

Father of Chinatown

by Henry Wing Yip

Grandson of Yip Sang and Dong Shee



YIP SANG (1845-1927). Sang spent the first half of his life in poverty, but during the second he was awash in fortune.

YIP SANG WAS BORN in Taishan County, Guangdong Province, China, in 1845: the grandson of a wealthy man but unfortunately the son of a poor father, who died when Sang was still a boy. His mother passed away when he was still a teenager, and then bandits abducted his older sister, so he was left all alone at a time when China was engulfed in the chaos of the Taiping Rebellion. During his long life he would go from rags to riches.

In 1864, at the age of 19, Sang sold his few possessions and used the money to buy a passage on a sailing junk from Hong Kong to San Francisco, a voyage that in those days lasted two months. In California he washed dishes and cooked in a restaurant, later rolled cigars, and eventually laboured at panning gold to earn enough money for a trip back to China, where, according to family lore, he saw a girl that he promised himself he would marry. He returned to San Francisco and from there departed for Montana, where he worked as a cook to save enough cash to return to his homeland and get married. His wife bore him two children. He sailed for San Francisco again, leaving his family in China, but a telegram notified him that his wife had become ill and died. He returned to China and took a second wife to raise the two children, but she was too young and flighty to run a household. Yip—as Chinese custom allowed—took a third wife. He left both wives and his family in China and again returned to California only to realize that the gold there had petered out, so he headed north to try his luck in the Cariboo gold rush.

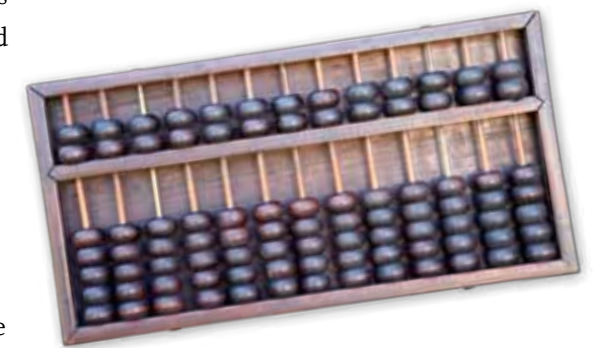
In 1881 he passed through Vancouver en route to the diggings. He walked along the Cariboo Wagon Road with his belongings piled into a cart. When gold eluded him, he returned to the coast to New Westminster and managed to get a job selling coal door to door. Father Luck finally smiled on him: he met Lee Piu, a Chinese foreman for Andrew Onderdonk, the contractor hired by the CPR to build the rail line from Port Moody to Kamloops. This man was so impressed with Sang's quickness that he made him bookkeeper, timekeeper, and paymaster for his work gangs. According to family stories, Sang rode on horseback along the line and paid the Chinese

labourers from sacks of gold; once he escaped would-be brigands who sought to rob and kill him. Sang became the Chinese agent for the CPR, supplying its railway with construction labourers and its steamships with sailors. Without the Chinese labourers Onderdonk's section of the rail line could not have been built on budget or on time. Poorly paid, housed, and fed, the Chinese men were given the most dangerous projects, and of 7,000 workers some 600 died in accidents. "No one was killed," ran one account of an explosion on the line, "only two Chinese." To recruit the labourers, Sang went to the Pearl River Delta in China, and while there he married a fourth wife and fathered more children.

In 1888 Sang returned to Vancouver and established the Wing Sang Company at 29 Dupont (later 51–69 Pender) Street in Vancouver's Chinatown. The following year he supervised the construction of the Wing Sang building ("Wing Sang" meaning "everlasting") for his office and personal residence, the first brick building to be constructed in Chinatown. The building was located immediately to the west of a 20-foot-wide high-tide stream that ran from False Creek northward to Burrard Inlet. The company soon became one of the wealthiest firms in the Chinatown part of Vancouver, engaging in 14 businesses that included contracting Chinese workers for the CPR, contracting passengers for the Canadian Pacific Steamships Limited, and the importing of rice and clothing. Sang pioneered the exporting of salted herring from his cannery on Vancouver Island to China, Japan, and other points on the Pacific Rim. He acquired 16 buildings in Chinatown, including one in Shanghai Alley, where immigrants could stay until they found work.

