

Spring 2016

Reclaiming Our Histories

# Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island: Race, Indigeneity and the Transpacific

Asian Canadians were among the first to come to these Indigenous lands. Chinese tradespeople arrived in 1788-89 with the early fur traders. And many more came in 1858 during the era of the gold rush. Japanese and South Asians soon followed and lived and worked throughout the islands, from Victoria to Alert Bay, from Tofino to Salt Spring Island. Yet they, with Indigenous peoples, confronted a deep and pervasive racism--deprived of the right to vote, to work on crown projects, or to take up many professions. Despite the many challenges, communities proved resilient yet too often their stories have been lost.



Sonia Manak, an ACVI researcher whose family has deep roots in Duncan, speaks at the launch of this project at the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives, July 29, 2015. Kathryn Gagnon, museum curator looks on. J Price photo.

The purpose of the project is to recover and re-conceptualize Asian Canadian history on Vancouver Island, with specific focus on ties with First Nations and the Transpacific. It will look at historical relationships among settler communities, their relations with First Nations, and also draw attention to allies who, in standing up for the rights of the marginalized, were harbingers of Canada's multicultural future. The project's goals include the establishment of a new research collection on Asian Canadian history; the writing of two books based on this collection; the construction of a digital history website housing the stories and related inventories from local archives and museums; a learning resource for history instructors; and the mounting of Asian Canadian/First Nations exhibits in local museums.

## WANT TO SHARE A STORY?

We want to hear the stories of your communities or family and their relations with other communities. For further information contact our project coordinator, Tusa Shea at: [acvi@uvic.ca](mailto:acvi@uvic.ca).



Chief Maquinna

## The Islands as First Nations' Territory

When Chinese craftsmen arrived at Yuquot in 1788-89, Chief Maquinna was the powerful chief of the territory. Today, his descendant, Mike Maquinna (Chief Yahtlua) heads the Mowachaht-Muchahlat First Nations. There are at least 53 First Nations on the islands, members of the Coast Salish, Nuu-Chah-Nulth, and Kwakwaka'wakw peoples who have lived on the land for centuries. First Nations continue to pursue their title to the land through the courts and negotiations. Cultural centres and museums, including the U'Mista Museum in Alert Bay and the Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre on Quadra Island testify to the resilience and determination of First Nations to preserve and promote their cultural heritage.

<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/acvi/>



Vancouver Island and the adjacent islands have been the territories of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-Chah-Nulth, and Coast Salish peoples for thousands of years.

Credit: BC Ministry of Education, <https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/images/map2.jpg>

## TELLING STORIES TOGETHER? Asian Canadians and First Nations

Colonialism on the Islands casts a long shadow. Appropriating First Nations lands, the provincial government then took the vote away from First Nations and Chinese in 1872. Japanese and South Asians faced similar discrimination. Immigration policies resulted in a 'White Canada'. And in 1942, Japanese Canadians on the Islands were uprooted, interned and their properties sold-off.

Despite all this, communities proved resilient. Many fought and continue to fight for their rights. But communities are more than bodies of resistance. Our project will bring to light the lesser-known stories of people and communities. Where communities and families are willing, we will gather and tell new stories, bitter or sweet, that illuminate ways forward.

### KWAKWAKA'WAKW TERRITORIES

The northern and northeastern Islands were the traditional territories of Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations. Many Asian Canadians came to work in this territory, in the coal mines and in the fisheries. Whether in Alert Bay, or Quathiaski Cove, Asian Canadians lived near and often worked with First Nations peoples in the area. At times forced to compete for jobs, relations were not always smooth:

***"When the first cannery men came to this coast, they put up canneries at the places where our people were living - at the best salmon rivers... The cannery managers needed the Indian men to bring in the fish and the women to work in the canneries. It was good... Later when other people got into the fishing business, we had to fight for our place in it."***

— Chief Harry Assu,  
Lekwiltok Tribe,  
Kwagiulth First Nation



Credit: Museum at Campbell River  
MCR 20395-1

Shigekazu Matsunaga, who lived in Quathiaski Cove before the war, commissioned Kishi Brothers Boat Works to build the Soyakaze (Gentle Wind) in 1939. A 36-foot, double-ender cod boat with a live well built into the middle of the hull, the boat was seized as part of the uprooting and internment of Japanese Canadians in 1941. The Matsunaga family were forced to leave Quadra Island but returned in 1949. Eventually Shigekazu found the Soyokaze and re-purchased it, and fished with it into the 1980s. It is now a featured outdoor exhibit at the Museum at Campbell River.





