

## Borrowing books and taking out diversity: VPL showcases local voices

by MAGGIE CHUANG

**Those of us who frequent libraries know what books offer: a new perspective, or a pleasurable escape to an alternate reality. But the Vancouver Public Library provides something more: a look into our own community. With the upcoming event *Diverse Voices in Canadian Literature*, VPL will showcase dynamic voices of Canadian authors and their importance in understanding our own culture.**

The event features authors of different backgrounds, but their works broadcast a common theme. Two of the authors, Nilofar Shidmehr of Iran and Julia Lin of Taiwan, talk of reaching crossroads of heritage and identity. It is a desire to communicate that inspires them to write, and to connect in a land of different voices.

Shidmehr cites one of her poems, "Few and Far Between," from her book, *Between Lives*, as one of her favourites because it expresses the longing for home, but finding roots somewhere else. Her collection of poetry is a desire to connect.

"Letting them get to know me and letting me get to know them, is the inspiration," Shidmehr says.

Lin is presenting her book, *Miah*, with the knowledge that

buying their publications and putting them in their collection, [the libraries] can help to support those new writers and poets in Canadian society," says Govahi.

### Defining diversity

The events dedicated to multiplicity and highlighting our diverse community have been met with geniality and warmth. With the publication of her book featuring stories of Taiwanese men and women, and immigrant culture, Lin was surprised to find interest from both Taiwanese-speaking and English-speaking audiences.

"There are so few Taiwanese voices in Canadian literature and I'm privileged to be one of the first," says Lin.

The pieces she chooses to perform reiterate the motivation to touch and connect with the rest of the world.

"I like to choose parts which convey the emotional realities of characters, and help the audience understand the historical and political backgrounds of the stories," Lin says.

Shidmehr agrees that there is a lack of exposure of diverse voices in our community, which is why this VPL event is so invaluable in providing publicity. She states that while it isn't easy to understand differing cultures, she believes that literature should be complicated.

Readers are challenged, yet rewarded at the same time. Literature enables them to do research, to imagine and to discover one another.

"To make Canada truly diverse, we need to make our ways of communication and expectations of communication diverse."

### A difficult but rewarding road ahead

While there is still tough and challenging path ahead to get true exposure and representation of the diversity that makes up our community, emcee Govahi believes the public library



▲ Author Julia Lin.



▲ Author and poet: Nilofar Shidmehr.

her work is helping to introduce Asian-Canadian voices to mainstream audiences. Lin says, "It's important to help raise awareness if the existence of Asian-Canadian voices so mainstream society can have a deeper understanding of people from various backgrounds in our wonderfully diverse multi-cultural country."

Which is where the significance of a public platform, such as the public library, comes in. The event's emcee, Narges Sonya Govahi, emphasizes the community library's pivotal role in showcasing different local talent.

"By introducing these new writers and poets, and also

plays a big role in helping expand our dynamic voices. But the ones who have come and listened give her hope.

"The most surprising response is the people's smile and the willingness to learn about new cultures and new ideas which is pretty rare, but in Vancouver is not like that. It seems every one that can make a sense of him/herself is very welcomed," says Govahi. ☞

Diverse Voices in Canadian Literature takes place on Oct. 12 at VPL Central Branch.

For more information, visit [www.vpl.ca/calendar/index.php/calendar/progid/50567](http://www.vpl.ca/calendar/index.php/calendar/progid/50567)



▲ Jim Wong-chu is talking about the Chinatown history at the exhibition opening.

## Chinatown activism: a moment in time

by DONG YUE SU

**Holding up a protest sign which reads "Save Chinatown," a group of Chinese people stand in the middle of a Vancouver street. This is one of a hundred black-and-white images from the current exhibition *Jim Wong-Chu Photographs 1973-1981: People, Place, Politics*, held until Oct. 18 at Centre A Gallery. The exhibition reveals the history of Vancouver Chinatown protest in the 1970s, a time and place that many younger Vancouverites have forgotten.**

"Those days are the darkest moment of Chinese-Canadian history," says Jim Wong-Chu, who captured the images featured in the exhibition.

Born in Hong Kong in 1949, Wong-Chu arrived in Canada in 1961 and took the photos while he was a student at the Vancouver School of Art, now known as Emily Carr University.

"At that time I was too young to realize the significance of these images. Later, when I looked back in history, I realized those are the pivotal moments in our history," he says.

The exhibit shines a light on an important period in Vancouver's history, according to Centre A executive director Tyler Russell.

"These photographs capture a moment in time in Chinatown and it is still relevant today," says Russell.

### Struggle to preserve the Chinatown community

"If you were a Chinese, you were different. You were seen as an

outsider," says Wong-Chu of his experiences at the time.

He moved to Chinatown, seeking an identity and a sense of belonging. There he witnessed and recorded the struggle of his community to protect their properties from those "insidious" forces that "would like to see the Asian kicked out," in Wong-Chu's words.

According to Wong-Chu, such incidents include the proposed Quebec-Columbia Connector Freeway, a massive eight-lane freeway project that would have occupied most of Chinatown and destroyed the entire neighborhood had it been built. The closure of BBQ Pork stores was another campaign against the Chinese community, through rigid food regulation that ignored Asian culture sensitivity.

Wong-Chu puts these incidents in the context of anti-Chinese sentiment that had existed since a 1907 riot when the entire Chinatown neighborhood physically attacked by whites, resulting in many Chinese businesses being destroyed.

### Writing as a means of activism

Wong-Chu joined in the fight as well as documenting it. Writing was one way he expressed this activism.

"Publication in English is important for us. When people can see your writing, they will get to know you and things start to change," says Wong-Chu.

Wong-Chu has been instrumental in the literary scene in

Canada. He became the first Chinese-Canadian to publish a literary book in English, founded the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop to help young writers to find a publisher and created Ricepaper Magazine to feature Asian writers. His efforts have helped create the Asian-Canadian genre of literature.

"[Wong-Chu is] an undeniably important figure in the contemporary Vancouver cultural scene," says Russell.

### Know the past so as to work for the future

Decades have passed since the exhibit's photos were taken and Wong-Chu acknowledges that blatant acts against Asians could not happen today. However, his activism continues and he views the current exhibit as a part of it.

"It is meant to be educational. We need to educate younger generation about the history. Without the fight of the 1970s, there would be no Chinatown today, and many Chinese foods such as BBQ Pork would not exist today. Young people have to know the past so that they can work for the future," he says.

To this end, Wong-Chu finds the combination of photographs and writing most effective. Alongside the photographs hung on the gallery wall of Centre A, Wong-Chu puts up a small write up about the story behind the scene.

"Photographs magnify the event in time. Writing cannot go that far. But without the context from writing, you cannot see it," says Wong-Chu. ☞

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