



# ◀) MEGAPHONE

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## **SITES, RITES, & GRATITUDE**

**Bridging Language  
and Culture  
in Chinatown**



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Cover photo by Meghan Mast  
Cover background by Lydia Kwa





# **SITES, RITES, AND GRATITUDE**

**Carving out a new, inclusive  
Chinatown through art and language**

Story and photo by **Meghan Mast**





This photo is part of a series by Vancouver photographer Jaime Yee called "The Yee Fung Toy Society of Vancouver—A Visit." Photo courtesy of Kathryn Lennon.

Amidst Chinatown's bustling grocery and teashops, a small gallery is packed with adult pupils. People sit in chairs facing a hand-painted blackboard. Lips form into "O's" as they say "good morning" to each other: "*jóu sàhn*." This is "Saturday School"—a weekly class that teaches basic Cantonese lessons.

The classes are part of a larger community art exhibit at the Centre A studio that aims to connect neighbourhood residents from different language communities. The exhibit, *M'goi/Do Jeh: Sites, Rites and Gratitude*, includes original work by artist Lydia Kwa and interactive pieces like the Cantonese lessons and a community memory map organized by Kathryn Lennon. The title was inspired by the daily interaction between Tyler Russell, the gallery's curator, and the owner of

the neighbouring teashop.

"Thank you" is one of the first words the Saturday School class learns. Zoe Lam, the instructor, distributes a banana and people pass it around, shyly saying "*M'goi*" to each other. Lam hops up and down and waves excitedly to demonstrate how to get the attention of a server at a restaurant. She bows deeply as she says the Cantonese word for goodbye and draws lines through the air with a chopstick to demonstrate tone. Cantonese uses six different accents and each one can change the meaning of a word entirely. The word "*fu*" that means "trousers" can also mean "bitter" or "husband" depending on the tone.

"If we get the melody wrong, people cannot understand us," says Lam. She draws crisp lines through the air as she speaks and her audience sings the words

back. The class learns basic lines, but also cultural subtleties. When someone asks in Cantonese, "have you eaten?" they are also asking, "how are you?" It's a way of expressing care.

This exhibit and other revitalization efforts come at a fitting time for the community. New condominium developments are under construction, new businesses are moving in, and rising housing costs are causing many elderly seniors to move elsewhere. According to a series of articles in *The Tyee* last year, the language minority population most in need of supportive senior's housing consists of people who speak only Mandarin and Cantonese.

#### **Bridging linguistic, generational gaps**

Kathryn Lennon, who helped organize



the lessons, hopes the classes and the rest of the exhibit will help bridge the language barrier between different generations and cultures in the area. "If we learn Cantonese, maybe we can reach out a little bit to [the seniors]," she says. "Just be able to say good morning in the language of the people who are here is such an important gesture."

She also intends the classes to be a fun, nostalgic nod to weekend classes many children of first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants were forced to attend. "I was thinking it could appeal to people like me," says Lennon, who grew up learning Mandarin and Cantonese. "People who needed an invitation to come back to Chinatown and the language and the culture."

This is the first time Lennon has worked with a gallery.

"Whenever someone says, 'here is the artist,' I'm like, 'where?'" she looks over her shoulder for emphasis and laughs. But she is no stranger to community organizing. She arrived in Vancouver less than a year ago and is already an integral part of several Chinatown preservation initiatives, including efforts to save the Ming Sun-Uchida building and raise money to buy pieces

of typeset from Ho Sun Hing Printing, Canada's first Chinese print shop that recently closed.

Before moving to Vancouver, Lennon helped organize two night markets in Edmonton's Chinatown, including one aimed at young professionals called "Not your grandma's Chinatown."

She is currently studying urban planning and is acutely aware of

the repercussions of development. "The flip side of planning is you build something but you also displace, and usually what gets displaced is social fabric. You can build new buildings," she says, "but you can't repair or replace a social fabric that's been disrupted by scattering members of a community."