A Wing Sang advertisement from the 6 December 1891 *Daily-News Advertiser* said the company dealt in "China silks, utensils, trinkets, curios and Japanese dry goods." At the bottom of the ad a phrase in capital letters proclaimed "Importers of Opium." Opium was legal in Canada until 1908, and Chinatown had numerous opium dealers and even opium factories like the Hip Tuck Lung Company, located across the street from Sang's store. Aside from being infamous for its opium dens, Chinatown's Dupont (Pender) Street was known as Vancouver's first red-light district. It is rumoured that some of the ladies of the evening may have rented space in the Wing Sang building. In 1903 the Wing Sang Company and the Chinese Board of Trade were listed at 51 Dupont Street, "Chinese barbers" at 57, Wing Hon On & Company at 61, and Kwong Yo Yuen merchants were

The abacus used by Yip Sang to calculate payroll for the 7000 Chinese labourers employed for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad through the Fraser Canyon. Yip recruited the labourers from the Pearl River Delta in China.





Dong Shee (1866-1941) Wife No. 2



Wong Shee (1872-1957) Wife No. 3



Chin Shee (1866-1934) Wife No. 4



Yip Sang (1845-1927)



The Wing Sang & Co. Block was built in 1889 and expanded in 1901, when Sang brought his family over from China.

listed at 67. In between the Chinese businesses, Grace Hall rented 59, Carmen Hall rented 63, and “Carmelita” rented 69. Women’s names disappeared from Dupont Street in 1906, when city officials and police moved the establishments over to a new red-light district on Alexander Street.

In 1901 Sang brought his entire family over from China. He built a three-storey addition onto the Wing Sang building and ensconced his three wives and their children into one floor each. The main floor consisted

of a store where patrons could buy Chinese-style jackets and pants as well as dishes and games. Imports were hoisted up to a second-floor warehouse. Although the Sang children went to English-speaking public schools, Chinese tutors taught them Chinese subjects on the third floor. This floor also included a bowling alley and a special room that contained an ancestral altar and was used for special occasions such as weddings.

Next, in 1912, Sang built a six-storey addition onto the back of the Wing Sang office to house his growing

family. Eventually Sang had nineteen sons and four daughters, who all married and produced 67 grandchildren. In time 100 family members lived in the building. The final addition included a bowling alley and a schoolroom where both a Chinese and an “English” teacher taught. Sang was a very strict patriarch and every night after supper would sit in an armchair next to the door leading to the upstairs suites. He would sit there smoking a pipe and watching everyone coming and going until curfew at 10 p.m., at which time he locked the door with the one and only key.

Sang spent the first half of his life in poverty, but during the second half he was awash in fortune. He became a philanthropist and started the first Chinese hospital and Chinese school. He organized the Chinese Benevolent Association and even sat on the board of the Vancouver General Hospital as a lifetime governor.

Sang became a major witness for the Federal Royal Commission headed by the Deputy Minister of Labour, William Lyon Mackenzie King (later Prime Minister of Canada) in the wake of the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver in 1907. He testified that the decline of the labour contract system was the result of the increase in the head tax from \$50 to \$500 imposed on Chinese immigrants in 1903.

By 1908 Sang’s company was one of the four largest Chinese companies in Vancouver with an annual revenue of \$50,000 from its import-export businesses alone and real estate holdings worth over \$200,000.

Though Sang did not speak English fluently, he valued integration into the wider society and had many non-Chinese friends—unusual in an age when Chinese were considered a separate class, forced to pay a head tax to enter Canada, from 1923 until 1947 virtually banned as immigrants, and denied voting rights until 1947. When Sun Yat-sen and his followers toppled the Manchu Dynasty in China in 1911, Yip Sang, a firm believer in modernization, cut off his queue and assumed western dress.

Yip Sang’s death in 1927 was marked by the longest funeral procession Vancouver had yet seen, with dozens of cars of mourners, a marching band, and ranks of somber men in formal western and oriental garb. Vancouver’s premier Chinese merchant had insisted on burial in Vancouver rather than having his bones shipped back to China.

Yip Sang’s descendants sold the Wing Sang heritage building in 2001 to developer Ewen Stewart for \$850,000. In 2004 “Condo King” Bob Rennie bought the old edifice for \$1,000,000 with plans to restore it to its original state and make it his office and private art gallery.



SLIPPERS OF TEARS. The first three of Yip Sang's four wives had their feet bound at an early age to prevent their growth. This painful procedure allowed the women to wear these tiny shoes that cost their wearers a bath (kang) of tears.