

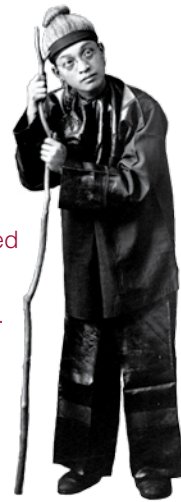
# Mysterious Chinatown



A journey into a city within a city where fortune seekers from China came with great expectations of the Gold Mountain – Canada. A maze of streets created a fortress around a culture strange to Europeans... one still found most interesting today.

## Cultural Centre of the Coast

Victoria's Chinatown was once the largest in Canada. It was the main port of entry for all of British Columbia before Vancouver finally became bigger in the late 1890s. Chinese called Victoria *Dai Fao*, literally meaning "big port". Chinatown was home for many Chinese who travelled seasonally to the Interior gold regions, coastal salmon canneries and logging camps. In the winter, they returned to Victoria to spend their hard earned money. The proprietors of Chinatown's stores, tea houses, gambling dens, opium parlours, theatres and brothels always welcomed the men and their cash. Travelling Cantonese opera companies were one of the favourite winter attractions. Chinese New Year in January or February was a highlight, with firecrackers and a lion dance to help celebrate the 15-day festival. Hopefully, the men saved enough money to send some home to support their families in China. Once the weather improved the men left *Dai Fao* to return to their places of work. And the cycle started all over again.



Chinese Actor

Courtesy BC Archives F-07384

**1** Market Square – Until about 1900, a ravine and stream ran through Market Square separating what is now Johnson Street from Pandora Avenue. The first Chinese – mostly young men – arrived in town in 1858 at the time of the Fraser River Gold Rush. Most settled on land to the north of the stream. It was away from the centre of town and cheaper. This suited them fine, since most of them hoped to get rich and go back to live in China.

**2** Some of Chinatown's first buildings were on the Pandora Avenue side of Market Square. They were flimsy and made of wood, and in the 1880s were replaced by the present brick structures.

**529 Pandora** – The brightly painted BC Produce Company, on your right as you leave the Square, supplied vegetables and fruit to stores around town. Most of the early Chinese were from farming areas in Guangdong Province and many planted garden plots and sold the produce from door to door. Later some bought farms and started greenhouses around Victoria. Fruits and vegetables are still important market products in Chinatown, as you will see when you reach the colourful produce stalls on Fisgard Street.

**3** 540 Pandora – Look for the gold characters of Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association sign on the other side of the street. Young Chinese men were strangers in this land and formed groups to help each other. Such organizations were called "tongs" after the Chinese word for "meeting hall." Many were from Hoy Sun County in Guangdong and they formed the society that constructed this building. The Dart Coon Club played a similar role and its national headquarters are still on nearby Fisgard Street.

**4** Fan Tan Alley – To the right of the Hoy Sun Ning Yung building is Fan Tan Alley, Canada's narrowest street. "Fan Tan" is a gambling game that was popular in the 1800s and it was played in six gambling dens upstairs above the alley. Opium dens, restaurants, shops and a tofu factory once operated in the ground-floor storefronts. Opium was legal in Canada until 1908, but gambling was not. Trap doors to second floors and locked gates at each end of the alley helped slow down police when they raided the illegal gambling dens.

**5** 500 Block Fisgard – These days the most vibrant place in Chinatown is **Fisgard Street**, now its main business area. Fruit and vegetable vendors, curio shops and restaurants line both sides of the street. Explore the shops and taste the authentic food! The clatter of mah-jong tiles and the sound of traditional Chinese music are often heard from second-floor clubs. The Chinese character “shou” (representing long life) is repeated in the brick pattern along the sidewalks. The colour red dominates the streetscape because it brings good luck.

**558 Fisgard** – The tallest building on Fisgard Street is the former headquarters of the **Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association**. At first, the association acted as a sort of unofficial “government” in Chinatown and Chinese immigrants first required approval of the organization before they could come to Canada.

Before you cross the street, look to your left by the planter where you will find a brass plaque portraying some of Chinatown’s more important buildings. Cover the images with paper and rub a crayon over them for a souvenir of your visit!

**6** 532 Fisgard – Look for the red sign that marks the entrance to **Dragon Alley**. The dragon in China is not a nasty creature, but one that brings good fortune and positive energy. Originally the alley was a passageway to very crowded residences for men who lived in many such buildings throughout Chinatown. Walk through the parking lot next door if the alley gate is closed.

