

# REFLECTIONS ON EXCLUSION AND OTHER THINGS IN THE DARK

***To be excluded once more!  
Already excluded in the Chinese Exclusion Act,  
now excluded once again in a historical  
research document.***

AN ESSAY BY FUNG LING FEIMO

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AN ESSAY IN RESPONSE TO THE JAMES SHORT RENAMING PROCESS. COMMISSIONED BY ANNIE WONG AS PART OF HER CALGARY CHINATOWN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE PRESENTED WITH THE NEW GALLERY IN PARTNERSHIP THE CITY OF CALGARY.

JULY 2021

The [James Short Historical Research](#) document released in May 2021,

commissioned by the City of Calgary, and written by local historian Harry Sanders, was intended to preface the renaming of James Short Park. It is part of the process of delving into the history of James Short and how his actions impacted the community served by his namesake school that existed at the site. The document had the opportunity to bring to light the racist actions and injustices inflicted on the local Chinese community. But it didn't.

So, I am writing this to honour the missing history, for the unsung people you'll meet in the ensuing pages, and for anyone and everyone who wants to know.

It is jarring to read Chinatown's history as it was told in the [James Short Historical Research](#) document because of what is excluded. There is no mention of the [Chinese Immigration Act](#) in 1885 and later the [Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923](#), both of which displaced and destroyed the lives of the Guangdong diaspora for generations. Why is it jarring? Because critical history about the community's founding was left out. The 47-page research document continues to venerate James Short and the "old boys" and validate the dominant culture. Yet the community's history, the long history that outlives James Short, is reduced to a handful of non-speaking parts.

Within the latter six pages of the research document, there were mentions of about a dozen or so Chinese names. Unlike their white contemporaries, they were presented as a faceless and voiceless monolith with hardly any history, all the while James Short's role in the

anti-Chinese movement was downplayed. As with the history of exclusion, they were invisible then, and invisible now in a research document.

In 1910, James Short helped lead a campaign to halt the establishment of Chinatown in Centre Street. Then again in 1919, Short protested the Centre Street Chinatown location and supported its removal. In both cases, Short proposed that the Chinese lease property elsewhere, arguing that they would lower the property value of neighbouring white residents.

Despite his efforts, the Canton Block was built, and Chinatown thrived.

In the late 1800s, the first Chinatown was a site of rioting and harassment by the white community, who blamed the Chinese for bringing smallpox to the city. The area was razed by a fire causing mass displacement within the neighbourhood. Then in 1910, the Canadian Northern Railway announced a proposed route into Calgary along the second Chinatown. This caused property values to increase, which compelled the landlords to evict Chinese tenants and sell the properties. Having been displaced twice from earlier Chinatown locations, the community understood that the only way to achieve some permanence and stability was to buy the land and own property. This was a hurdle since they were not recognised as “persons” under the law and therefore not allowed to own property. As such, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chinatown in Canton Block was established in 1910, land and buildings were purchased by various clan and tong associations rather than “Chinese non-persons.” Other institutions in early Chinatown include the Chinese Mission, churches, and the Calgary Chinese School, which also owned

their respective properties. Although this history is excluded from the James Short Historical Research document, it is the very context in which he lived and is significant to understanding the neighbourhood.

From this historical perspective, it is omissive to say, "The first Chinese settlers reached Calgary three or four years before Short's arrival. Since the Chinese community comprised only adult men at the time, there were no Chinese students at Central School during Short's tenure as principal."<sup>1</sup> Short moved to Calgary in 1889. The *Chinese Immigration Act* was first passed in 1885, restricting Chinese immigration through an increasing "head tax" when the Act was amended over the years, until it reached an entrance duty of \$500— a prohibitive sum that would represent two-year's wage for a Chinese labourer. On July 1st, 1923, immigration was barred altogether upon the passing of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*. They also had to carry Chinese Immigration Certificates with them at all times,<sup>2</sup> even infants and children, including those who were born in this country. At the bottom of the certificate, it reads: "This certificate does not establish legal status in Canada." They were stateless. Already relegated to the confines of Chinatown and not welcomed beyond its boundaries, they had to carry the IDs even at home or within the neighbourhood. Failure to do so could mean deportation or imprisonment, and at the very least a \$500 fine. The crumpled state of these slips of paper can attest to the matching crumpled dignities— if only the papers could talk.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, *James Short*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Clement, Catherine. [1923 Chinese Exclusion Act Project](#).

