今日唐人街

Chinatown Today

CT

aunties elders & ancestors

summer 2019 | volume 2

We acknowledge that this work is taking place on the traditional, ancestral, unceded and occupied Indigenous territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, and in particular, the title holding nations of hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Snichim speaking Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Sə̓lílwətaʔɬ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh).

This land was never surrendered, relinquished, or handed over by these nations to Canada or British Columbia through a treaty or other means; it is sovereign and unsurrendered. It is time land is returned to them, or they be compensated for it.

acknowledgements
感 謝

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table of contents
篇目

from your summer staff

In 2017, Chinatown Today printed the first volume of Chinatown Stories where community members, activists, and writers shared their stories about both the changing dynamics within Chinatown but also the long-standing heritage and cultural history that remains important today. As a collection of stories, Volume 1 became the backdrop for Chinatown Today to cultivate a conversation that embraces both the past and future of storytelling in Chinatown.

This year's theme for Chinatown Stories: Volume 2 is "Aunties, Elders, and Ancestors," wherein we asked contributors to define what intergenerational and ancestral relationships mean to them; how these relationships have been shaped by migration, hardship, and resilience but also joy, care, and compassion. While the histories we inherit from our elders are often complicated, they can also provide us with the groundwork to better understand ourselves and our place as settlers on unceded lands.

As a part of a growing Asian diaspora, the idea of family lineage is often fraught by histories of migration and displacement. These conditions often challenge us to reflect on how intergenerational relationships are fundamental to healing as we continue to search for new understanding of what it means to be tied to the many places we consider home.

I want to thank all of the contributors who have generously shared their stories with us, and for your vulnerability and strength in giving words to your histories. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the board of directors of Chinatown Today for entrusting myself and my colleague kathy thái, in creating this volume. I would also like to acknowledge our community partners such as Chinatown House, hua foundation, and Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice for their continued support.

My hope is that these stories not only invite our ancestors into the rooms we share as a community, but help guide and care for the next generation who may need their comfort.

Editor, Chinatown Today
Ý Vy Trương

It was important for Ý Vy and I, in developing this first themed volume, to choose a topic which made space for reflection on the complexities of our histories, ancestries, elders, and chosen families. We paired this volume with a community art project called *Letters to our Ancestors*, inviting participants to draw or write a response to prompts on postcards. These cards were later themed for Pride in Chinatown 2019 and working with Chinese-Vietnamese seniors through a partnership with Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice.

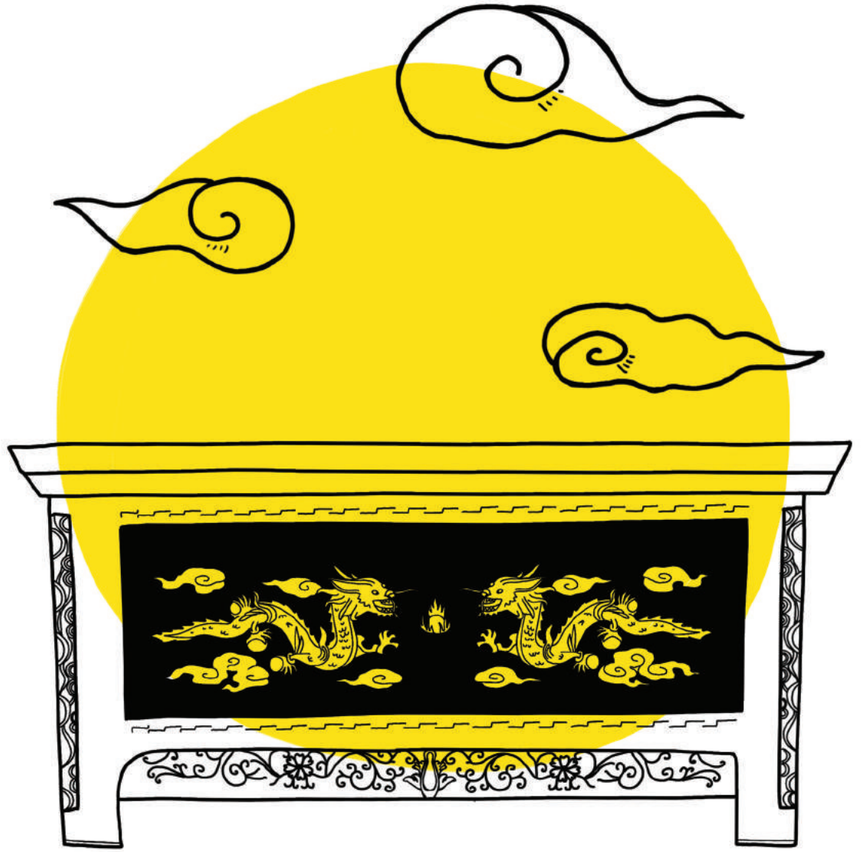
This project aimed to connect us to the memories of our elders and ancestors, but I hope it also enabled us to assert our current identities in the grand scheme of our lineage. Although many of us may not feel fully connected to our roots/traditions or have traditionally "untraditional" lifestyles, we can gain strength in knowing that we have much to offer present and future generations, and that in continuing to be generous we are honouring our histories.

For allowing me the opportunity to collaborate with them, and for trusting Ý Vy and I to hold onto and work with their pieces, I cannot thank the artists and contributors of this volume enough. I would also like to thank members of the community; whether they shared their thoughts in a moment, on a postcard, or in an eventual submission to the volume, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to listen and find ways to highlight what they expressed.

Programming & Outreach Coordinator,
kathy kim thái

carving

justine crawford



This is an illustration of a coffee table that my grandfather hand-carved back in Bhutan. It sits in the middle of my parents' living room; I'd rest my feet on it, eat my dinner on it, stub my toe on it. It took me nearly 2 decades of seeing it every day to fully grasp how beautiful it is.

Craftsmanship and artistry had always been my grandfather's gifts—a familial thread that has been weaved through most of my relatives. A nearly identical table sits in my aunt's living room, connecting our families together no matter the distance.

ancestors

poetry: sarah wai yee ling 凌慧意 | **photography: christina lee** 李嘉明

You speak of all the generations
your communities were denied.
Still your ancestors fought over and over
and over again.
They rose in waves
crashing against ivory walls.

I watch in awe
as you chip away
like they did.
Year after year.
Man after man.

Carving out spaces,
where they never wanted us.

Opening doors,
opening minds.

Weaving stories,
speaking truth.

Nourishing bodies,
dancing ceremonies.

So the world never forgets
what happened here
on unceded lands.

So we remember
where we are,
who we are,
and where we came from.

So the words of your language
hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓
will leap from the land,
back into the mouths of young ones,
like *the old people*,
awakening generations.

No longer bounded
by foreign laws,
preconceptions,
and prisons
masked as schools.

hay ce:p q̓ə,
doh jeh 多謝 ,
for teaching me how to unravel,
and become
a good ancestor.

the carpenter

story: vyas saran | photography: kathy kim thai & christina lee 李嘉明

I don't have a key to Chinatown.

I know I could ask for one, but I don't. I'm burdened with an office that opens well after my best writing hours.

Less than a year ago my grandfather died. I used to come home to the sounds of his hands banging on the tabla, his singing *dha dhee dhin dha* as he played. I used to come home to hear him philosophize. I used to come home and ask him about his past.

