

# Dr. Sun Yat-sen garden belongs to all

BY LI YANG AND DRUG HALVERSON, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 20, 2011



The pagoda in Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Files

When then senator Pat Carney went hunting for federal funding to build Vancouver's Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden in the early 1980s, she faced a consistent question: "What is a Chinese garden?" "Parks Canada thought it must have something to do with Agriculture. Agriculture thought it belonged to External Affairs," Senator Carney told a recent 25th anniversary gathering of the garden's founders.

But Prime Minister Brian Mulroney joined British Columbia and the City of Vancouver -along with a wide array of private benefactors -in funding an unrivalled icon in the heart of Vancouver, the first authentic classical Chinese garden built outside of China.

The garden has remained on most Vancouver "Top 10" attraction lists since it opened. While many visit it simply for its beauty, it offers much more. About 5,000 children take part in the Garden's school programs in a typical year. It is Vancouver's No. 1 public gathering spot for Chinese festival celebrations. It hosts a constant stream of concerts, art shows, lectures and cultural events.

The idea of the garden arose in the 1970s and 1980s when the freeway debates and reform to Canada's immigration laws brought unprecedented value to Chinatown and Chinese culture. Vancouver was changing from a provincial to a world city. The need to bridge the city's ethnic divides was obvious.

This insight coincided with China's change in political direction. Gardens were a way to showcase China's cultural legacy and China willingly made the resources available to Vancouver. With planning for Expo 86 underway, Canada and B.C. were keen to demonstrate their openness to China and Asian trade.

Move ahead 25 years and what has Vancouver become? "A city that defines our age" according to an April Lonely Planet article:

" . perhaps the most understated of Vancouver's city-of-the-moment credentials is its underlying inclusiveness. Patriotic Londoners might brag effusively about the cosmopolitanism of the British capital, but the stomping ground of Dickens and Conan-Doyle is a wholly English creation rooted in its past. Vancouver, on the other hand, doesn't belong to anyone. Go back two generations and everyone here is an immigrant. The notion of race is a non-issue in a metropolis that has become a microcosm of an increasingly globalized world."

Notwithstanding the Lonely Planet having forgotten the Coast Salish, we can ask "what is a Chinese garden in such a place?" For those of us born here the garden is a window to Chinese culture. Bob Sung, who leads culinary and cultural tours of Chinatown, says he always starts in the garden. The garden, with its careful adherence to Daoist design principles, is his teaching tool on the traditional Chinese view of everything from social order to lunch.

For first-generation immigrants to Vancouver from China, the garden plays an interesting welcoming role. When I (Li Yang) arrived in Vancouver 16 years ago from mainland China, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief to know that Chinese traditions and culture are respected and celebrated in this city I was about to call home. I was touched by the vision of Vancouverites, both Chinese and non-Chinese, who brought a part of China to Vancouver. Despite its small size compared to many ancient gardens in China, every bit of the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Chinese Garden reflects the essence of being Chinese: Resilience, balance and harmony.

That last note appeals to everyone. A visit to the garden is simply refreshing for the mind.

In line with the Lonely Planet observation, the garden belongs to all of Vancouver. Of our current seven volunteer tour guide trainees, three are recent immigrants from China. The rest are locals. Our staff is gathered from all corners. The garden is accomplishing its founders' goal of building cultural bridges and understanding.

The garden has built a worldwide reputation in the past 25 years. Today, SFU's David Lam Centre will host an international conference on Chinese gardens in honour of the anniversary. Contact the centre for registration information.

The garden is a living museum, a community gathering place, a window into history, a classroom, an art gallery and a place of harmony and quiet wonder.

It is deeply rooted in Vancouver's past and loved in its present. Visit the Garden. Become a member. No one in Vancouver any longer has to ask "What is a Chinese garden?"

Li Yang is president and Doug Halverson is immediate past president of Dr. Sun Yat-sen Garden Society of Vancouver.

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