

# Keeping Cantonese alive

Chinese school focuses on survival language skills like buying groceries and ordering food

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## A new spin on Chinese school

### DIVERSITY

### Classes focus on Chinatown's Cantonese conversations



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Metro | Vancouver

Doris Chow understands the words but can't speak Cantonese, the first language she learned in life, fluently.

It's a language that is slowly disappearing from Vancouver but the city's Chinatown is one place where Cantonese still rules. Advocates hope the neighbourhood's bustling grocery stores and bakeries will inspire people to see the language's value with a new "Saturday school" this fall.

"Most of the classes out there are focused on Mandarin, which is of course the national language of China, but history of Vancouver and Vancouver's Chinatown is different," said Chow, co-founder of the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown.

"People here are predominantly Cantonese-speaking so we wanted to bring back some

of those pieces, some of that history, and some of those intangible characteristics of Chinatown."

Chow, 37, says living and working in the neighbourhood has helped her retain her family's language and history.

The classes will focus on survival language skills like buying groceries and ordering food in Cantonese. Students will then practice what they have learned with people and businesses in the area.

It's a complete 180 from the teaching style many children of immigrants are familiar with, said instructor Zoe Lam.

"A lot of people who grew up here went to Saturday school when they were children and they think it must be a lot of reciting and writing and you have to learn a poem by heart or something like that."

Instead, this eight-week session will feature what Lam, a UBC linguistic researcher, calls "place-based learning."

"We hope that participants can feel that they are connected to this neighbourhood. So what they're learning is actually relevant to where they are," she said.

Absolutely no pre-existing knowledge of Chinese is re-

quired, she added.

Lam taught a similar class at the Centre A art gallery on East Georgia Street two years ago. Chow remembers the diverse group that attended those lessons and hopes this fall's eight-week session will attract a similar crowd.

"Many of them were non-Chinese, and we also had some Canadian-born Chinese people who maybe grew up here and ... lost some of their Cantonese and wanted to get back to their roots. So we're anticipating this to be another kind of diverse group."

The Saturday school will be held in one of city's oldest Chinese schools, the Mon Keang School in the Wong Benevolent Association heritage building on East Pender Street.

Notable graduates of Mong Keang include Canada's first Chinese member of Parliament, Douglas Jung, Canada's first federally-appointed Chinese judge, Justice Randall Wong, and historian and author Paul Yee.

It's that history that Chow, whose parents immigrated to Vancouver in the '70s, hopes Vancouverites can appreciate.

"There are still many Chinatowns across the world where the predominant language is still Cantonese so it really speaks to the diaspora and migration patterns. That's really important to keep."

There are eight classes in total that run from Oct. 1 to Dec. 3.



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