Aja is gone. Aja led us to Canada. Aja was my close friend and proud of everything I did, calling me every few days when all he wanted to know was whether I drank tea, how my classes were, and how my health was. *Tum cha pia? Tumar tabet right hai? Kaise tumar class hai?*

I'm not from Toishan. I'm not from China. I'm not even from East or Southeast Asia. I'm a South Asian thumb, sore and dark and sticking right out of our Pender St. office. I grew up around these communities, so I rarely notice my skin and my features. But here, this community sometimes gave me the impression that I was a guest. For the most part I was comfortable, but I wondered if the folks around me thought there was a more suitable home for me. What did they think of me when I was the only dark face in their buildings? I've been welcomed with open arms and raised eyebrows.

Like I said, I never asked for a key.

Early one morning I came to the neighbourhood to watch the sun light up the strip. Passing by my office, looking up at the detailed crimson and jade woodwork lining Pender, I didn't expect to see our office door open. Excited, I stepped in, and remembered that a part of the building was going through renovations, meaning that a carpenter would be in early every morning.

For everyone else the young man's drilling and hammering was a bother, but for me it meant that for a couple of weeks Chinatown was a little more open. Until that point I was stuck on the idea that I was a stranger who could only go so far –afterwards, something clicked. I was proud of my writing, I worked harder, and forged better relationships. I stopped questioning the space I had made for myself here.

I don't have a community anywhere else; not in Surrey where I grew up, and despite how many times the politicians I would door-knock for would have me cover the area, I didn't know Punjabi Market. I'm an Indo-Fijian, a descendant of Girmitya's. My ancestors were kidnapped from an already colonized land to serve as the labour that made sugar companies rich, including Roger's

photos by christina lee 李嘉明

in Vancouver. Ripped away from South Asia, our identity became tied to the lonely Fiji Islands as pawns in another colonial project for generations, only to be forced to flee to the stolen lands we occupy today.

What mattered to me was locating a community that shared my values. I found that in Chinatown. It was here that I saw young people building solidarity, fighting racism and capitalism in the same breath, offering a solution for people in need of sustenance and dignity in a community pushed to the brink by profiteers. As much as I stuck out, their fight for liberation was a part of the fight for all people's liberation.

The more confident I felt in the heart of Chinatown, the more I started thinking about the history of South Asians: we were here too. It was an attack on our bodies that inspired the terrorism which devastated Chinatown in 1907, a place many of us called home. It was those riots which led to the gutting of our rights to work, vote, and journey here. It was those riots that led to the *Komagata Maru*. We were here.

Someone else was in Chinatown too: Aja. I don't know how this happened, but the gravity of a family's history can make it hard to remember even the most amazing stories. Movie-like scenes you've been told about as a child fade into the background. The foreground emerges as how they used to greet you when you visited, how they reacted to all sorts of good news, big or small, and how their watch jangled on the way to the tea kettle they started for you.

From the 1970s to the late 1980s, following his journey to Vancouver, my grandfather worked as a carpenter as he once did in Fiji. Sure enough, much of his work was in Chinatown. I realized this as I recalled the stories he told of restaurants and office buildings he once erected and renovated, and which streets he missed walking down. I got used to the neighbourhood. Seeing Pender, Georgia, Union, and Main every day had me realize that these were also the stomping grounds of my Aja.

The speed at which Chinatown gentrifies means that looking at pictures from only a few years ago can send you back aeons. What did my Aja see in his day? How much busier were the streets? How loud were the sounds coming out from the society offices above the dried goods shops and grocers? If Aji couldn't pack stuffed roti lunches for him, what did he eat? I want to imagine that he, supposedly a good Hindu, was tempted by the forbidden red meats hanging in the windows he walked by.

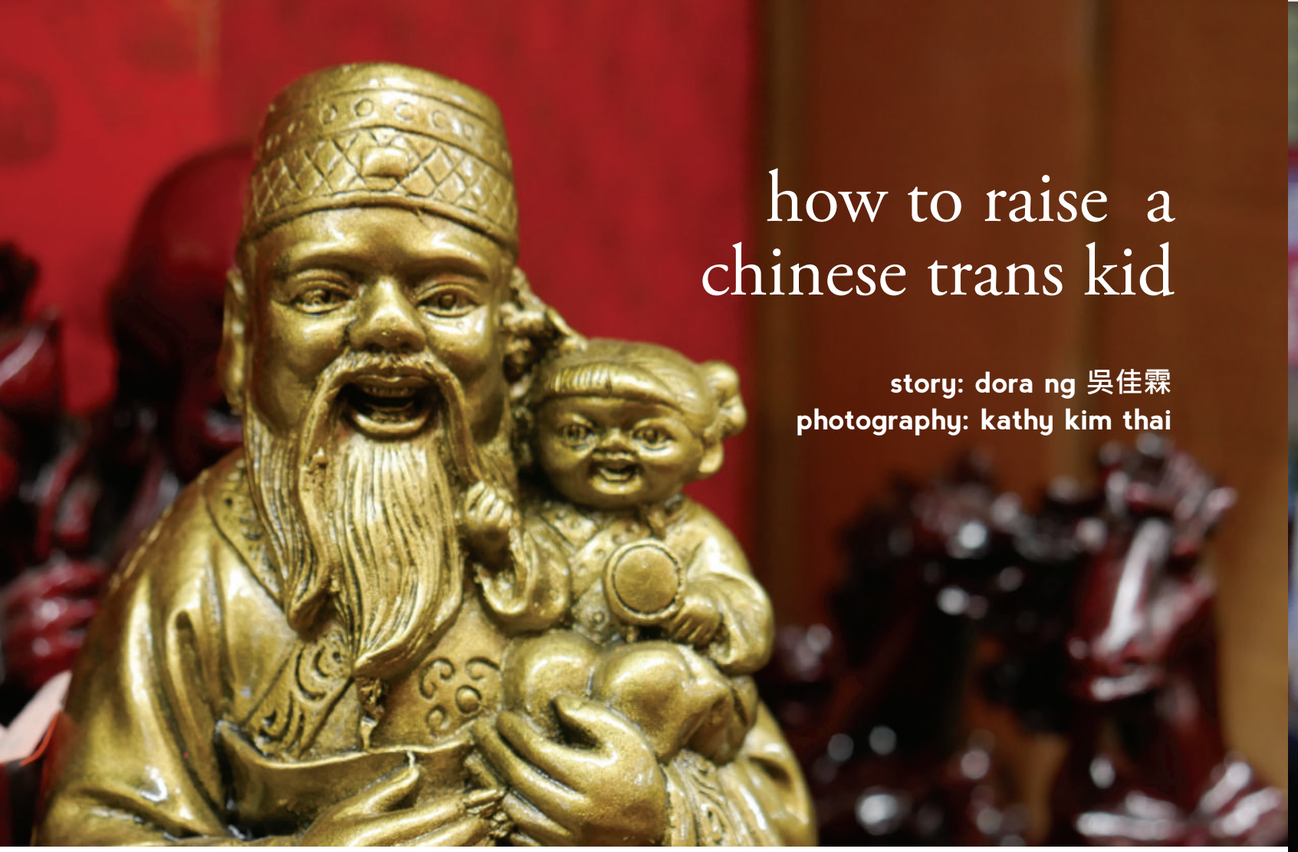
I wish Aja was alive to walk around the streets with me now. I wish he was here to point to what he did, what he loved, what he hated, and what he wanted. I wish he was alive to show me what he built here.

After a couple of weeks, the renovation was complete and the carpenter was gone. The door wasn't open in the mornings anymore. Although, that didn't seem to matter as much. Today, Chinatown is where I feel most grounded. It is where I feel confident. It is where I feel myself.