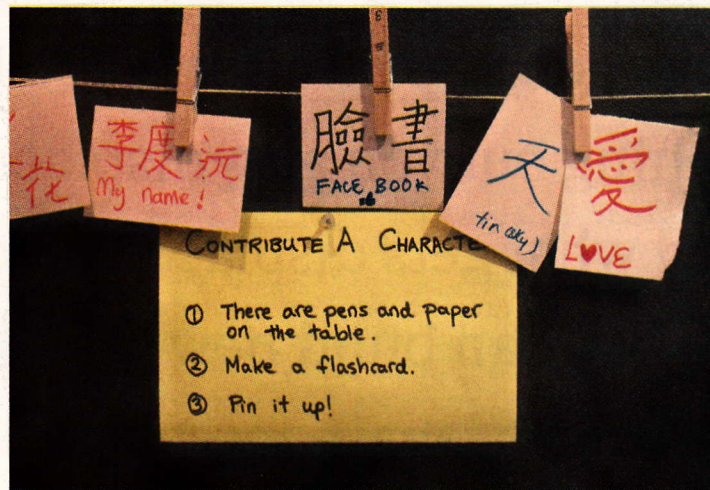
#### As Chinatowns change, cultural gaps grow

Gentrification and displacement is a growing concern for Chinatowns across North America. A recent report on Chinatowns on the East Coast of America found that the number of self-identified Asians in the community continues to drop. Although Asians are still the majority group, they make up less than half of all residents of Chinatown. As more

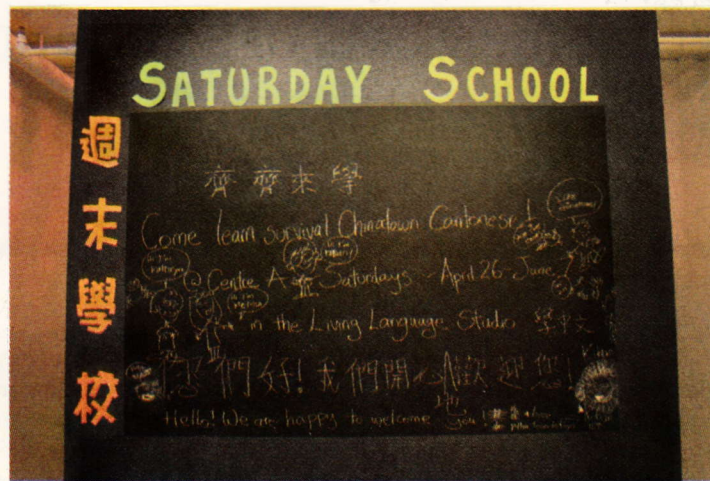
and more Chinese elders leave the community, the cultural gap grows larger.

"It doesn't feel like there is a strong collective memory about these things," says Lennon. Much Chinese-Canadian history remains untold.

To combat this in a small way, Lennon built a community memory map wall out of yarn and old photos



Students practice Cantonese penmanship at Saturday School.  
Photo: Meghan Mast.



The Saturday School chalkboard is full of warm greetings.  
Photo: Kathryn Lennon.



“The flip side of planning is you build something but you also displace, and usually what gets displaced is social fabric. You can build new buildings... but you can’t repair or replace a social fabric that’s been disrupted by scattering members of a community.”

— *Kathryn Lennon*

and relevant historical articles for the exhibit. Chinatown historian Jim Wong-Chu’s photographs of protests at Chinatown barbecue meat shops figure prominently, recalling the time that health and safety committees cracked down on Chinese restaurant owners. Those involved felt the regulations were thinly guised racist attempts to flatten Chinese businesses. Lennon hopes this map will help the history live on in people’s memories.

**Amidst struggle, relationships and traditions thrive**

Back in Studio A, the more formal part

of class has ended and pupils prepare for the second half. Judy Lam Maxwell, a local Chinatown historian, leads the class on a tour of Chinatown. She takes the crowd through the streets of the neighbourhood and behind closed doors of historic buildings.

A room full of Chinese seniors clicking mahjong tiles together in the Chun Wing Chun Association resembles the scene of a Wayson Choy novel. Wrinkled hands gather small piles of coins and prepare for the next move. Maxwell approaches a small woman with short grey hair for a key to the upstairs meeting room and the two

exchange some Cantonese.

Chinatowns may be struggling, but it is clear there are plenty of relationships and traditions still thriving. This moment comes to mind again when Lennon sums up the intent behind the exhibit at Centre A: “Maybe we just need a moment to reflect and mourn and grieve,” she says, “but also make an offering of thanks for what is still here.” ◀

*Sites, Rites and Gratitude: An Art & Community Initiative runs at Centre A Studio (229 E. Georgia) to June 14th. Gallery hours: Tues-Sat, 11am-6pm.*