

Yip Sang Company
By Sarah Romkey

Yip Sang (Ye Sheng in Mandarin, also known as Yip Chun Tien and Yip Lin Sang) was born in Shengtang village, Guangdong province, China in 1845. He was penniless when he immigrated to San Francisco in 1864, where he worked panning for gold, cooking, washing dishes and rolling cigars. Like many male Chinese immigrants at that time, he returned to China to marry. He fathered two children with his wife Lee Shee, who died after his return to North America. He traveled north to British Columbia in 1881, following the gold rush. Unable to find his fortune in goldfields, he gained employment with the Kwong On Wo Company as a Chinese foreman on the Canadian Pacific Railway line.

After the completion of the railway, Yip Sang settled in Vancouver, B.C. and got his start in the city selling coal door to door. His connections with the CPR eventually led to his recruitment by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company as a Chinese passenger agent. He founded the Wing Sang Company in 1888 (the name was changed by his children after his death to the Yip Sang Company), initially an importing and exporting business. His business interests expanded to fishing and canning; the Wing Sang Company was in part responsible for establishing the market for Canadian goods such as salt herring in China. By 1908, the Wing Sang Company's annual revenue was over \$50,000, and its real estate holdings were worth \$200,000.

In the meantime, Yip Sang had married three more times (consecutively, which was the practice for many Chinese men at the time) to Dong Shee, Wong Shee and Chin Shee. In 1901, he moved his wives and children from China to Vancouver. The Yip family home and business on Pender Street became an iconic building in Vancouver's Chinatown. It was renovated and extended over the years to accommodate Yip Sang's family of three wives, 23 children (19 sons and four daughters), grandchildren and other family members. Residents of Chinatown had many reasons to visit the Wing Sang Company at 51 Pender Street, for example, to buy goods, to reserve tickets for a CPR steamship crossing, or to deposit their money in the Wing Sang Company branch of a Hong Kong-based trust company. The Yips also acted as unofficial postmasters for the Chinese community, ensuring letters to and from family at home in China arrived. The building soon became a centre of activity in Chinatown.

Yip Sang was not only known for being a successful businessman; he was also renowned in the Vancouver Chinese community for his philanthropic work. He was instrumental in the foundation of Vancouver's first Chinese school and first Chinese hospital, and the Chinese Benevolent Association. A believer in the importance of health, education and community leadership, Yip Sang's was involved with hospitals, schools and political organizations in both Canada and China. His children followed in his footsteps, and became highly educated and community-minded individuals. His daughter Susan was one of the first Chinese Canadian women to attend a Canadian university; son Kew Dock Yip was the first Chinese Canadian to be called to the bar; local sports hero Quene Yip was

known both for his soccer skills and for advocating for the rights of Chinese workers and peddlers.

Archival material of the Yip family members and the Yip Sang Company can be found in the University of British Columbia Library's Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection. This historical material was entrusted to Dr. Wallace Chung by a Yip family member when the building at 51 Pender Street was undergoing renovations in the 1990s. Subsequently donated to the University of British Columbia Library in 1999 with the rest of the Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection, the Yip family and Yip Sang Company fonds contains business records reflecting all the activities of the Yip Sang Company, including records of passengers aboard CPR ships, and personal records such as photographs, correspondence, diaries, and other documents. More archival material of the Yip family and Yip Sang Company is held by the City of Vancouver Archives, and artifacts from the Wing Sang and Yip Sang Company are held by the Vancouver Museum.

The Yip Sang story is truly one of rags to riches, and an example of the perseverance of Chinese Canadian pioneers. Despite living in times of prejudice and racist politics, by the end of his life in 1927 Yip Sang was a highly respected Vancouver citizen and the "unofficial mayor" of Chinatown.

Sources:

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