Aja had to leave Fiji. All he had in Vancouver were his children. He missed the rivers, his fields, and the mongoose he chased away from his crops. He missed the shops, the trees, and the dirt roads. He wasn't an outsider there.

Minding his own business in the early morning in a space that he probably felt was someone else's. He was that carpenter.

Key or not, I am here. As Aja was.



how to raise a chinese trans kid

story: dora ng 吳佳霖
photography: kathy kim thai

My grandpa has a gay voice.

This was a recent discovery, made after he called one night and a friend of mine asked who I was talking to and I told them it was my grandpa.

"That was your grand...father?" they asked, and I said yes.

"He sounds kinda gay."

I could see where they were coming from, but I've never thought about my grandpa as having a gay voice, I just thought he sounded like a woman. Actually, I never thought he sounded like a woman. It was only when people called him 吳太 (Mrs. Ng) when he answered the phone that I knew to other people, he sounded like a woman. To me my grandpa's voice is my grandpa's voice and grandpa sounds like my grandpa.

His telephone voice is a running joke in our family but he doesn't really mind. When your last name is Ng you just have to learn to laugh at yourself from time to time.

The last name Ng in Cantonese is pronounced *mm* which sounds exactly like 唔, which means 'not.' So when your last name is 吳 and your given name is an adjective then when people read your full-name, whatever your name means it becomes *Not That*.

My grandpa's name means strong. 吳強.

While talking to my friend, I eventually conceded that my grandpa's voice is a bit high.

"Do you think he *could* be gay?"

My friend sounded so hopeful. I think all gay people secretly wish that our elders are gay too. It would make coming out so much easier.

"I don't think so... I mean he has a LOT of kids."
"You know that doesn't mean anything."

"I know, I know, but my gaydar just says no."

My friend wasn't giving up.

"Well, what does he like doing?"

"He likes to watch sports," I replied, puffing my chest out. "Sports."

"What kind?"

"...figure skating, synchronised diving and women's gymnastics..."

My friend gave me a meaningful look.

"Those sports are pretty gaaaaay~"

"No, they're not!"

I tried to explain.

"All Chinese people like watching those sports. Those are the sports where we win medals."

I lived with my grandpa as a child and growing up we spent a lot of time watching TV together. One of my grandpa's favourite things to watch was olympic sports. He recorded competitions on VHS and rewatched them over and over, even when it wasn't olympics season.

Especially when it wasn't Olympics season.

No matter how many times we watched the same routine, he would always react like it was the first time.

"*Wah wah wah wah!* Look, look, look!"

"I can't believe the athletes..."

Grandpa always said athletes, 運動員, never girls. Even though most athletes we watched were young women.

For both figure skating and synchronized diving he likes watching coed doubles. After each routine he would exhale, shake his head in disbelief, and say the athletes are *ho lek*, the athletes are really awesome. The men and the women are equally *ho lek*. He also likes watching videos of how the athletes train and he LOVES making me watch them too.

"*Na na na~* Look how hard they train! If you trained this hard you can be *ho lek* too."

When we weren't watching TV, I would tag along with my grandpa when he hung out with his friends. He spends a lot of time volunteering for a Chinese seniors' friendly visiting program in Chinatown, which he co-founded with a group of very outstanding women, who became his best friends.

When he talks about his friends he speaks with so much pride. He would exhale, shake his head in disbelief, and say these women are *ho lek*. He would talk about how the women went to school in England, how well they could read and speak English, how they do all the organizing and he just manages the money and gets equal credit.

Study hard, learn English, he would tell me, and you too can be *ho lek*.

My grandpa had a grade 6 education and doesn't speak English. He doesn't speak Mandarin either, but he speaks six dialects of Chinese. He is fluent in spoken and written Vietnamese. He doesn't know the word 'feminist,' but acts like one. I think I identified as a woman for as long as I did because he had instilled in me so much pride in and admiration for that identity. He taught me to love not only women but womanhood itself. He taught me that even as a woman, if I worked hard, I will be *ho lek*.

My grandpa, with the gay voice who likes watching figure skating and whose name sounds like *not strong*; my grandpa, who taught me how to respect women, to look up to women, to aspire to be like outstanding women, to acknowledge the work and contributions of women; my grandpa, who taught me to see women as friends, as equals, as role models — he taught me how to be a man.

my porpor

dawn lo 盧曉兒

As a Chinese Canadian, I consider Vancouver's Chinatown a very special place. It is a place where I can find familiarity, comfort and a sense of community. Chinatown reminds me of my Grandma's sartorial fashion sense. My PorPor (Grandma in Cantonese) is never afraid of pairing bold floral knitted sweaters together with funky pattern pants (at the same time, always). I loved it when she proudly showed off to me all of her layers and told me stories about each piece of clothing. This illustration shows PorPor doing her morning exercise routine while wearing her famous layers.

Her style is original, defying, and unafraid,
which is also what Chinatown represents to me.

may wa leng

fading memories - my grandma's story

story: levana luu | photography: kathy kim thai

The fluorescent lights hum overhead as I walk down the beige corridor, scanning room numbers until I reach 319. I peer into the half open door and a small familiar frame sits, waiting in her chair beside the bed with the lights switched off, not quite sure for what. "Hello grandma, it's your granddaughter here!" I announce brightly. It takes a moment for her to process my voice and face, but then a toothless smile stretches across hers. "Oh it's you granddaughter, and you've come to visit me!" she delights. I dread the day that her face will stare back blankly in confusion but until then I savour every moment of memory with her.

My grandma was diagnosed with dementia a few years ago, and it's been an agonizing deterioration since. She prided herself on her independence and her biggest fear was to become a burden on my dad. When my parents were no longer able to safely care for her at home, they had strategically chosen care homes that were close to their house in East Vancouver. However, the first available spot happened to be a care home in Chinatown. Through it all I can't help but reflect on how Chinatown is a place that keeps drawing my family back with a gravitational pull. Over the years this neighbourhood carved a special space in my heart and has had a bigger influence on me than I ever imagined. The driving force behind it all is my grandma, my biggest mentor.

Growing up, my parents worked six to seven days of the week, so my grandma raised my brother and me while they worked. She nourished our bodies with her wonderful meals, and it was often during meal prep (which was an all day ordeal) that she would tell me the stories of her past over and over again. I would half pay attention to these stories, as I was too engrossed with her culinary wizardry. Perhaps if she told these stories enough times, they would seep into my subconscious and somehow be preserved. Looking back now, these stories were her way of teaching me how to forge my way through life in a world that can be unforgiving and to never take for granted where we came from. "I have lived a sun fu mang, a hard life," she told me. Her life was characterized by constantly packing up to escape war, poverty, and communism. My grandma was born in 1926 in Bei Hai, Guangxi, China to a merchant family. She was the eldest daughter in a family of three girls and one prized boy. Her childhood was short-lived and at an early age she was inundated with the burden of responsibilities. Despite excelling academically, she was denied an education beyond second grade because her role as a girl was to learn homemaking skills to help her mother raise their family. She always reinforced what a privilege it was for me to study.

Life was thrown into tumult with the onset of World War II. Shortly after the war ended, my grandma's father fell sick and passed away on her 16th birthday. As the eldest child, she now carried the burden of working to support her family. Work opportunities were scarce after the war and she was sent alone to Hai Phong, Vietnam, a port city 262 km away, where her mother had connections. While my grandma spoke no Vietnamese, she thrived amongst a large population of Cantonese speaking migrants in Hai Phong who had left Guangxi or Guangdong provinces looking for better opportunities.