In many port cities such as Vancouver and Victoria, upon paying the official entrance duty on arrival, the Chinese would be searched and then confined in [Chinese detention sheds](#), called “pig pens” by the Chinese.<sup>3</sup> Release from the pens depended on further undocumented fees or bribes, so the detention period was contingent on however long it took to raise the monies. Detainees also had to pay for their meals while they waited, which could have ranged from a few days for the wealthy, to weeks or much longer for others. Some never made it out of the pens.

The process was the same for newcomers and returning Chinese alike. Even Canadian-born Chinese were non-status. Yet the [James Short Historical Research](#) referred to the Chinatown residents as Chinese-Canadian. This was not applicable in James Short’s time, as the [Chinese were non-status](#) and never recognised as Canadian or even as “persons” under the law.

## A History of Exclusion

From the late 1800s, the discriminatory immigration policies prevented Chinese men from bringing over their wives and children or having families here. Nor could they alternatively start a family here when there were almost no Chinese women, while anti-Chinese hatred also did not permit them to marry white women. Given the extreme hardships and

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<sup>3</sup> Cheung, “When Chinese in Canada Were Numbered, Interrogated, Excluded.”

hostile environment, the men at first did not plan to put down roots. The plan was to send money home.

Eventually, the Chinese were completely prohibited from immigrating— the only racial group to be excluded by legislation. Note the dramatic difference between Chinese and Japanese statistics (notably, the ratio of female to male) within the same census years in British Columbia:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Chinese Males</b>	<b>Chinese Females</b>	<b>Japanese Males</b>	<b>Japanese Females</b>
1921	21,820	1,713	9,863	5,143
1931	24,900	2,239	12,997	9,170
1941	16,426	2,399	12,426	9,670

Population of Persons of Chinese and Japanese racial origin in British Columbia, by gender, 1921 – 1941. (Canada, Census, 1921 – 1941)<sup>4</sup>

Though it's been over fifty years since the immigration reforms ended legislative anti-Chinese racism, the ongoing hate towards the community continues to exist and has actually amplified in recent years. Aside from seeing more reports of hate incidents originating in cities with larger Asian populations, I too have experienced more racist behaviours or microaggressions in Calgary, and have reported the incidents to two registries led by the [Chinese Canadian National Council](#) and [Vancouver Asian Film Festival](#).

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<sup>4</sup> Roy, [The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41](#), 242.

At the time of writing, award-winning journalist Christopher Cheung, whose article I quoted, experienced an anti-Asian hate incident on a public beach on July 8, 2021:



The image shows a screenshot of a Twitter thread. The top part of the thread is the main tweet, and the bottom part is a reply. Both tweets are by Christopher Cheung (@bychrischeung) and are timestamped 10:15 AM on July 8, 2021. The main tweet describes an anti-Asian hate incident at a beach. The reply discusses the author's experience of being excluded from safe spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Thread**

 **Christopher Cheung** ✓  
@bychrischeung

Well, it finally happened. Friends and I were the only visibly Chinese people at a beach yesterday. I put on a mask only because I was cold. Minutes later, big racist guy shows up to yell slurs at me. He joins his group, who stare and curse about us until we leave.

10:15 AM · Jul 8, 2021 · Twitter Web App

**Thread**

 **Christopher Cheung** ✓  
@bychrischeung

Replying to @bychrischeung

In Covid I've been limiting myself to places where I don't look different, places white preservationists whine about for being exclusionary because there isn't enough English \*or French\*. Because what's the point of leaving our safe spaces if we're going to be treated like shit?

10:15 AM · Jul 8, 2021 · Twitter Web App

65 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 1,375 Likes

## No Chinese Students?

In the James Short Historical Research paper, it states “there were no Chinese students”<sup>5</sup> who attended the school where James Short was a principal. However, this needs to be explained. Various iterations of the *Chinese Immigration Act*, culminating in the *Chinese Exclusion Act* kept families apart or prevented families from ever happening; no women, no families, no children got to go to school. Even youngsters who arrived would have worked as labourers to survive and would not have had the opportunity to go to school. The Chinese community in Canada was stunted, as wives and children were barred from joining the men.

Given legislated exclusion, it is a minor miracle that there were 44 Chinese students at James Short School.<sup>6</sup> Many of the children were from the founding families of the Chinatown community. The fact they existed is a testament to the resilience of the community and would have been cause for celebration. Why no stories!?

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<sup>5</sup> Sanders, *James Short Historical Research*. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Prior to its renaming in 1938, James Short School was called Central Public School.



Image credit: Glenbow Archives, University of Calgary, Young Men's Christian Association (Calgary) Fonds, Series 6, M 1710 Ovr.

