

A look inside the Forbidden City at VAG

by DONG YUE SU

A glimpse of a city that was forbidden to the public for 500 years can now be seen in Vancouver for the first time.

On Oct. 18, 1000 visitors flocked to the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) for the opening of *The Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors*, an exhibition that will run until Jan. 11, 2015. The exhibit showcases 200 objects and works of art on loan from Beijing's Palace Museum.

These treasures include many personal items that still bear the aura of the once all-powerful emperors and their families. Ranging from scroll paintings and



Photo courtesy of The Palace Museum

▲ Manchu woman's socks – Qing dynasty, Kangxi period. Silk.



Photo courtesy of The Palace Museum

▲ Chicken Cup – Ming dynasty, Chenghua mark and period, 1465-87. Porcelain.

clothes to furniture and weapons, the items convey a sense of the grandeur and power of the imperial city.

"The robe is so big. I guess the Chinese emperor must be an oversized person," said one visitor at the exhibition.

The display of wealth and power

The exhibits are arranged loosely from the outer court of the Forbidden City, where the emperor carried out his everyday business, to the inner court, where he lived with thousands of women. These objects are mostly related to the three Manchu emperors of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) whose reigns were the zenith of the empire.

"It is all about the display of wealth and power," explains Timothy Brook, a UBC history professor and the curator of the exhibition, in a tour given to the VAG's public educators.

Most objects symbolize imperial power. The emperor's dragon must have five claws. The bright yellow was the imperial colour that nobody else could use. The Forbidden City itself was like a stage to showcase the supreme power of the emperor

who viewed himself as "the Son of Heaven," ruler of the entire world.

While the emperor had absolute political power in the empire, some of his personal domain was actually dictated by the symbolic system that had been created over many generations.

"Even items as personal as clothing and jewelry were not necessarily selected by individual choice. He and his family had no choice but to wear robes embroidered with dragons. These objects are not marked with anyone's personality," writes Brook in the exhibition guidebook.

The emperor had to sit on a sedan when he traveled in the outer court of the Forbidden City, never walk. Some of his movements were carefully choreographed and even some conversations between the emperor and the people around him were scripted.

"Some emperors got tired of this system but they just had to do it," says Brook in the tour.

The imperial taste attracts many

The Qing Empire collapsed in 1911. The Forbidden City was turned into the Beijing Palace Museum in 1925, and many objects were preserved. Even though the palace is open to the public, the stories behind these objects are still a mystery for many.

Many of these treasures are so precious that they remain enclosed in glass cases. Even Brook was not allowed to touch them; the Palace Museum sent a special team for the installation.

The painted portraits of the Qianlong emperor, the emperor's ceremonial robe and the imperial seal are among the most popular exhibits that captivate the visitors.

"Many people show up in my guided tour and they are very fascinated by the exhibits," says Jessa Alston-O'Connor, the public and family educator of the VAG.

Ho Yuan Lau, a Vancouver resident originally from Hong Kong,



Photo courtesy of The Palace Museum

▲ Portrait of Emperor Qianlong in ceremonial robe – Qing dynasty, Qianlong period. Ink and colour on silk.

had the opportunity to visit the Beijing Palace Museum and the Palace Museum in Taipei. However, at the Beijing Palace Museum he saw only architecture and no artifacts on display, and he found the museum in Taipei too crowded and noisy to enjoy the treasures on display. In contrast, Lau was impressed with VAG exhibition.

"This is the best viewing experience of the Chinese treasures," says Lau. ☞

The Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors

Oct. 18, 2014-Jan. 11, 2015
Vancouver Art Gallery,
750 Hornby St., Vancouver
www.vanartgallery.bc.ca

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Other issues brought up by the Chinese-Canadian community include more access to schooling, more focus on crime prevention, safety and lowering taxes.

Dealing with crime

Fellow mayoral candidate Chang has also noticed a thing or two about current issues in Burnaby. A school board trustee from 2005 to 2008, Chang says her three-year term was eye-opening.

"You get in the system and really see how people are elected and how the whole system works," says Chang.

Chang says that Chinese-Canadians are the biggest [ethnic] community in Burnaby but that many other languages besides Chinese are spoken in the city.

"The most common theme in ethnic groups is to be heard," says Chang.

Chang says because 50 per cent of Burnaby residents are immigrants, ESL learning is a concern.

During her time as a trustee, Chang pushed for an ESL Parents Advisory Council group, where parents could have meetings in their mother tongue. In addition, Chang also encouraged an evaluation program to assess if ESL students continued to stay with the system and suggested an ESL

student body in schools to promote leadership.

While she still advocates for these issues for new immigrants, Chang, who is a trained criminal and clinical psychologist, says her most important platform now is dealing with criminal matters.

"According to my observation [and research], there is no mandatory requirement to report hate crime to one's jurisdiction and then to the federal government," says Chang, who



▲ Burnaby mayoral candidate Helen Hee Soon Chang.

has been studying hate crimes since 2010.

In 2011, Chang started a petition to get the federal government to report accurate hate crime data, which in her opinion will help to provide a safety net and ensure a much better society.

In her research, Chang has also found recent gang problems popping up in the city that include youth from ethnic groups and new immigrants joining forces with street gangs or organized crime.

All of this creates more problems says Chang, who also adds there is "no proactive message" coming from Burnaby City Council on these matters.

For Chang, a validation that her work is being heard came at the Korean Cultural Festival, held last year in Moody Park. At the event, a woman approached Chang and told her how much she appreciated her work [on hate crime and helping newcomers integrate into a new system].

Having raised two children of her own here in Canada, Chang says she understands the importance of collaboration between a community and its residents. She also wants to help both parents and children.

"It's time to work from inside the system," Chang says. ☞

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is scheduled. However, in my experience, lunch is the best time to break down barriers between departments and to allow for free, easy dialogue with your fellow workers. I therefore routinely exceed the ridiculous half hour allocated for lunch and often entice a few colleagues along to share a joyous and good-humoured lunch. Envious remarks can be overheard from co-workers passing through the lunchroom, "It sounds like a family dinner!" New recruits are regularly added to our table.

It stands to reason that the sometimes contradictory mix of laid-back attitude and reserve of the Vancouver lifestyle is also found in the business world. To casually approach your boss in the office is not shocking, but making a vaguely crude remark will have your co-workers staring at you in amazement. All the same, they won't deny themselves the pleasure of hearing you upset the politically correct office culture. "You Europeans are so risqué," they'll say, after recovering from their hysterical laughter.

It is certainly interesting to live with these cultural dif-

ferences whose existence I hadn't even suspected. While my culture is obviously not representative of all others, I am certain it is not an outlier, for I know of other European or Latin American immigrants making the same sort of workplace observations. All agree that one of the more positive aspects of the Canadian job market and corporate culture is the possibility of advancement. Following my lead, many have had the opportunity of being promoted in their Vancouver workplace within a year, while they might have spent several years in the same position at the same salary in their native lands.

So we adapt by making the most of these differences. We rid ourselves of the tension that we had grown used to shouldering when arriving at the office. We're more direct with our managers – how good that feels! In return we bring a little of our zest for protracted lunch breaks and occasional off-colour remarks, while we play our part in the cultural diversity of Vancouver. ☞

Translation Barry Brisebois