She explained that even though the work was tough, she relished the relative independence she had. Her role as family income generator temporarily shielded her from the traditional expectations to marry and have kids. This independence ended a few years later when she entered into an arranged marriage in which she had no say. She didn't talk much about my grandfather. He wanted to be an intellectual, but his family was unable to afford him an education. He spent his time reading up on current events and languages instead of working a labour job that he felt was beneath him. Consequently, the onus of supporting the family financially and physically fell on her. "If it was up to me, I would have never married." She taught me from an early age what it meant to be a strong, independent woman in a culture and generation that didn't value this.

By 1954 my dad was born, and in the same year the Viet Minh troops defeated the French in northwest Vietnam. The country was subsequently split into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Following this split was a large migration to the South from the mainly communist supported North – and the beginning of the Vietnam War. Once again my grandma packed up to escape the communists and resettled in Saigon in the Cholon district, otherwise known as Saigon's Chinatown. Her stories about this period were always punctuated with weariness. Life was very tough in Cholon as my grandma single handedly worked a variety of labour jobs to provide for her three sons and one daughter. As war waged on, she faced the constant fear of losing her sons to mandatory enlistment. The future was so uncertain. Despite her family not having much, there was richness in the friendships they forged in this neighbourhood. They had a shared understanding of displacement and amidst the chaos they made a life the best they could, trying to preserve their heritage in a microcosm of familiarity.

In 1975 the Vietnam War ended. Vietnam unified under a new communist regime, which enforced repressive measures for the South Vietnamese, such as seizing homes and limiting job opportunities. This began the wave of boat people: refugees who would flee Vietnam for a better future. Money was tight, yet somehow my grandma scrimped and saved, selling what limited possessions she had to pay smugglers to help her children escape. Alone in Saigon, she anxiously awaited news from her children.

In 1978 my dad fled Saigon on a dilapidated and overcrowded vessel at the mercy of ocean, pirates, and dehydration. He arrived at a Hong Kong refugee camp, only to face significant discrimination — despite his ethnic Chinese background. After a year in the refugee camp, he was accepted to come to Vancouver, Canada. He was the first of his siblings to be relocated. Shortly after my dad arrived in Vancouver he applied to sponsor my grandma to come to Canada. It wasn't until five years later, in 1984, that her application was accepted and she arrived in Vancouver.

Those early years in Vancouver were mixed with relief, joy and incredibly hard work trying

to make sense of life in this new foreign place. Both my grandma and my dad fondly recall how Chinatown was the place to be amongst the newly arrived boat people, many of whom were ethnically Chinese. The boat people they met in Chinatown are still some of their closest friends today. Chinatown offered familiarity. It was the only place to buy Chinese groceries and indulge in Cantonese restaurants. You could get by without knowing English and easily access the neighbourhood without a car which many couldn't afford. Here my grandma felt she didn't need to be dependent on my dad which was something she struggled with. When my parents were looking to buy property, a huge factor in their decision was how accessible Chinatown would be by public transit for my grandma.

As a child my weekends were characterized by the dreaded trip out to Chinatown for Chinese school in the morning, followed by pushing the grocery cart for my grandma in the afternoon. After lugging our produce up and down Keefer and Georgia, I was always rewarded with an egg tart from Maxim's. I became very familiar with trustworthy newspaper ladies who would watch our cart while I crossed the street to buy my treat. There were Chinese grocers near our house, but my grandma was adamant that we go to Chinatown for our groceries: "more choice and fresher," she said. She never learned English, and there was no need. Her life revolved around running the house and visiting Chinatown. While she wasn't a social butterfly, she had a small network of acquaintances in the neighbourhood. Her usual grocery stores and restaurants recognized her as a regular. Chinatown became her second home.

My grandma continued to cook for our family until she was 85. I would often accompany her on her grocery trips to Chinatown long after I wrangled my way out of Chinese school and made it a priority to take her out to our favourite haunts. In these moments she was in command, carefully inspecting the produce to be concocted into a delicious meal. When she could no longer manage the stairs up to Maxim's Restaurant, we would frequent The Boss to savour our B Breakfast specials. Slowly the newspaper ladies disappeared and one by one our beloved grocers would close down, replaced by trendy cafés or new real estate developments. "Chinatown is dying," my grandma would tell me sadly.

The meals she cooked steadily became more burnt from forgetting to turn off the stove. The produce she picked would sometimes be half rotten as she wasn't able to clearly see. The stories she used to tell about her past became less frequent, replaced by asking the same few questions about the present over and over again. As her health deteriorated, my mom took over cooking and grocery duties and I sensed a real loss in her. Watching this decline and its impact on my grandma's pride was difficult. My visits to Chinatown with her were opportunities where she could hold onto a version of herself in better times, but the neighborhood itself was becoming unrecognizable to her.

The memories of my grandma and my relationship with her are strongly linked to the ties we have to Chinatown. As her memories fade, I can't help but desperately hold onto the things left here that still remind me of her. I grasp at whatever I can, as if putting these memories on paper will cement them, keep them from slipping away. Our family history has been so intricately connected to the Chinatowns of her migration, and she has spent the most time in Vancouver's Chinatown. It's in this place I feel we are given the freedom to define who we are; to re-create our own versions of what it means to be Chinese.

On our visits, I bring familiar goodies from her favourite Chinatown spots, such as an egg tart from Maxim's or a three bean dessert from Ba Le. Her face lights up as she wolfs down these confections and then, assuming I have better things to do, tries to usher me out. Often we sit in mutual silence, since she has a hard time keeping up with conversations. There are still so many questions I want to ask her. I want to tell her how grateful I am for her sacrifices; how my life has been so easy because she fought so hard for it to be that way; how incredibly lucky that I will never have to go through what she went through.

As she slowly loses her sense of self I want to let her know that she will always be the strong, fiercely independent woman who has lived this incredible life, and her legacy will not be forgotten. I want to tell her this over and over again so she doesn't forget. But alas, we sit in silence, parted by barriers of language and lapses of memory. "I'll send you out," she tells me. Together we exit her room, and she leads the way with her walker, her faded white runners shuffling along the linoleum flooring. With my final wave goodbye, I catch a fleeting glimpse of sadness flickering across her face as the door shuts behind me.

hitting home

photography feature:

jenn xu 徐静怡

Jenn Xu is an analog-based photographer capturing and creating on the unceded Coast Salish territory.

Hitting Home is a series of images captured on a trip to her father's hometown in JianHu, China. It was a trip vital in her self-discovery, allowing her to deepen familial ties with her grandfather and grandmother whom she has not seen in many years. As a child of immigrant parents living far apart from her family and heritage, these photos explore a feeling of endearment, nostalgia, and foreignness to a land she yearns to know.

Visualized through old homes and familiar faces, she aims to document the fleeting and meaningful moments on homelands to showcase the beauty in human connection, the resiliency of family, and to explore the feelings of loss and belonging.

My grandfather carefully reads his book of fortune for himself and each of his family members based on the Chinese zodiac. He'll always tell us our luck and what we should be weary of for the year. So far, the book has worked well in his favour. Besides the newspaper, this has been the only other publication he's dedicated himself in reading since turning 75.

Superstitious beliefs run strong in the family.

My grandmother's hands are steadfast and hardwearing. They are the hands to grasp onto when in search of strength. I've grown to realize how much of a matriarch and a rock my grandmother had been in the family throughout our lives. She worked as a great farmer while simultaneously raising my father and his three siblings single-handedly when my grandfather was posted abroad.