The photo above is a “Who’s Who” of Chinatown prominent persons. The boys would have been students of the school.

Most curious is the names of the owners of the corner building at 200 Centre Street SE. A legal title search reveals the owner’s name as William L. Dayton et al. “Et al” includes [Norman Kwong](#) and two other members. The building operated as 林西河堂 Lim Association until the society dissolved in the 1960s. Would anyone but a Lim establish the Lim Association? But who was the founding Lim?

In the above photo of the hockey team taken in the 1920s, everyone is of Chinese ancestry. However, the boy seated on the right is identified as Bill Dayton in the caption, the same Dayton identified in the title search. Based on the immigration registry\* his mother had a Chinese name, Wong Shee (mis-recorded as Ong Sze), but also an Anglo name in brackets: Mrs. Lim Soon Dayton. She arrived on May 16, 1923, at age 31\*, a mere six weeks before the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1923 shut the gate and would have been one of the very last Chinese women to be allowed until decades later. “Lim Soon” however, does not appear anywhere in the database, except in reference to the wife. The man is not in the registry.

It is uncertain why the Lims took on an Anglo name, but a Chinese family with a European name apparently was able to own property. If that is the case, the Lim under the name of Bill Dayton, was not only the named property owner but the founder of the Lim Association.

In 1929, Anglo name or not, Bill Dayton and his Hi-Y (High School YMCA) hockey teammates needed special permission to swim in the pool at [Cave and Basin in Banff National Park](#). Even for Chinese elites like [Frank Ho Lem](#)—who later became Calgary Regiment’s Lieutenant—and a “Mr. Wong” who led a dozen boys on the YMCA camping trip, much effort was required to gain access to the pool. While they were allowed to camp in the National Park, which was big enough to separate the youth from the white visitors, in a pool of common water, however, spatial segregation was not possible.

Did you know that Indigenous, [Chinese](#), Black and other racialised people were not allowed in public parks or pools? In their research for the Network in Canadian History and Environment, Meg Stanley and Tina Loo write:

When Banff's Superintendent repeatedly told Ho Lem there wasn't any regulation barring him from using the hot springs, he was, strictly speaking, correct. The discreet exclusion in operation rested on an informal "understanding" that required park employees to exercise their judgement. [Ho Lem's] claim for inclusion rested on the fact that he and Wong were Canadian citizens and members of the Calgary YMCA, and hence respectable. Those qualities and, perhaps, his persistence—which came with a hint that he might relish in a fight over exclusion—won the day. He, Wong, and the Chinese boys were allowed "to use the pools at any time they were open to the general public." In return, Ho Lem and Wong agreed "to accept responsibility" if there was any trouble.<sup>7</sup>

For both Frank Ho Lem and Mr. Wong (likely Wong Kong Sem also known as Wong Wah)<sup>8</sup> to be recognised as Canadian citizens was a rare exception, yet they still faced racial

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley and Loo, "Getting into Hot Water: Racism and Exclusion at Banff National Park."

<sup>8</sup> Frank was the son of Ho Lem and Mary Ho Lem. Immigration database shows Ho Wing Shim arrived in December 1907 (the same date and ship as his mother) at age 10, who was most likely Frank. He had the same family name Ho, as well as the generational name, Wing, as his brothers. Wong arrived at age 15 in 1916\*. Both became naturalised citizens.

discrimination. In Paul Yee's *Chinatown: An illustrated history of the Chinese Communities*, Norman Kwong recalled the following in 1929:

When I was a boy, there was a park at the top of the Centre Street hill. I used to always want to go wading in the pool there, but I wasn't allowed because it was just for white people. There was no sign or anything; it's just the way things were.<sup>9</sup>

Racial segregation was the norm. That is why Chinatowns were built. As were Chinese Y's. In 1914, Calgary Chinatown welcomed the [first Chinese YMCA in North America](#). It was housed in the Chinese Mission at 120 2 Avenue SW, which is the present-day location of the senior housing complex, Clover Living.

## The Children of the James Short School

James Short was the designated school for Chinatown, hence students were almost exclusively of Guangdong ancestry. Chinatown was their playground. Some students included children from the Mah family. This includes Ellen Wong (née Mah), her paternal cousin Jim Mah, and their paternal aunt Jeannie Tse (née Mah).<sup>10</sup> Ellen was there from grades 1 to 6, starting in 1959. Jeannie is younger than Ellen, thus attending the school a few years after her niece around 1962 till it closed in 1968. Jim was only there around 1966 for grade 1, until the school closed.

