

Society Buildings in Chinatown

City of Vancouver
Chinese Canadian Historical Society

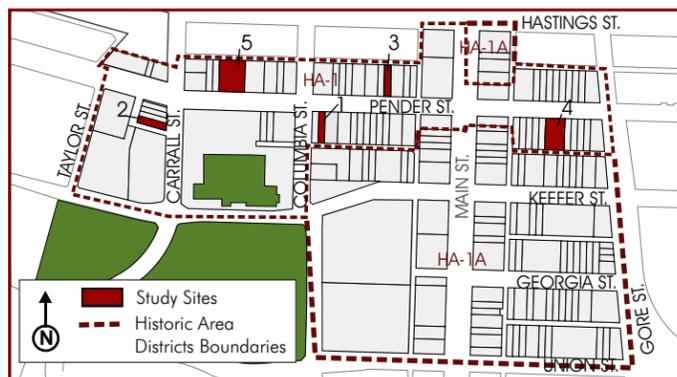
Purpose of the Study

The Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia was commissioned by the City's Planning Department to conduct this study in 2004-2005. The purpose of the study is to tell the stories of the society buildings, including their historical, social and architectural significance and to help stimulate interests to restore or upgrade these important buildings from their current condition. The process of the research is also an outreach to the clan associations and benevolent societies in Chinatown that would begin the discussion for the future of the society buildings.

The Buildings

This study includes five heritage buildings that are owned by societies/associations in Chinatown:

1. Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver (104-108 E Pender St)
2. Lim Sai Hor Association (525-531 Carrall St)
3. The Mah Society of Canada / Asia Hotel (137-139 E Pender St)
4. Shon Yee Benevolent Association / May Wah Hotel (258 E Pender St)
5. Yue Shan Society (33-47 E Pender St)



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Heritage streetscape at the 100 Block of East Pender Street (North side), showing the Mah Society building (first building on right)

The Societies and Associations

The early Chinese community felt more "at home" within the confines of Chinatown. In it, the Chinese community organized itself into the following entities for mutual help, co-operation and general welfare purposes:

- The family/clan societies (zongqinhui, tongsuo or gongsuo) with membership open to persons of the same clan --- that is of the same surname-lineage. e.g. *Mah Society and Lim Society*
- The county (xian) associations/societies (a county being similar to its opposite in the UK): membership open to persons originating from the same county such as Zhongshan, Panyu, Kaiping e.g. *Yue Shan Society and Shon Yee Society*
- Association embracing the entire community. e.g. *The Chinese Benevolent Association*
- Other societies --- political, cultural, athletic, hobbies.

The family/clan societies and the county societies generally fulfill the more important roles in the social life of Chinatown. Many of these societies eventually acquired their own buildings to carry on with their activities. And, over the years, as Canadian society evolved, the activities of these societies have also changed. Nevertheless, these societies have resiliently survived and are still contributing to the social life of the community. In fact, many of these buildings are actively used by the Chinese community. However, most of these are around 100 years old and are aging.

Some of the buildings date from the first decade of the 20th century. Others are more recent. Some were built by the associations that now own and inhabit them; others were purchased by the present owners from a previous owner and remodelled to their needs. Most buildings have undergone changes in construction and usage over the years. Typically, the associations began quite informally, with no fixed building of their own. At some point, a more permanent location would be seen as necessary and building construction (if needed) and ownership would be financed, by selling shares in the project to the membership.

Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver

中華會館

Address: 104-108 E Pender St

Year Built: 1901-10

Present Uses: retail at grade / society meeting hall

Heritage Status: Category A, municipally protected



The Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver was informally established in 1889, formally registered with the British Columbia government in 1906, and in 1909-10 purchased its own building at 108 East Pender. The CBA has played a leading role in fund-raising for causes in China and as spokesman for local Chinese interests. Its elaborate meeting room contains scrolls, photos and gift furniture, mostly from similar organizations. For a time it housed, following the Reform Association, what was to become the Chinese Public School. It also marks the collaborative effort and contribution of early Chinese merchants to their community.



The CBA played a major role in the history of Chinese Canadians. One of the most important events it participated in is the repeal of the 1923 Chinese exclusion law in 1947. The CBA remains a leading traditional Chinese organization in Chinatown. It has undertaken to incorporate new immigrants and reached out to other ethnic groups and the Vancouver society as a whole. The Chinese New Year Parade is a notable example.

Lim Sai Hor Association

林西河總堂九牧公所

Address: 525-531 Carrall St

Year Built: 1903; acquired and renovated by the Lim Association in 1945

Present Uses: commercial at grade / residential / society meeting room

Heritage Status: category C, municipally protected



The surname "Lim" or "Lam" means "forest" in Chinese, so green was chosen as an accent colour for both interior and exterior of the building. The picture above shows storefronts and bay windows facing Shanghai Alley.