She is loved by countless and relied upon by many. When I think of her, I think of her mighty soul, swift hands, and a green thumb that would harvest the plumpest and most magical choi, leeks, and green beans around.

fold

poetry: jane shi | photography: kathy kim thai

"I called to the heavens and there was no response. Luckily, in my teens I knew how to knit sweaters and embroider to make some money. It was as if I was born knowing how to use these hands to get through those tough days."
—雪卿 (Xueqing), in a letter to her second aunt Suk-Fong, from Paul Wong's "Suk-Fong, How Are You?"[1]

Dear Auntie,
You instructed me to wash and fit
my covers like a spring roll, a dessert cigar
you'd unfurl into a perfect ring of smoke—
You told me to flip the cover cloth inside out,
roll the cotton filling on top, a rabbit candy
retreating into its velveteen wrappers.

You taught me, putting your hand over mine,
that knitting is a lot like pulling the trigger
over and over, almost for no reason, to keep
a body warm. Nothing but bread flakes
fly out of the cylinder. Nothing but
sawdust in white rice.

Thank you, Auntie. These covers rest on me
like tender arms of fresh dough.
My flours, all a-glitter in the air, force me to choke
on memory of shrapnel,
on drownings, on miscarriages, little bits
of history polluting our strained conversations.

My voice, so husky from coughing,
wavers when I read your letter. The tiny husks
carry inside them our spoils of silence.
Wounded soldiers of missed opportunities
adrift in the snow.

To fix this, you tell me to go back home.
To fix this, you send me money.
To fix this, you tell me to fold.

But my hands, auntie, sore
from playing your version of big 2 for too long,
from chopping vegetables into the shape
of corrupted cards, from wanting to grab hold of all
the pieces, stop shaking. They fly as they fold, copying
the KonMari method. Half, two thirds,
half again. Twist them into clumsy dumplings
that stand upright in the pot,
and then fall, that taste all the same,
anyhow. I fold my copybooks too, hidden and ashamed,
full of words I can't remember now.

Unflip. Perfectly rolled covers. Boxes in neat rows.
Perfectly golden brown. I've moved into a new home.
A warm scarf around my neck.
I've not told anyone my new address. Spent yet another
Lunar New Year outside of niangjia.
Fluffy snow bits settle into the stolen ground.
Auntie, I fold.
Auntie, I won't.

No one claps.
No one to hear the sizzle.
No one to see the fire.
No one to hear me cry.
No one to remember how they took you away.
No one to thank the desk that took the shrapnel first.
No one to be impressed with my folding.
No one to knit secrets into starlight.
No one but me, the glitter-flour in my bed,
unread copies of
Obasan
Wild Swans
Runaway
Red Azalea
Rape of Nanking
Do Not Say We Have Nothing
Egg on Mao
and the smallest things I am learning with my hands

from yours.

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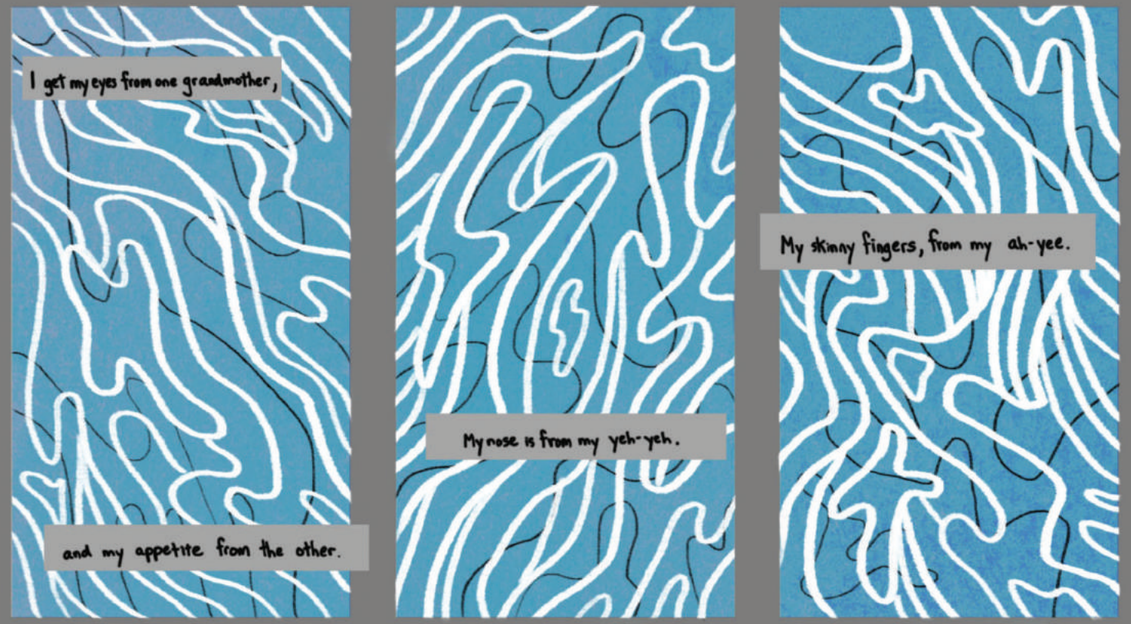
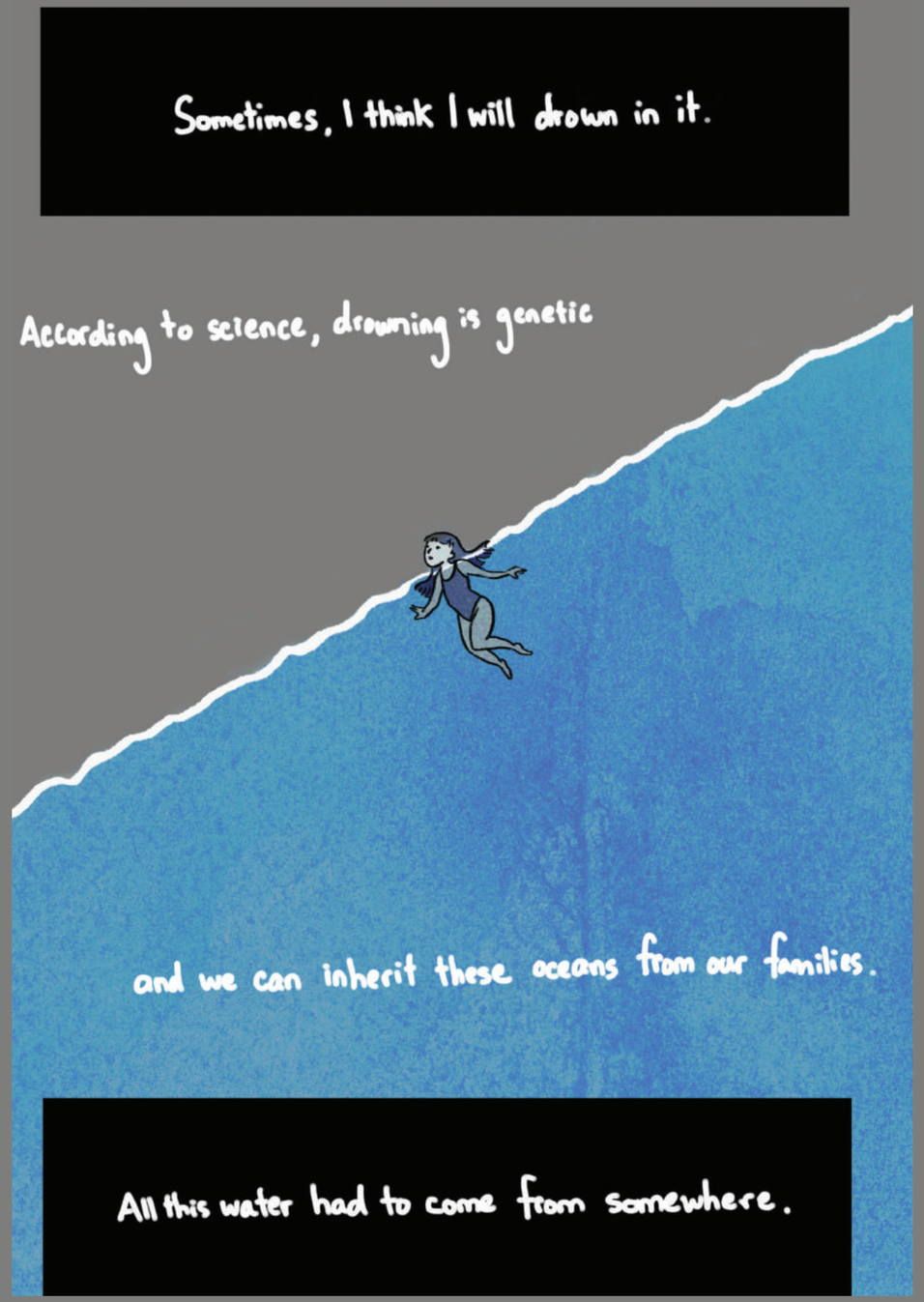
1 Translated by Mark Lee