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<sup>9</sup> Yee, *An illustrated history of the Chinese Communities*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen and Jeannie's maiden names were Mah.

On the way home from school, kids used to buy candy from the Home Confectionery operated by the Dofoo family, which is the present-day Chinatown Post Office. With parents working long hours, kids would go to school as well as roam the neighbourhood on their own; they had free run of Chinatown. There were no organised recreational activities, or activities available to them outside of the area. Jim played baseball and football in the park behind the United Church. Though now known as Sien Lok Park, in English this was called the Chinatown Park. The 華埠公園 archway with the park name in Chinese is still seen at the northwest corner of Centre Street and still considered “wah fau gung jyun” by the old-timers. For Jim, the playground broadened to include the Bow River, Centre Street Bridge, as well as Prince’s Island’s lagoons and wetlands before the development of Prince’s Island Park.

Like Jim, Jeannie’s family lived on the east side of Centre Street in the Flatiron building, which was demolished in the late ‘70s. Without any traffic lights on Centre Street, she was told not to cross over to the west side because of the busy and uncontrolled intersections. Aside from that, they were free to roam the neighbourhood. She recalls special occasions such as skating in the park rink behind the United Church, which is west of Centre Street, accompanied by adults or older kids.

When the James Short School shut down in 1968, Chinatown students were bussed to the vacant Central High School,<sup>11</sup> which had been closed since 1965, rather than to another elementary school to continue their schooling. Being bussed out of the neighbourhood was

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<sup>11</sup> Central High School is today’s Dr. Carl Safran Centre located at 930 13 Avenue SW.

considered a treat to the Chinatown-bound kids. Yet they were bussed to a vacant high school with facilities built for older, bigger kids rather than a more suitable elementary school with desks, chairs, lockers and toilets meant for their size, lest they mix with other young white children. It was in effect an act of segregation.

Both Jim's father and grandfather took the bus to work in the family restaurant on 16 Avenue and Edmonton Trail NE. It was extremely rare for a Chinese person to own a car during the '60s because of the legislative hurdles they had to go through to own property, a vehicle, or even have a driver's licence. But Ellen's father did. He was the only one in the extended family. Change was happening— but these stories are sparse because people either don't know or don't want to remember those hard times.

The Mahs were the lucky ones. Patriarch Mah had paid the head tax, established his business in Calgary, and was able to afford to return to China a few times over the years to start a family. Upon the repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, Ellen's dad was finally able to come to Canada to join his father in 1948; and a year later, Jim's dad did the same. Aside from elder Mah's few visits over the years, the brothers were in their 20s by the time they got to know their father.

## The Children of the Chinese School

Like their contemporaries, all three Mah children spoke Toisan at home and then conformed to English when they reached elementary school, abandoning their heritage

language. There were no Chinese classes at James Short School, but they did attend Chinese School in addition to regular school; one afternoon a week for Ellen, twice a week for Jim. The schoolhouse was located next to the United Church. Even when the school was replaced in 1980 and became integrated within Bowside Manor, the school component operated from the new building at the same site, 126 2 Avenue SW.

Language of instruction in Chinese school was Toisan, and the Mahs would learn to read simple Chinese characters using Toisan pronunciation. With the shift in demographics, when Jim's children attended the same school in later years, Toisan was no longer used for instruction. Instead, they were taught to read the same Chinese characters in Cantonese tones, which made it unwieldy even for parents or grandparents to help with homework. Eventually the Toisan students quit. And now the options are either Cantonese or Mandarin.

Jim has since recovered some Toisan over the years, attributing his later language immersion to his wife who grew up in a small town in Saskatchewan and retained more fluency.

The James Short School closed in 1968, one year after [Canada's immigration reformed](#) to introduce a points system. For the first time in Canada's one hundred years, race was officially not a factor used to decide on eligibility of potential newcomers.

## The Last Bachelor

When growing up in Montréal, I recall seeing the Chinese “bachelors” during my ritual Chinatown visits on weekends. The solitary older men would be nattily dressed in clothes from a bygone era; in a suit and fedora, and an overcoat in the winter, perched at street corners, smoking a cigarette. I had wondered about them at the time, but alas only understood their plight and what they represented till much later. They died alone with no descendants to tell their stories. Though I mentioned men in plural, I am not sure if I was spotting the same man every weekend at the same corner in Chinatown. If that is the case, he could have been the very last “bachelor” in Montréal’s Chinatown.

