

# UVic knowl**EDGE**

## Exhibiting histories

**J**ust like novels or history books, museum displays are organized to tell a story. “There is a definite connection between literary and museum forms of representation,” explains Dr. Misao Dean.

A professor in the English department, Dean uses her expertise as a reader of stories to analyze how culture and history are portrayed in museum displays. She explores the relationship between object and narrative and how these are used to create meaning.

Museums and other heritage institutions are much more than collections of old documents and artifacts. “They are politicized institutions, in part, because history itself is politicized,” says Dean.

Much thought and planning lies behind creating a new exhibit or updating an older one. Each display is a representation of the past, but whose version of the past is it? Whose experience and perspective is being represented? The answers to these questions are critical to how we understand our place in history and culture. And they are thoroughly documented in the museum records that Dean studies.

The stories of our history are often told through objects we preserve. “We each have a museum of ourselves in

what we keep,” says Dean. “Objects, like mementos and souvenirs, remind us of our own history, the story of events in which we’ve participated.” The stories of some people, such as servants and labourers, may be unrepresented in museums, however, because they created no documents and few of their objects were considered valuable enough to preserve.

Point Ellice House and the Royal B.C. Museum’s Chinatown exhibit are two local examples that present the history of B.C.’s Chinese residents from different points of view.

“Point Ellice uses a taped tour narrated by a Chinese houseboy,” explains Dean. “The narrator addresses the visitor as if he or she is the new Chinese houseboy being trained.” He describes the family members and their way of living, their social lives and relationships as well as the objects in the household and the way they’re used. “The servants function as stand-ins for the visitors, allowing visitors to step into the past and observe the private affairs of the family.”

The Royal B.C. Museum’s Chinatown exhibit tackles a similar issue with a slightly different approach. Chinatown is part of a larger exhibit known

as Old Town, a three dimensional re-creation of a late 19th-century B.C. town.

Chinatown is constructed to enhance the exotic and unknown aspects of a different culture: unusual architectural features, “Oriental” ornamentation, signs with Chinese characters, lowered lights, cramped spaces and sounds of clucking chickens. “The display attempts to highlight racial division in B.C. society,” says Dean. “Non-Chinese visitors are prompted to feel as though they’re part of an exclusive cultural community and experience the feeling of being an outsider in an unknown world.”

There is no right or wrong way to present such displays, Dean stresses. But whether one is creating or viewing an exhibit, it’s essential to look critically at how narrative shapes our perception of the past and the present.

“It’s important to remember that the same story, whether a museum display or a literary novel, can be told from a number of different perspectives,” explains Dean. “You need to ask yourself: Are there other ways that the stories might have been told; what does the story mean to different people; are there other stories of interest?”

Diana Nethercott photo



*Dean in front of Man Yuck Tong herbalist shop at the Royal British Columbia Museum Chinatown exhibit, created in partnership with the Chinatown Lions Club.*

## Sharpen your knowl**EDGE**

The Chinatown exhibit at the Royal B.C. Museum includes an actual Chinese herbalist’s shop from Victoria’s Fisgard Street, saved and preserved with the help of UVic’s Dr. David Lai. The shop, Man Yuck Tong, was established around 1905. Its contents were about to be sold to buyers in Ontario when, in late 1981, Lai convinced the proprietor to give priority of sale to the museum. It was purchased in

1982 with financial support from the Friends of the Royal B.C. Museum. Lai conducted an inventory of its stock and equipment, which includes tools for preparing, mixing and weighing the herbs; and UVic’s Dr. Nancy Turner and others identified the shop’s 260 herbal medicines. The Chinatown Lions Club contributed \$45,000 to support the new exhibition, which was officially opened in November 1992.

This article was written by Kristi Skebo, a graduate student in biology, as a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), supported by the Vice-President Academic and Provost and the Vice-President Research.



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