



☺ We have to remind the city that when they decide to change things in a community, they must always consider the concerns of people who live in it. –Bessie Lee, 1979 ☺

Strathconanese  
**Freeway Foes**  
in battle to  
SAVE CHINATOWN

IB  
JOE  
早工  
在士達  
打東街5921  
社區  
COMMUNITY  
Save  
Vancouver  
Chinatown  
Stop the Rezoning of  
105 Keefer  
#chinatownvyr



# Another World Is Possible: Intergenerational Resistance in Vancouver's Chinatown

Poster by erica hiroko isomura

Essay by Kaitlyn Fung

The words of activist Bessie Lee, included on the front of this poster, reflect a robust legacy of community organizing by matriarchal elders, organizers, and activists in Vancouver's Chinatown—one that continues today. This vibrant neighbourhood has long been a welcoming home to communities of immigrants, working-class, and low-income people. Yet displacement continually complicates its existence. Chinatown is situated on unceded Indigenous lands, including xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories, and the neighbourhood has encountered many waves of displacement and gentrification. But intergenerational communities of resistance have always grown, and intermingled with each other, to challenge these threats.

In 1968, Bessie Lee co-founded the Strathcona Property Owner's and Tenants Association (SPOTA) to stop "urban renewal" plans from the City of Vancouver, including the construction of a freeway that would demolish the neighbourhood. The women and mothers of the community led these efforts, knocking on doors to connect with neighbours, supplying food at meetings, and more. Ordinary families and residents, like SPOTA members Mary Lee Chan and her daughter Shirley Chan, became passionate advocates at local protests and city hall meetings. Their organizing drew attention from all levels of government, including the federal housing minister at the time. Through these efforts, they stopped the freeway from being built and spared neighbourhood residents from further displacement.

Unfortunately, in 2017 the community faced renewed threats of displacement due to the proposed development of a luxury condominium building on 105 Keefer Street beside Chinatown Memorial Plaza, a prominent neighbourhood gathering space. Anticipating that this project would worsen unaffordable housing and loss of cultural heritage, organizers mobilized again. Chinese seniors and youth huddled together for hours at city meetings, providing essential language interpretation services in Cantonese, Mandarin, and other dialects when the city did not. Elders such as Kong Tai and Ma Tai gave earnest and compelling speeches, sharing multilingual protest signs and snacks with youth. After four days of comments at public hearings, which overwhelmingly opposed the project, on 13 June 2017, city council voted against rezoning the area for development. On November 6, after the city's development permit board listened to nearly a hundred speakers for over eight hours, people throughout the Chinatown community celebrated when the official building proposal was rejected.

Connected across time, place, and cultures, these community organizing efforts reflect the dynamic and intergenerational spirit of the neighbourhood. Even as ongoing gentrification in the area makes affordable homes and livelihoods increasingly difficult to sustain, its people remain determined to confront displacement. They are part of what makes Chinatown a lively community of resistance and care, led by the combined wisdom and joy of elders, matriarchs, and youth together.

## Biographies

**erica hiroko isomura** is a writer, multi-disciplinary artist, and community organizer living on unceded xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ territories (Vancouver/New Westminster, BC). erica is part of the Louie and Lang clans. Their family once ran the Marco Polo supper club (1964–1982) and Le Kiu store on East Pender Street in Chinatown, Vancouver. ericahiroko.ca

**Kaitlyn Fung** is a second-generation daughter of the Cantonese diaspora now living on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ nations. She pursues storytelling, often through writing or multimedia means, as a path towards greater hope, community, and justice in the world.

## Further Reading

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