



University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections

SC556

David Lai fonds

1. Fonds-level description

Title

David Lai fonds

Dates

1969-2015

Extent

78 cm of textual records, 156 photographs, 580 slides, 2 audio cassettes

Biographical sketch

David Chuen-Yan Lai was born on 16 September 1937 in Guangzhou, the eldest of three boys. When he was two-years-old his family moved to Hong Kong. During World War II his father was killed. Lai earned his Bachelor of Arts (1962) and Master of Arts (1964) from the University of Hong Kong. Following this he received a British Commonwealth Scholarship which allowed him to earn a Doctorate in geography from the London School of Economics, University of London, which he completed in 1967. His thesis is entitled *The Cotton Spinning and Weaving Industry of China, c. 1890-1957: A Study in Industrial Geography*. Following this he returned to Hong Kong and taught at the University for a year.

Lai immigrated to Canada in June 1968 with his new wife. That summer he taught a course at the University of Alberta, and in August he moved to Victoria and began teaching in the geography department at the University of Victoria. In 1971 the geography department organized a seminar on urban development in Victoria. As Lai was the only Chinese in the department, he was assigned to research Victoria's Chinatown. This project sparked Dr. Lai's interest, and thereafter he began to study avidly Chinese-Canadian history and the history of Canadian Chinatowns.

By the late 1970s Victoria's Chinatown had become a slum and the city was contemplating razing it. Dr. Lai acted as Chairman of the Chinatown Redevelopment Committee and in 1979 produced the report "The Future of Victoria's Chinatown: A Survey of Views and Opinions." The city elected to refurbish the area, a project that included restoring buildings, burying power lines, and building the first permanent Chinese arch in Canada. In 1995 Chinatown was designated a National Historic Site. A year later Lai helped to secure the same designation for the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point. He was also heavily involved with the 1980 twinning of Victoria and Suzhou. Lai has published extensively on Chinese-Canadian history. Books include: *Arches in British Columbia* (1982), *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (1988), *The Forbidden City within Victoria: Myth, Symbol and Streetscape of Canada's Earliest Chinatown* (1991), *Land of Genghis Khan: The Rise and Fall of Nation-States in China's Northern Frontiers*

(1995), *Building and Rebuilding Harmony: The Gateway to Victoria's Chinatown* (1997), *Chinese Community Leadership: Case Study of Victoria in Canada* (2010), and *Great Fortune Dream: The Struggles and Triumphs of Chinese Settlers in Canada, 1858-1966* (2016). In 2003 he retired from teaching, and is currently a Professor Emeritus at the University of Victoria. In 1980 he was made an Honorary Citizen of Victoria, and in 1983 a Member of the Order of Canada.

In 1968 Lai married Roberta Manyuk. They have two children, Jim Yuan (born 1971), who teaches at the University of Toronto Faculty of Dentistry, and Joan Man (born 1972), a dentist who lives in Vancouver.

Scope and content

Fonds documents David Lai's work in Victoria, including the restoration of Chinatown and the twinning of Victoria with Suzhou, as well as other heritage projects in the community. Also included are documents related to awards and appointments Lai received throughout his career.

Notes

Acquired from David Lai, April 2017.

See also the [*David Chuen-Yan Lai fonds*](#) (PR-277) at the Saanich Archives, as well as the *Dr. David Lai Research Collection* at the Richard Charles Lee Canada-Hong Kong Library (Robarts Library), University of Toronto.

2. Structure

Series 1. Work. 1978-2011. 62 cm of textual and photographic records.

-Boxes 1-2

Series consists of records relating to the restoration of Victoria's Chinatown, the 1980 twinning of Victoria and Suzhou, and other community work. Also included are documents relating to public lectures by Lai, publications on Canadian Chinatowns, and books featuring Lai.

File 1.1. Chinatown. 1978-2006. 31 cm of textual and photographic records.

-Folders 1.1 to 1.13

File consists of records documenting Lai's work in the Victoria Chinatown restoration circa 1979-1981, information on the restoration of the Chinese Public School, information on the Chinatown Care Home, and various research materials from his work on Chinatowns.

File 1.2. Victoria-Suzhou twinning. 1980-1999. 18 cm of textual and photographic records.

-Folders 2.1 to 2.5

File documents the twinning of Victoria and Suzhou in 1980, including visits to each city, as well as three folders of slides from trip to Suzhou.

File 1.3. Community Work. 1979-1998. 8 cm of textual records.

-Folders 2.6 to 2.9

File consists of records relating to heritage awareness work, building restorations, "Forbidden City" development, transfer of CCBA records to UVic, Chinese Cemetery, book on Genghis Khan, and heritage designations.

File 1.4. Other work. 1979-2011. 5 cm of textual records.

-Folders 2.10 to 2.15

File consists of documents related to public lectures, published booklets on Canadian Chinatowns, a teaching philosophy statement, and two books featuring information on Lai.

Series 2. Recognition. 1969-2015. 22 cm of textual and photographic records.

-Box 3

Series documents awards and appointments that Lai received throughout his career, as well as a collection of English and Chinese news articles about him. Includes photographs from events.

File 2.1. Awards and appointments 1984-2015. 11 cm of textual records.

-Folders 3.1 to 3.6

File consists of records documenting awards and appointments Lai received throughout his career.

File 2.2. News articles. 1969-2015. 11 cm of textual records.

-Folders 3.7 to 3.10

File consists of clippings of Chinese and English news articles documenting Lai's life and work.

3. Inventory

Accession 2017-069

Series 1. Work

Box 1

- 1.1 Chinatown development
- 1.2 Chinatown development
- 1.3 Chinatown development
- 1.4 Chinatown development
- 1.5 Victoria Chinatown
- 1.6 Victoria Chinatown
- 1.7 Chinatown Care Home
- 1.8 Chinatown Care Home
- 1.9 Chinatown Victoria (1977 report)
- 1.10 Chinatown tours
- 1.11 Chinese public school (architectural report)
- 1.12 Chinese public school (architectural report)
- 1.13 Research on Chinatowns

Box 2

- 2.1 Victoria-Suzhou twinning
- 2.2 Victoria-Suzhou twinning
- 2.3 Victoria-Suzhou twinning photos
- 2.4 Victoria-Suzhou twinning photos
- 2.5 Victoria-Suzhou twinning photos
- 2.6 Community work
- 2.7 Community work
- 2.8 Community work
- 2.9 Community work
- 2.10 Teaching philosophy
- 2.11 Public lectures
- 2.12 Publications
- 2.13 Book: *Exploring Canada*
- 2.14 Book: *Saanich Centennial*
- 2.15 Photographs

Series 2. Recognition

Box 3

- 3.1 Certificates, scholarship
- 3.2 Appointments
- 3.3 Awards
- 3.4 Awards
- 3.5 Awards
- 3.6 Awards
- 3.7 English news articles
- 3.8 Chinese news articles 1988-1999
- 3.9 Chinese news articles 2000-2004
- 3.10 Chinese news articles 2005-
- 3.11 Audio cassettes
 - “Canada: melting pot or mosaic?”
 - “Suchow Song”