

People

Judy Maxwell: Chinatown's insider tour guide

By HATTY LIU
in Vancouver
For China Daily

The career of Judy Lam Maxwell, owner and operator of Vancouver's Historical Chinatown Walking Tours, proves that being a good historian and historical tour guide means taking interest in a community for more than just its past.

Born to parents of Chinese and European descent in Vancouver and raised in Vancouver, Hong Kong and Japan, Maxwell has a master's degree in history from the University of British Columbia and has been researching stories of Vancouver's Chinese pioneers.

She sits on the board of the BC Historical Federation and the Vancouver Chinatown Revitalization Committee, where she wrestles with questions relating to Chinatown's future in a fast-growing city with representatives from Heritage Vancouver and the Vancouver Downtown Eastside Planning Department.

The rest of her time is spent building connections in the community, which is how she ended up being the only tour guide in Chinatown who can take people inside the heritage clan and county association buildings.

"When I first set up the tour, which was five years ago, I asked permission from [the clan associations] and they were hesitant at first, but they are very embracing of what

I'm doing now," she said. "Part of it is because I'm very connected to the community. I'm on a lot of committees, and I always donate back a portion of the money people give me for my work to the associations."

"I'm doing a lot of respectful things in the Chinese tradition and they really appreciate that," she said.

The personal touch seems to make a difference. Maxwell's reviews on Tripadvisor praise the tour for being an "insider" experience, going "behind the scenes" to see Chinatown from a different vantage point.

Maxwell takes her tour clients upstairs in the clan buildings, showing them the historical, artistic and genealogical treasures housed in the associations' century-old meeting rooms and memorial halls.

Tour guests also get unique views of the city looking out from Chinatown's distinctive recessed balconies, which are some of the best preserved examples of early Chinese diaspora architecture in North America.

"These buildings had a very important role in helping newcomers to Chinatown, and they are heritage sites, so no one can do anything to them," Maxwell said. "But how long will they last without bringing people — the younger generation — to these places, to carry on the community function, so that they don't just become a façade?"

Both on the way in and out of these buildings, Maxwell makes a point of stopping to chat with the



Judy Lam Maxwell is Chinatown tour guide who takes visitors to little-known historic sites. HATTY LIU / FOR CHINA DAILY

seniors who visit the associations every day to read newspapers and play mahjong.

The tour continues into the alleyways and courtyards behind the heritage buildings, some of the oldest parts of Chinatown, giving visitors a radically different view of how the neighbourhood is connected behind the scenes.

Other stops on Maxwell's tour include the Jack Chow Insurance building at 8 West Pender Street, the world's shallowest building

according to the Guinness Book of Records, and Modernize Tailors, which is one of Vancouver's oldest Chinese tailor shops and still run by 94-year-old owner Bill Wong.

"Judy seems to have connected with her tour delegates so well that they appear to be her friends, so when they enter our narrowest building attraction they are already in a great mood and prepped for an amazing experience," Rod Chow, president of Jack Chow Insurance, told China Daily.

“I’m doing a lot of respectful things in the Chinese tradition and they really appreciate that.”

Judy Lam Maxwell, owner-operator, Historical Chinatown Walking Tours

Maxwell sees her network as one that is expanding beyond Chinatown. "I get people of all ages and ethnicities, teachers, social workers," she said. "I just had a group of preschoolers on the tour. I get locals and people from all over the place — England, Belgium, Australia — who are all really interested in Chinatown and having this authentic historical experience."

There is one market she has yet to capture. "I've never taken a tour of people from today's China, and I'm not sure why, but there doesn't seem like people know about the Chinese that left China in the early days and spread around the world," she said. "Maybe they want to do stereotypical 'Canadian' things when they come to Vancouver."

Another goal of Maxwell's is

to continue to supporting new entrepreneurs and businesses in Chinatown.

"I talk to people [on the tour] about new things in Chinatown, such as new restaurants, what I like to eat, so they get all sorts of information on many levels," she said.

The Chinatown Revitalization Committee has guidelines for new and non-Chinese businesses to follow in order to not change the character of the neighbourhood, and "everyone has complied, and they are great, because they bring a lot of people to the neighbourhood who would not otherwise go there," Maxwell said.

Recently, Maxwell put these ideas about new business to use when she changed the rendezvous point of her tours from Blenz Coffee in International Village to The Capilano, a First Nations tea house on the boundary of Chinatown and Gastown, which just had its grand opening on Feb 19.

"Since there's a lot of history between the Chinese and First Nations in BC, it seemed like a good match for what I'm trying to do, to introduce people to Chinatown as a neighbourhood that reflects a lot of important history, and to support local entrepreneurs," Maxwell said.

"This collaboration, and all the stuff I'm trying to do, is trying to reflect all that's good about Chinatown and all that's good about Vancouver: neighbourhood, ethnicity and history."



The Chinese Freemasons Building, built in 1901, features the recessed balconies that are found on many heritage buildings in Chinatown. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Some of the oldest parts of Chinatown are its alleyways and courtyards. HATTY LIU / FOR CHINA DAILY



Visitors to Chinatown pause at the Millennium Gate. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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