Japanese Canadian fallers, Hillcrest Lumber, June 1940  
Credit: Kaatza Station Museum and Archives, Wilmer Gold Collection

## NUU-CHAH-NULTH TERRITORIES

Many people know that Europeans arrived at Yuquot (Friendly Cove) well over 200 years ago and were initially welcome by Chief Maquinna. Fewer people are aware, however, that on those ships were Chinese craftsmen who stayed longer than most Europeans, building ships and buildings. And even fewer are aware that Chief Maquinna's younger brother traveled to China in 1786 where he stayed for over a year, learning Chinese.

When settlers built the first Alberni sawmill, Hawaiians were among the first to work there. All along coastal Nuu-Chah-Nulth territories, from Tahsis to Barkley Sound, on the water, in canneries, and in the forests, Asian Canadians and Pacific Islanders worked and lived with their families.

## COAST SALISH TERRITORIES

On the historical territories of Lekwungen-speaking peoples, Victoria became the seat of settler colonialism in 1843. Initially a diverse set of newcomers, including Chinese, African Americans, and Hawaiians among others arrived in the area. Intermingling among these peoples was not uncommon. Chinatowns were established in Sidney and Victoria. Salt Spring and adjacent islands, sites for many First Nations, became home to Kanakas, many of whom had inter-married with Indigenous peoples.

Asian Canadians came to Nanaimo (Snuneymuxw territory) and Cumberland (Komox Territory), particularly to work in the coal mines. Some came to the Cowichan Valley.

From Duncan and Chemainus up to Lake Cowichan, newcomers went to work in the resource industries. Many helped build the E&N railway and in 1917, Mayo Singh and his colleagues founded a lumber mill in what would become the thriving multicultural community of Paldi.

*“Before the war there was a Japanese barber shop here in Duncan. That was the only place that would cut Asiatics’ hair, as well as the local Indians’ hair. There were only two white barber shops, here at that time and they would never cut our hair, so we went to the Japanese barber.”*

– Karm Singh Manak,

In Sarjeet Singh Jagpal,  
Becoming Canadians, 58



University  
of Victoria  
History



# OUR RESEARCH TEAM

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the project is directed by a research team that includes:



## John Price

A historian at the University of Victoria, John Price has worked with Asian Canadian communities in Victoria and Vancouver for the past ten years. He has extensive experience conducting archival work at the Victoria City Archives, B.C. Archives, Kaatza Station Museum (Lake Cowichan), BC Legislative Library, United Church archives in Toronto and Vancouver, Library and Archives Canada (Ottawa), British National Archives (Kew Gardens), British Library (London),

Jiangmen City Archives, China (江门市档案局), Japan's Diplomatic Archives (外交資料館), Tokyo. He was the director of the Chinese Canadian Artifacts Project (see <https://ccap.uvic.ca>) and is the author of *Orienteering Canada: Race, Empire and the Transpacific* (UBC Press, 2011). He is ACVI's project director.



## Imogene Lim

Previously chair of anthropology at Vancouver Island University, Dr. Lim has extensive experience in community-based research related to Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island. She has conducted comparative research on Chinese in America, as well as extensive fieldwork on Chinatowns in Nanaimo and Cumberland. Her work often crosses ethnic boundaries as with her chapter "Encountering the Past: Family and Community History," in Phyllis Senese, ed., *Shashin: Japanese Canadian*

*Photography to 1942*, (Burnaby, BC: Japanese Canadian National Museum, 2005). She is currently working with community activists to restore and protect the Old Hillside Chinese Cemetery in Duncan, Vancouver Island. She sits on the Coal Creek Historic Park Advisory Committee in Cumberland and was a founding member of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of B.C.