when people ask me where i'm from, this is what i tell them

illustration: emily chou





I've been told I get my dramatic flair from my uncle.

I've never met him.

ninuno (ancestor)

poetry: phebe m. ferrer | illustration: kathy kim thai

but what if I can't scream my feelings in tagalog,
will that make them worth less to you?
when I lay them out on your gravestone with flowers and candles,
do you care to listen?

what do I call you?

you have never seen my face.
we existed for only days together.
now you sleep beneath marble and dirt,
I wonder if you can feel us standing above.

my first time here I didn't step off the bus,
but my second time here I still don't know who you were,
who you could have been, to me.
This time I step out of the car,
walk over with your daughter, grandson,
me, your great granddaughter,
your blood diluted,
your blood nonetheless.

together, we offer you our presence,
nandito po kami para makita kayo
kamusta po, sana mabuti
before we make our way back home.

who knows when we can see you again,
so we make sure to now, at least.

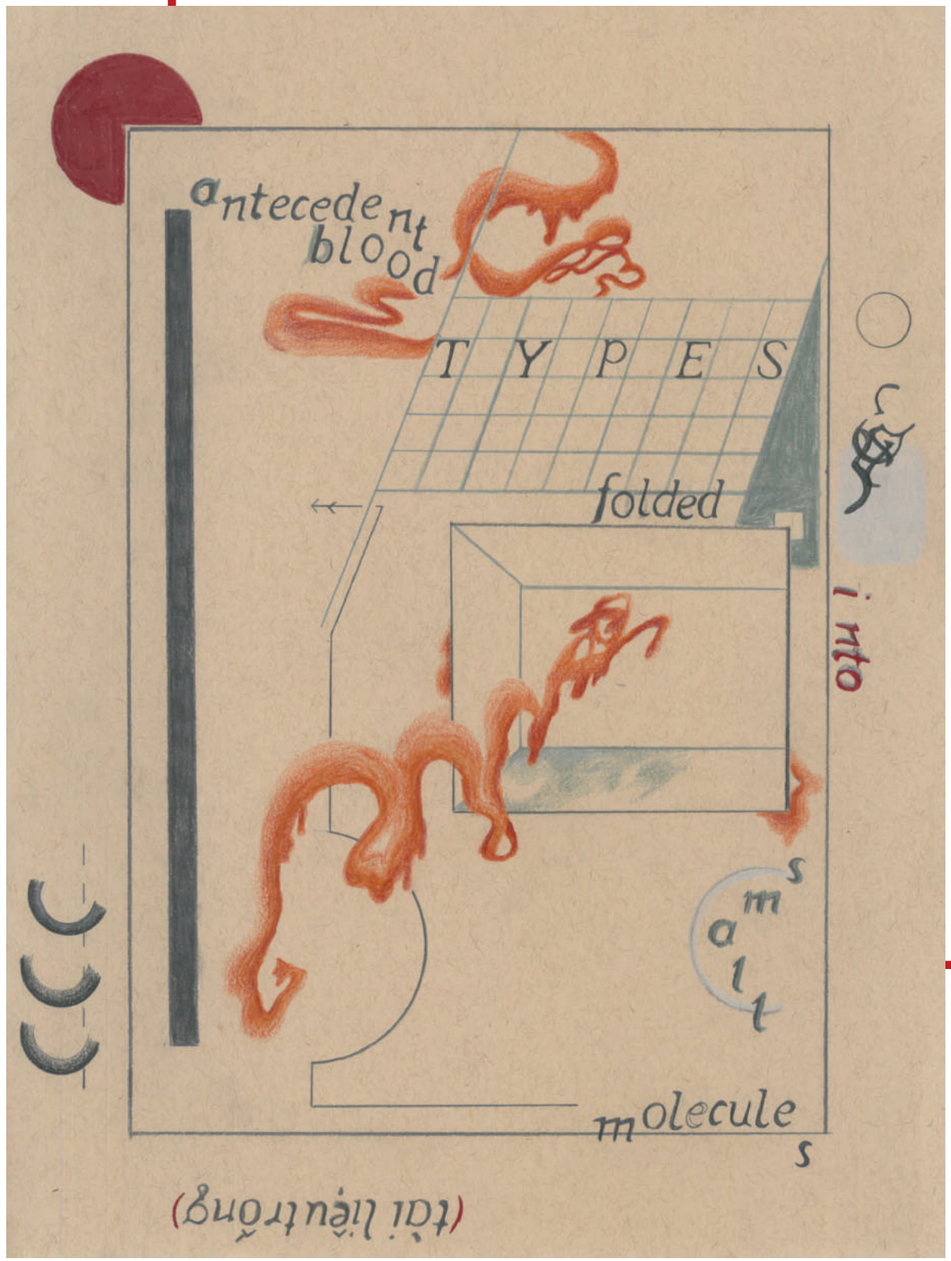


illustration: hue nguyen

grandma's house (no. 2, 4)

photo series: rachel lau

We make home with what we're given. Peeling white paint, moss coated steps, sticky tile floors; with reluctance, we take root in a place not ours to call home. We live in these spaces and leave traces of ourselves behind.

But what do we make of these spaces when life unravels into absence?

嫲嫲屋企 *Grandma's House* honours the home my 嫲嫲 created for her descendants from the fabric of scarcity and trauma. When our elders leave their corporeal forms, can we still find them in the spaces we shared?

This photo series explores the possibility of objects and spaces holding spirit when we no longer breathe life into them — can the onlooker feel the presence of someone in a space they've never known?

北興里

story & photography: leilan mei yin wong

This photograph documents a moment of preparation before my visit to my family's ancestral village in Hoiping in 2018. The photograph depicts my MaMa writing the name of our ancestral village out on a piece of paper for me. It was a last-minute decision - one I had been putting off - to visit her and ask her for this information. I felt both embarrassed to ask, as well as worried of shaming her if she couldn't remember the name. This photograph depicts the transfer of intergenerational knowledge between grandparent and grandchild. More importantly, this photograph allows me to remember my MaMa's hands and her handwriting. She is the final member of our family that speaks Toisan and can write in traditional Chinese.