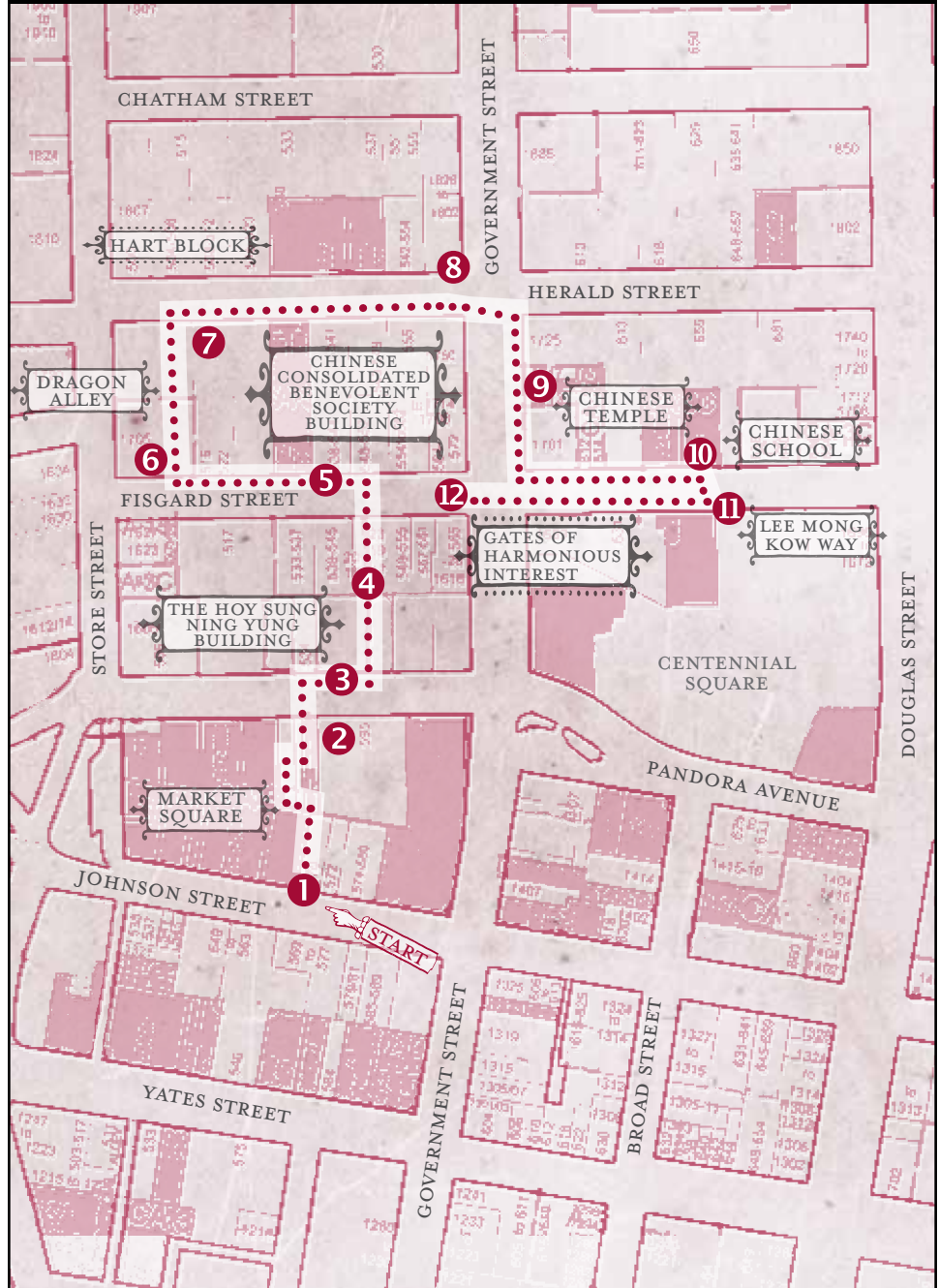
**7** 531 Herald – You emerge from the **Hart Block** building as you arrive on Herald Street. Big wooden doors allowed horses and carriages to enter a stable at ground level. Upstairs was one of Chinatown’s brothels, a common feature in a place where so many of the residents were single men. Life was grim and all too short for the girls who were forced to work here, most of them as slaves.

**8** 1800 Block Government – Across Herald Street at Government Street is the **longest building in Chinatown**. It was built in 1910 by Lim Bang, an influential and respected developer who had his own brickyard. After you cross Government Street, look back at the building to admire the recessed balconies. The design provided shade and was common in Guangdong where summers can be very hot.

**9** 1713 Government – One of these interesting tall, slim buildings was established by the Yen Wo Society. Fifty-two steps up to the top floor is the oldest **Chinese temple** in Canada, dedicated to the god Tam Kung. The statue you see there was originally kept in a wooden box in the ravine at Market Square, and was moved into an older temple here by its keeper after Tam Kung appeared to him in a dream. Visitors are welcome most days, and you can make a donation to ensure your good health and the upkeep of the shrine!

**10** 636 Fisgard – Chinese children were once banned from attending public schools unless they spoke English. In 1909, as a result of this racial discrimination, the Chinese community established the **Chinese Public School** where immigrants could learn the English language. It still serves as a cultural centre, though children are now taught about Chinese language and traditions.

# MYSTERIOUS CHINATOWN



**11** 629 Fisgard – **Lee Mong Kow Way** is directly across the street from the school. It was named after the school’s first principal who was a highly respected spokesperson for the Chinese community. His image can be seen in the mural beside the alley leading to Centennial Square.

**12** Fisgard at Government – Walk back toward the **Gate of Harmonious Interest**. Its construction in 1981 followed the Chinese tradition of erecting gates to commemorate an important place or event. The stone male and female lions and the bells in the corners keep away evil spirits. Dragons, phoenix birds and other symbols bring positive energy. The gate’s name reflects the need to strive for harmonious relations between all people and is a reminder that the boundaries between East and West are now fading. The once “forbidden city” is now very much a part of Victoria.

## OTHER WALKS AVAILABLE IN THIS SERIES

Haunted Victoria | Law and Order | Rollicking Boomtown

Also available online at [www.victoria.ca/tours](http://www.victoria.ca/tours)