## Christine O'Bonsawin

Director of the Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Victoria, Dr. O'Bonsawin is in regular contact with Indigenous students and communities across Vancouver Island. An accomplished scholar in the field of Indigenous peoples in sports, she will examine Asian Canadian and First Nations' sports history on the Island, an integral part of community life from the 1920s on. Her recent publications include "Indigenous Peoples and Canadian-Hosted Olympic Games,"

in Forsyth and Giles (eds.), *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013). She provides ongoing assistance in guiding the project in its approach to First Nations history, the protocols of contacting communities, and theoretical questions related to Indigeneity.



## Tusa Shea

Receiving her PhD in Art History in 2012, Dr. Shea is presently the Program Coordinator for the Cultural Resource Management Program at the University of Victoria. Her scholarly work includes a focus on culture, gender and Indigeneity ("Fabric of the Nations Art: Appropriation of First Nations Motifs During the Interwar Period in British Columbia," in Birnbaum and Anna Novakov eds. *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919-1939: Expanded Social Roles*

for the New Woman Following the First World War (Edwin Mellon Press, 2009). She has extensive experience working in partnership with museum staff throughout the project, most recently with the Chinese Canadian Artifacts Project.



## Rita Kaur Dhamoon

Professor Dhamoon teaches in the political science department at the University of Victoria. Her current research program is grounded in critical race feminism, and includes a book project on Sikhs in Canada and nation-building; research on intersectionality and solidarity politics between people of colour and Indigenous people; and an intersectional analysis of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, with Dr. Olena Hankivsky (SFU). Her publications include *Identity/Difference Politics: How Difference is Produced and Why it Matters* (UBC Press, 2009). Rita Dhamoon organized commemorative activities related to the 100th anniversary of the Komagata Maru incident of 1914.

## Continuing Associates:

**Zhongping Chen:** Consultant and professor of history, UVIC

**Brian Smallshaw:** Web master and a history graduate student studying the uprooting of Japanese Canadians on Salt Spring Island.

**Wenjuan Lu:** Researcher and translator, part of the co-op work placement program and a graduate student in English.

**Tad Suzuki and Faith Takishita:** Librarians at UVIC and VIU respectively, creating a dynamic bibliography as part of the research project.

**Martin Holmes and Stewart Arneil:** Staff of the Humanities Computing and Media Centre working as consultants for ACVI.

**Christopher Arnett:** Consultant on Indigenous history, Anthropology, UBC.

**Joe Akerman:** Organizer and educator on Indigenous affairs, graduate student in Indigenous Governance program, UVIC.



Professor John Price (centre) with members of ACVI research team during a field trip to Russell Island, formerly the home of Pacific Islanders and now part of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. From left, Jennifer Seidel, Steven Davies, Imogene Lim, Price, Wenjuan Lu, Tusa Shea and Jillan Valpy. Photo by team member Brian Smallshaw.

## Research Contributors:

The project depends on the contributions of many people including research associates, members of community organizations, and the staff of our partner museums.

Research assistants who have worked on the project include Sonia Manak, Jennifer Seidel, Stephen Thomas Davies, and Jillan Valpy. Museum staff contributors include Aimee Greenway, Kathryn Gagnon, Anna Rambow, Linda Reid, Barbara Simkins, Meghan Dalskog, Beth Boyce, Suzanne Bonner, Frank Neumann, Gillian Watson, Brad Morrison, Gregory Evans and Sherri Robinson. Others who have made important contributions include Margarita James, Rumiko Kanesaka, Joel Legassie, Mahinder Kaur Doman, Mary Beth Small, Mike Abe, Joan Mayo, Neil Dirom and Willie Chow, Helen Lansdowne.