These skills will be lost with her, and with it a connection to China.
These words are some of the last she wrote before her stroke.

愛心不是講法，是做法 /
I love you is not something we say

story: christina lee 李嘉明 | photography: kathy kim thai

I didn't know how to say the words "I love you" in Chinese until I was in my 20's. At home, my family mostly spoke English, and with my grandparents we spoke 台山話 (*Toisanwa/Hoisanwa*)[1], a regional variation of Cantonese, from Guangdong Province. While I could recognize the written characters from pop culture and distasteful tattoos, it wasn't a phrase that I had ever heard spoken aloud or learned to say in my mother tongue.

And while my lack of language skills has always haunted me (and continues to, even today), this led to a particularly existential form of grief when my 人人 (*ngin ngin* / paternal grandmother) was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia in 2012. She — one of the strongest women I have ever known, resilient, awe-inspiring, someone for whom I've always had a respectful fear and admiration — had been given, at the very most, two years to live. It wasn't as if the idea of mortality itself had shaken me; my 阿公 (*a-gung* / maternal grandfather) had passed away from lymphoma nearly ten years before. Cancer and its wake were by no means new to my family, but this time around, I was old enough to be (somewhat) informed on what was happening, and the duration of her illness allowed enough time for the true gravity of the situation to sink in. With *a- gung* before, I was far too young and the cancer spread so fast that I didn't have time to process or understand anything that was happening at the time. My *ngin ngin* on the other hand, to no one's surprise, thrived for the full two years that her doctors had estimated. And even though her condition worsened over time, when I say 'thrived,' I really do mean it. She spent her last years going on cruises with friends and road trips with family, crossing as many things off her bucket list as she could. We made sure of it.

But the entire time that this was happening, between weekly dinners together and ferry rides out to Vancouver Island, the phrase "我愛你" (*ngoi oi nei* / I love you) burned in the back of my mind. I knew I wanted to find a way to express this to my ngin ngin before she passed away, but no moment ever felt right. If I tried to say the words out loud, even to myself in the mirror, the phrasing felt unnatural, like cotton balls on my tongue. I knew I loved my grandmother, but that love didn't feel like this.

In the later stages of her illness, my *ngin ngin* asked my family over for lunch. After we had finished eating and had washed and put away the dishes, she

1 Pronunciations are approximated based on Toisanwa/Taishanese, the regional variation of Cantonese that the author spoke growing up. There is no standard romanization system, or even in some cases, no written characters for certain words in Toisanwa. Even between native speakers, there can be different pronunciations for certain words, depending on what part of the region one comes from.

called my brother and I back to the table and pulled out two little red pouches, handing one to each of us. Inside mine was a delicate gold bracelet, made up of small, flat circles, each stamped with Chinese characters, held together by thin gold chain links. I looked up, not understanding, to see my *ngin ngin*, who was not one to cry, tearing up across the table from me. My mom, in English, explained to us that, following Chinese tradition, *ngin ngin* was meant to pass on something gold to her grandchildren at their wedding, and that she was giving these to us now because she knew that she wouldn't be around to do it for herself in the future. What better moment than that to say what had been rolling around in my head? I choked on the words. It still didn't feel right.

Two years after her diagnosis, after many trips to doctors and specialists, alternating trips to chemotherapy and Vancouver Island, the Okanagan, Banff & Jasper, and testing new foods to try and satiate her chemo-altered taste buds, my dad called the family to come to the 15th floor oncology ward at Vancouver General Hospital. Even as my dad held the phone up to my *ngin ngin* for me, as I rode the bus towards the hospital, and even as I walked into the curtained off hospital room, I couldn't bring up the words I had been practicing. I knew that this was the last time that she would be able to hear them from me, but even as I stood holding her now very gaunt, clammy hands, tears streaming down my face, even then, it didn't feel right. I whispered many things softly into her ear, but those three words, words that I had wanted so badly for her to hear in her mother tongue, never reached my lips.

In the years following her passing, I poured myself into my identity reclamation and community work in Chinatown. Even years later, I'm still not entirely sure if it was out of a desire to make her proud, or guilt for not doing so earlier, for all of the years distancing myself from my ancestry and culture in order to 'fit in' at school, on sports teams, or in society more broadly. She had always been the carrier of traditions in our family, and I had spent much of my childhood resisting those traditions, going through the motions of 拜神 (*baai seen* / ancestral prayers) with her but not absorbing anything.

There are still many pieces of that cultural puzzle missing for me, but now for the first time in my life, I am surrounded by folks who understand me for who I am, and hold space for me to look deeper into those layers of history, culture, migration, diaspora, and colonialism that shape me and my experiences. It is only within the shelter of these spaces that I have started to understand the violent impacts that white settler colonialism has had, not only on my ability to connect with my own identity, but the ripple effect that this must have had on my grandmother. My grandmother who, in her early 20's, moved with her sister from her small rural village in Guangdong to 1950s Hong Kong; by the age of 27 was married with two children; and by the age of 30 risked everything, picked up, and moved her young family across oceans, to a place with an unfamiliar language, culture, and people, all in hopes of a brighter future for her descendants.

I think often about the class privilege that I hold, both in being able to distance myself from my culture growing up, and to explore these aspects of my identity today. I wonder about the shame it might have brought my *ngin ngin*, the privilege she had worked so hard for, the pain of distance from her homeland that she had endured, for me to grow up safely and comfortably, but so distant from the culture that she held so dear. In the absence of home, she found comfort in her village association's women's group, and would go dancing on Saturday mornings. Unlike many of my fellow Chinatown community members, I did not grow up in Chinatown; in fact, I have very few clear memories of this space. I remember only vignettes: picking my *ngin ngin* up from her women's group and the loud clatter and exclamations of all the 老公's (*lo-gung* / husbands) slamming down Chinese chess pieces; the sour-sweet flavour of 陳皮 (*chan-pei* / dried tangerine peel) pressed into sticks and wrapped in colourful foil, a treat in the car ride back for being well-behaved. Regardless, coming to Chinatown in my 20's felt like a homecoming; everything about it felt so incredibly familiar.

It took a long time —and coming to Chinatown— for me to realize that, even though I had never uttered the words *"ngoi oi nei"* to my *ngin ngin*, by way of all the effort we had made as a family to spend more time with her in her last years, in some ways it really didn't need saying out loud at all. I learned this as I found community in Chinatown, with folks whose upbringings were similar to mine; learned through knowing glances and well-timed text messages, through wordless plates of washed and cut fruit set before each other. Translating what we knew inherently from our parents: a shared understanding that sometimes the best way to show love is not through words at all, but through actions that say "you are on my mind" in all of the myriad ways that care does.

In the wake of death, there are times when home does not feel like home anymore. An indescribable emptiness takes over and fills the spaces that had once felt so warm; suddenly those spaces that felt safe and comforting before become a reminder of what is no longer there. As our needs shift and morph over time, this means that the spaces we consider to be 'home' can too. As I got involved in Chinatown, I found a place that already carried many of the markers of what had always felt safe to me. And gradually I began to learn that 'home' is subjective and always shifting; it can mean any number of places, at any time, that invoke feelings of comfort, warmth, and belonging. These places can grow or shrink in number as we encounter new communities, let others into our sacred spaces, or lose (touch with) the ones that we love. Sometimes certain spaces stop feeling like home; sometimes they only feel like 'home' under certain circumstances; sometimes 'home' is not a specific geographic location, but rather any place where a certain group of people can be found. But despite the constant ebb and flow of 'home,' one thing remains true: in the shadow of loss, these places offer us shelter to heal, to collect our thoughts, and slowly, to feel whole once again.

