveloped riverbank of the Fraser and an escarpment separating it from the residential district above, was isolated from the downtown commercial area.

New Westminster's Chinatown also served as a winter resort for contract workers from the Interior, who came to indulge in the comforts of being part of a shared community. For many of the young labourers the pleasures of gambling, smoking opium and visiting houses of prostitution served as a diversion from the drudgery of their daily life of hard work.

New Westminster and its surrounding district slowly began to recover after the end of the gold rush. Its new economy was based on the establishment of the lumber, fishing and agricultural industries of the Fraser Valley. Many of these businesses relied on cheap labour supplied in quantity by Chinese contractors. The salmon canneries on the New Westminster waterfront along the Fraser River were among the largest employers. By 1879 the population of the city's Chinatown was estimated in an official census to be 300, including cooks and servants, labourers, vegetable gardeners, woodcutters and laundry workers. But, like all other Chinatowns, it was still a largely a bachelor society, with only 10 Chinese women in the community, a decline from the 37 enumerated in 1867.

New Westminster's Chinese people actively celebrated their community