The Lim Sai Hor Association building was constructed in 1903 for the Chinese Empire Reform Association, one of the most influential societies in early Chinatown. The four storey building fronts both Carrall Street and Shanghai Alley. The Reform members were the elite of early Chinatown, with links to politics in China and to Chinatowns around the world. From this building they published a newspaper, ran a school, and even a small clinic.

When revolution - not reform - came to China in 1911, the Reform Association faded, though they owned the building until 1945, when they sold it to the Lim Sai Hor Kow Mock Association. Established in 1923, this association became the headquarters for Canada's Lim Sai Hor associations in 1926 and, after selling shares and purchasing this building, rented rooms to members. The building recently has operated a part time school and established a clan member ancestral altar.



Each tablet represents an individual ancestor. On special festival days, such as Chinese New Year, fruits and incense will be prepared for the ancestors.

Mah Society of Canada

加拿大馬氏宗親總會

Address: 137-139 E Pender St

Year Built: 1913; 5th floor (meeting hall) added in 1921

Present Uses: retail at grade / SRO hotel / society meeting room

Heritage Status: category C, municipally protected



The "noodle" staircase is a unique feature of the Mah Society building as well as other heritage buildings in Chinatown.



The Meeting Hall is richly decorated with gifts from other associations, such as traditional Chinese furniture, Chinese paintings and calligraphy and photographs of early founding members.



The Mah Society was informally established in Vancouver in 1919 and purchased its building two years thereafter. It used part of the upper building for rental rooms which, atypically for a Chinatown clan association, it rented out to non-members as well as members. Like other successful associations of this type, the Mahs used rental income to finance most of their operations. It also claimed both national headquarters status as well as local branch status. Eventually the local (Vancouver) branch physically removed itself to a separate building on 41 East Hastings. In recent years the Mah Society has undertaken new activities, the most notable of those being the Sports Club.

Shon Yee Benevolent Association

鐵城崇義總會

Address: 258 E Pender St

Year Built: 1914; acquired by Shon Yee in 1946

Present Uses: retail at grade / SRO hotel / society meeting room

Heritage Status: category B, municipally protected



A room in the May Wah Hotel is typically 110 ft² in size. All tenants share a communal kitchen and there are two communal bathrooms per floor.



Shon Yee has been successful in recruiting young people into its membership and training them to be future leaders. Various programs are organized to attract youth participation, such as its Athletic Club.

The May Wah Hotel has existed under that name at its current address since 1980. The building dates from at least 1914, and has usually been a hotel, under various names. The Shon Yee Association, a district association with links to the town of Shek Kei in Zhongshan County in the part of China adjacent to Macau, has owned it since 1946.

Shon Yee was established in Vancouver in 1914 to provide support for Zhongshan people in Canada, and to give aid to Zhongshan as needed. An unusually active society, Shon Yee began in 1922 to purchase Chinatown properties, through the usual share sales method. More recently Shon Yee has engaged in a wide variety of activities and initiatives, including seniors housing, an athletic club, social activities, and educational works. The May Wah Hotel, a three storey building with 40 rooms, formerly served mostly single men, but has also housed single women and families.



Yue Shan Society 禺山總公所

Address: 33-47 E Pender St

The property is comprised of 3 buildings: 33-39 E Pender, 41-47 E Pender and 30-50 Market Alley.

Year Built: 1920 (33-39 E Pender); 1898 (41-47 E Pender); Building Year not available for 30-50 Market Alley

Present Uses: retail at grade / residential / society meeting room

Heritage Status: the entire property is municipally protected



An alley separates the two buildings that front Pender Street (on the left is 33-39 E Pender; on the right is 41-47 E Pender).



Much of the property's historical significance lies in its central courtyard (fronted on the south by the two buildings on Pender Street, and on the north by the building on Market Alley). The courtyard is probably the only remaining one for residential use in Chinatown. The courtyard offers a more intimate space for residents and allows for more exposure to natural daylight and ventilation in the building.

The Yue Shan Society, like Shon Yee, is a member organization for people from a specific locality in China; in this case, part of Poon Yue county near Guangzhou. It existed for many years without a regular home and only a communications office in rented space. Its main tasks were facilitating letters and remittances of members to relatives in China and shipping the remains of deceased members to the home district.

Between 1939 and 1943, it took its present name, raised money by share sales purchased the building, moved in and registered with the BC government as a charitable society. The back building facing Market Alley, has been used as a dormitory for members from elsewhere passing through Vancouver. The volume of such traffic was especially high in Chinatown in the period after World War II. Recently, Yue Shan has become more focused on recreational and social affairs.