Ever since I was young, I have loved fruit of all kinds, and because of that, my *ngin ngin* would call me her 生果王 (*saang gwo vong* / fruit queen) as she sliced oranges, washed and peeled the skins off of apples and grapes, and taught me how to eat lychee. This year, 2019, was the fifth year anniversary since my ngin ngin passed away, and my first time spending it alone. Unsure if there were any special traditions I needed to take part in, I simply did what felt right: I lit 3 sticks of incense, and split an orange with her: 你吃過飯未呀? (*nei hyek-a faan meih a?* / have you eaten yet?).

about the contributors

christina lee 李嘉明
Christina is a researcher and hobby photographer, born and raised on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, including the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), and Qiqéyt (Qayqayt) First Nations. She is a justice and equity advocate working towards inclusive and sustainable communities that are sensitive to history, culture, and difference, and has been actively involved in the Chinatown community since 2013.

dawn lo 盧 曉 兒
Dawn Lo, also known as dawndawndawnillustration, is an illustrator who graduated from Emily Carr University with a Bachelor of Visual Arts. Her work has appeared in picture books, stationery, greeting cards, public art installations, murals and more. She aims to create works that are high-spirited and whimsical while retaining a certain degree of simplicity and humour. Most of her work are inspired by little everyday moments and personal mix-culture experience.

dora ng 吳佳霖
Dora Ng is a non-binary/genderqueer storyteller and lion dancer who grew up in Chinatown, Coast Salish Territories. Since childhood, Dora had a love of reading, and especially enjoyed Chinese martial arts novels and English fantasy fiction. Growing up in a single mother household, Dora shared deep connections with their grandparents and extended family who all played important roles in their care and upbringing.

When Dora came out and queer and began questioning their gender identity, Dora found themselves estranged from their family. Through the writing and sharing of personal stories and essays, Dora hopes that their family can gain a better understanding of their identity and heart. Today, Dora is a community advocate who works to queer Chinese spaces and to take up space for people of colour in queer spaces through storytelling and lion dancing.

emily chou
Emily is a CantoCanadian poet, illustrator, educator, and connoisseur of snacks. She has lived in the UK, Japan, and Italy. Her work has appeared in Ricepaper, Lemonhound, and various other books, anthologies, and publications. She's currently hard at work on her MFA at UBC.

hue nguyen
Hue Nguyen is a multidisciplinary artist with a focus on print media and film. Currently, their publishing work comprises of zines and comix, focusing heavily on topics of intergenerational trauma, immigration, and mental health. Their work explores these topics within a Western political atmosphere, critiquing the white hegemonic state and its role within the livelihood of the marginalized populace.

jane shi
Jane Shi is a queer Chinese settler living on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. Her work has appeared in *Room Magazine, Poetry Is Dead, LooseLeaf Magazine, Thirteen: New Collected Poems from LGBTQI2S Writers in Canada, China Channel,* and *PRISM International*, among others. She wants to live in a world where love is not a limited resource, land is not mined, hearts are not filched, and bodies are not violated. Find her online @Pipagaopoetry.

jenn xu 徐靜怡
Jenn Xu is an analogue-based photographer capturing and creating on unceded Coast Salish territory. She takes a documentary and editorial approach to her work. Through her images, she hopes to capture the stories and moments of tenderness and warmth exuded from those around her. Originally born in Nanjing, China, she immigrated to Canada with her family at the age of four.

justine crawford
Justine Crawford is a half-Chinese artist and illustrator born and based in Vancouver, BC. Using a bold, minimalistic, and highly graphical style, she aims to connect to her culture, often drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese art and symbolism. Her work explores themes of diaspora, identity, and emotional growth.

leilan mei yin wong
Leilan Mei Yin Wong identifies as a mixed-race white-passing student, in particular of Cantonese, Irish and English descent. In living, working and learning on the unceded territories of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Peoples, she aims to critique the systems of power and oppression that shape the world we live in. Her academic studies focus on Canada's investment in a white Canada through historical and contemporary state sanctioned dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, as well as Canada's continued endorsement of anti-immigration and racially discriminatory practices. She is currently exploring writing and sewing as she prepares for pursuing her Masters in English Literature.

levana luu
Levana is a second generation Chinese-Canadian born and raised in East Vancouver. She works full time as a physiotherapist helping people recover from neurological injuries such as stroke. One of the highlights of her job is listening to the amazing life experiences and stories from her clients. Chinatown holds a special place in her heart and she has always wanted to get involved with organizations looking to preserve the tangible and intangible cultural gems in this neighbourhood. In her free time she enjoys exploring mountains, going on worldwide gastronomic quests to find the ultimate hole in the wall, and trying to overcome her fear of heights by rock climbing.

may wa leng
Migrating from Australia to Canada to work in the animation industry, May has come to realize that any Chinatown is a second home away from home. Drawing (comics) about personal experiences is a visual way to express himself to his family in hopes of prevailing language and emotional barriers.

rachel lau
Rachel Lau is a queer Cantonese artist, writer, and audio storyteller, living as a settler on the unceded territories of the ʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and sel̓il̓witulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.
Focused on community-based storytelling, they've produced radio documentaries and short films in

collaboration with the Chinese Canadian community and several other communities, including the award-winning short film *The Heart of Cambie*. As a youth who grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown, Rachel is currently revisiting their relationship with Chinatown and its surrounding communities through community organizing and artmaking. Most days they can be found daydreaming on public transit about the Cantonese diaspora and queer futures.

phebe m. ferrer

Phebe is a recently finished Master's student and emerging poet, transitioning from writing a long and technical thesis to more impulsive and emotional poetry. In her contribution to Chinatown Today, she explores her relationship to ancestors - family she has never met but is nevertheless connected to.

Phebe is a queer Filipina settler, currently living on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. As a scholar, she is passionate about contributing to knowledge on Filipino/x migration stories. As someone in diaspora, she strives to honour both the joy and pain, resilience and separation, that coexist in diasporic stories. Phebe also wants to recognize that diaspora is not all who she is, and to that end her partner, who is a trusted reader of her writing, thinks she's best and simply described as 'best girl.'

sarah wai yee ling 凌慧意

Sarah was born and raised in Prince Rupert, BC on unceded Tsimshian territory. She completed her Master of Arts on the intercultural history of Chinese market gardening in the Musqueam community and stories of relationships between the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Indigenous communities. She is the co-editor of the publication "Journeys of Hope: Challenging Discrimination and Building on Vancouver Chinatown's Legacies" (2018) and the producer of the documentary film "All Our Father's Relations" (2016). She is the Community Engagement Manager for St. John's College at UBC. She currently serves as the President of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia, a non-profit, participatory organization based in Vancouver on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

vyas saran

Vyas is a writer, law student, and policy organizer. He is passionate about the politics of solidarity as it relates to our labour, our identity, and where we can go together. His projects focus on the potential of a more democratic world to bring power and dignity to working and otherwise underserved people. Vyas' writing has appeared in local outlets and *Maclean's Magazine*. He has worked as a researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and hua foundation, and cut his (crooked) teeth in electoral politics.

He is descended from South Asian "Girmitya" indentured labourers in Fiji, was born to refugees on Coast Salish territory, and is completing his law degree on Lekwungen territories that include the Esquimalt, Songhees, and WSANEC nations. All these lands are stolen and must be returned.