

# THE FOUR PHASES OF DEATH IN VICTORIA'S CHINATOWN

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## 1. THE BODY

The birth of Chinatown was the birth of a body. The term "body politic" has long been used as a metaphor for a state, nation or society, likening these groupings to a physical body. I argue that Chinatown's estrangement from Canadian society through modes of racialization and discrimination is what constructs it as its own body.



VICTORIA CHINESE PUBLIC SCHOOL, 2023

Looking at it this way, Chinatown, which was a space mandated through discriminatory practice becomes a metaphorical skeleton; a structure through which a societal body can be maintained and constructed through physical space. Looking at it this way, Chinatown, which was a space mandated through discriminatory practice becomes a metaphorical skeleton; a structure through which a societal body can be maintained and constructed through physical space. Chinatowns were, at their beginning, a place of necessity for Chinese immigrant labourers to live and communicate with each other, spaces for them to maintain a connection to their home and culture, even as many labourers were forcibly separated from their families back in China. Several immigration laws, such as the Head Tax, and later the Chinese Exclusion Act, restricted Chinese people's ability to move freely in or out of Canada, which only served to reinforce the community of Chinatown, as it was the only space where Chinese immigrants could maintain a connection to their home and a familiar culture. It was and is through this physical space that the imagined community of Chinese Canadians living in Victoria have been able to maintain and develop their own culture, unique from the dominant Canadian hegemonic culture. This dominant culture rejected Chinese people, viewed them as separate, and mandated them as such, leaving Chinatown's culture to develop as its own entity.

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GRAFFITIED TELEPHONE BOOTH IN VICTORIA'S CHINATOWN, 2023

## 2. DECOMPOSITION

Over the course of the past century, Victoria's Chinatown have undergone a transition; as Chinese Canadians have gained more rights and freedoms, they have moved out of Chinatown and into other neighbourhoods. Even as the Chinese population increased in Victoria until 2001, the Chinese population in Chinatown steadily decreased. The borders of Victoria's Chinatown have shrunk from six city blocks to just a single street (Chinese Canadian Museum). There is a paradox unfolding here - the body of Chinatown was preserved by the very same discrimination that harmed it, that caused pain to its members. In the past, Chinatown's existence and identity as a "Chinatown" was predicated on the fact that it housed Chinese businesses and people, out of a necessity to do so. It was a lived cultural community, those who were racialized as Chinese built their identities within that space. In recent decades, however, this is no longer the case. Chinatown is no longer exclusively home to Chinese businesses, nor Chinese people. There are dozens of businesses that are completely unrelated to any notion of "Chineseness", as Chinese Canadians of Victoria have moved out of the space, and non-Chinese businesses and interlocutors have moved in, beginning in the 1980s (Chinese Canadian Museum). Yet, the space of Chinatown itself is able to still retain its "Chineseness" through both aesthetics and history, relying on semiotic meanings to convey its continued purpose as a cultural space. Even as the body of the Chinese Canadian community disperses outside of the skeleton of Chinatown, the structure remains; always allowing for a space for Chinese Canadians to return to, to remain connected with, even if that space is no longer home.



ENTRANCE TO VICTORIA'S CHINESE CEMETERY, 2023

## 3. THE GRAVESITE

Victoria's Chinatown has become a lieu de mémoire in its transition from a lived space to a symbolic one. Though many Chinese people no longer reside in Chinatown, efforts have been made since the 1970s to preserve Chinatown as a site of cultural heritage. In 1979, Victoria City Council began a Chinatown rehabilitation program to contend with its decomposition. Buildings that had been deemed historic were maintained and rejuvenated, with many built between 1880-1910, in the early days of Chinatown's formation (Chinese Canadian Museum). Chinese aesthetics have been bolstered through lampposts, street signs, newer buildings and even trashcans; there is not a place in Chinatown now where you can turn your head without seeing the lucky colour red. Signs memorializing its history have been continuously added since the decision to preserve it was made, some telling of the history of the buildings, others tales of discrimination, and others the history of the families that occupied this space. These transformations have made our contemporary Chinatown a far cry from the necessitated ethnic community it once was; it is now a kind of museum, a space intended to preserve and educate about history.



HISTORY POSTER IN WINTER DISPLAY IN CHINATOWN, 2023

## 4. HAUNTING

In the corner of the winter window display of a furniture shop in Chinatown sits a sign that states "A Chinese Statesman was murdered here in September 1918". The sign goes on to explain that in 1918, former member of cabinet in of the northern Chinese government was assassinated by a supporter of the Southern Chinese government, and that the assassin later killed himself near city hall. The contrast between this macabre piece of history and the snowy Western holiday scene painted on the window serves to shed light on a continued conflict between what Chinatown was and what it represents as a place of memory, and how it is currently constructed as a symbolic body. The meaning of the history is still present, being communicated through the efforts of the community even in a space that undoes its ties to its lived history. This is an act of haunting; Chinese Canadian's continued persistence in preserving memory and history in Chinatown's space ensure that the losses, discrimination, and hardships that formed the community continue to remain relevant, even as they are tucked within the corner of a drawing which celebrates a pop culture holiday event outside the realm of Chinese culture.

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This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria, and Supervised by Dr. Tri Phuong.

All photos taken by Maia Vasko and Chihiro Hogg. A special thank you to the Chinese Canadian Museum of Victoria for their support in this research.

Poster created March 4th, 2023