The separation and lives erased meant they were never able to give out 利是 lai si red packets to younger generations (who never existed) on Lunar New Year, birthdays and special occasions. They were never able to celebrate a one-month-old newborn with a “red egg and ginger” party. Never able to light the candle in a paper lantern bunny rolling on wobbly wooden wheels, during the Mid Autumn Festival for your child. Never able to take the family to sweep gravesites and picnic with their ancestors during tomb sweeping days. For some, it meant the end of their family line.

Much was lost.

Let’s become more educated about the missing history and continue to probe and learn the history not taught at schools.

I want to reclaim the narrative for the "man in the fedora," for all the "bachelors" and the families that never were. The stories belong to us.

## Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude to all the friends of heritage for making history together, with special thanks to Ellen Wong, Jeannie Tse, and Jim Mah for sharing your stories and adding to the collective memory of Chinatown history; and Paul K.P. Wong for your generosity.

*Respectfully submitted from the traditional territories of the Blackfoot and the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta. I acknowledge that I am a settler on these lands and am grateful to have a home here. I also wish to acknowledge the kindness that the First Nations have shown to the early Chinese settlers. Thank you for having us here.*

## About the Writer

馬鳳齡 Fung Ling Feimo is an arts enthusiast; she is passionate about arts and culture. Her work in not-for-profits as well as arts administration has taken her many places, supporting artists and engaging communities. During the Cultural Capital, Fung Ling and the Calgary 2012 team championed community support for arts and culture, and funded hundreds of arts organisations and many more artists. “Heritage Buildings could Talk” is the name of a Chinatown Heritage Project that she completed in 2019, which includes the Chinatown Context Paper that will inform the Cultural Plan. In addition to projects within the community, Fung Ling has also been involved with Indigenous projects that include the

launching of Making Treaty 7, in 2012. She now draws on her rich experience to contribute to the Tomorrow's Chinatown Advisory Group.

Though a long-time Calgarian, she will always call Montréal her hometown (and still gets asked "Where are you really from?").

*This work was commissioned by Annie Wong as part of the Calgary Chinatown Artist Residency, presented by The New Gallery in partnership with The City of Calgary.*

## Additional Research

These are a few names of the students who had attended James Short School / Central School.<sup>12</sup>

- 周 Mary Chow
- 雷 [Silas Dofoo](#). Silas used Luey as his middle name. Dofoo was 雷 Luey/Louie. His father, Luey Dofoo, original name 雷 Luey Choau came to Canada in 1899. The family name was likely misinterpreted upon arrival, as was the case for many newcomers. The family continues to use Dofoo to this day.
- 方 Fong Bing  
A Fong Bing Kin arrived in Calgary via Vancouver port in 1911, at age 23. \* They were likely related.
- 何 Jack Ho Lem  
Jack Ho Lem is the son of Ho Lem and Mary Ho Lem. Jack's siblings include Frank, David, Jessie, Charles, and George. Except for the eldest, Frank, all were born in Canada. The family used Ho Lem although the name was 何 Ho in Chinese.
- Annie Kee, Charlie Kee, and Jessie Kee  
Kee may have been Yee romanised differently. If Yee, then the Chinese name is 余.
- Jack Kheong, Joe Kheong, Shuhong Kheong, and Vivian Kheong  
Pioneer Louie Kheong or Luey, is the founding member of all three Chinatowns and considered the patriarch of Calgary's Chinese community. His son, [Harry Kheong, was the first Chinese to be born in Calgary](#). The family name may have been 雷 Louie/Luey rather than 龐 Kheong.
- Sing Hoo  
As Sing is not a Chinese family name, it was likely misinterpreted for Sing Hoo as well as Charlie Sing, who was shown in the hockey team photo. A Yee Sing Lem arrived in Calgary via Vancouver port in 1919, at age 18. \* Typically, the generational name is the middle word (sometimes last) of a Chinese name, one that would be repeated for all males/females of the same generation. Sing may have been the generational name that links all three male siblings. Their family name would then be 余 Yee. There's a

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<sup>12</sup> These names are from the list in Harry Sanders's document, and I decided to find out more about the students.

possibility that Charlie Sing and Sing Hoo are the same person and are using an English alias first name.

- 黃 Harry Wong, Margaret Wong, and Nellie Wong  
Nellie Wong was one of six children raised by her widowed mother, Mrs. Wong Mo Yin who arrived in 1910 at age 38, \* to join her husband. Nellie later married Charles Ho Lem.
- Daisy Woon  
Both David Woon and Louie Kheong were trustees of the Calgary Chinese School in the 1920s.
- Charlie Ying

*\* Based on the [Register of Chinese Immigrants to Canada database download](#) from the [Chinese Head Tax Digitization Project](#).*

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