

## Six weeks in Toronto's Chinatown



*The city of Toronto's logo, that screams that it was made in the 90s, is of its city hall, which screams it was made in the 60s. The story told by the city was that they cleared mostly vacant, low value land to build the city hall and the square that surrounds it. The actual story is that they bulldozed Chinatown.*

*After being displaced once, a decade later the city threatened to demolish Chinatown to widen roads and force displacement once again. This time the community fought it, and the community won.*

- Laidlaw blog post from week 4

As a Laidlaw Scholar, I spent six weeks working for the Toronto Chinatown Land Trust (TCLT). Only starting up in 2022, their aim is to steward community-owned property to support affordable housing and small businesses in Toronto's Chinatown through relationship building and non-extractive finance. Democratic governance ensures that members can vote on what should happen with these properties. This is embedded within an anti-colonial framework that both respects and follows through with indigenous peoples' claims to the land, as well as standing up for working class folk in the area.

### **What am I doing**

*In Montreal's Chinatown is Wing Noodles, a business that's made Canadian-Chinese food for the community for almost a century. I went in person and saw a shuttered business covered in fences. Real estate speculation and children who don't want to take on the family business mean that the business will shut in the near future: their current operations are largely reduced to making fortune cookies. Those fortune cookies were the first bilingual fortune cookies in Canada.*

*Right now this fortune cookie sits in my room. Some time in the future it will become a relic of history, but for now (when I get over my sentimentality and eat it) I'll be able to read my fortune: I'll read the French first.*

- Laidlaw blog post from week 3



In my journal entries leading up to landing in Toronto, my key priorities were to update the database, present it in a user-friendly manner, and to design it so that it can be updated yearly. I also wanted to learn as much as possible about Toronto's Chinatown and about community organising. Success would've looked like a presentation to board and community members, making some existential reflections upon my future career trajectory, and having so much fun that I'd want to come back!

I'm proud to say that I've completed my key priorities and also mostly fulfilled what success would look like! I am writing this before I'm presenting the field survey but to be honest I think I'm going to kill it and am happy to update this for any curious readers. (Update: I did kill it!)

### ***Land acknowledgement***

*Our Chinatowns are situated on stolen Indigenous land. The ancestral, traditional, and contemporary caretakers of these lands, air, and waters are the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and other Anishinaabe peoples, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat.*

- *TCLT Land Acknowledgement*

How can we oppose displacement when we are complicit in the displacement of indigenous people from their land? Chinatown owners often aspire towards legacy: they want to be able to pass down their properties, their businesses, onto their children. They want to make roots in their communities. Doing this directly contradicts indigenous people's claims to the land that was stolen from them.

I feel that liberal capitalism is not particularly well suited at taking prejudice seriously: each person has one vote regardless of the differing impacts that the outcomes might have on different groups, and oftentimes it seems that the only way to magnify the effect of your vote is through having the wallet to bankroll it. It is how we get land acknowledgements and not landback. It is how we get “this land belongs to these groups thank you for sharing it bye” or even worse “we stole this land we are going to acknowledge it bye”.



*In Harvey's, a fast-food chain*

## Grateful to work on this land

As you consider watching a film with us, we encourage you to reflect on the land that you are on, who the traditional keepers of the land are, what the treaty relationship is, or if it's unceded territory.

TIFF Lightbox is located on the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, the Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee.

The territory is within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, the meeting place of Toronto (also known as Tkaronto) is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to work on this land.

### TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival) Land Acknowledgement

As an outsider, this feels incredibly strange. It feels analogous to saying that factory farming is bad and that we should be nicer to animals with your mouth full of chick-fil-a. I see some levels of recognition that colonial history is deeply horrific and that something should be done, but a lack of drive or imagination to get real change.

One of the TCLT's strategic priorities is to develop an anti-colonial framework to figure out what real action looks like. Generally I like how the TCLT does not shy away from difficult

problems. Actions taken include commitments to eventual land back, and the prioritisation of stewardship over ownership.

I see this in the TCLT's community work within Chinatown too. Everyone has a different story, a different vision, different languages (and it's not just Mandarin and Cantonese, but Vietnamese, Hokkien, Toishan, Teochew, Korean...) and somehow we as a community need to come together with our shared hopes and make something better from what we have. I find this utterly captivating.

As a politics and economics student I have studied models: I have explored ways to make the world much simpler than it actually is in order to try and make empirically verifiable conclusions and I am kinda done with that. These are the same models that would make Chinatown a monolith, that would elide any cultural specificity. These models make assumptions and then circularly assume that those assumptions can actually be made. I want to be more careful. I want to wrestle with the contradictions as they actually are, be immersed in a pool of different everything and see the world as it is. Does this make any kind of conclusion much harder? Yes! But I think the academy has gotten it wrong by looking for the right answers instead of the better ones. This perfectionism seeps its way into leftist discourse where groups are often paralysed by the fact that they don't want to make mistakes. It makes people feel that there is no solution and that the answer is therefore pursuing business as usual.

### **Green hats**

我:我们要去哪儿?

姨妈:去玩!

我:玩在哪儿里?

- 对话, 我和我姨妈, 2013(我大概8岁)。我当时明白她在说什么, 但我说错了, 应该说“去玩儿在哪儿里? ”。太辛苦了。

*Me: Where are we going?*

*Aunt: We're going to play!*

*Me: Where is play?*

- *A conversation with my Aunt in 2013 (I was about 8). I knew what she was saying but misspoke and should've said "where are we going to play". Sad.*

The land trust has merch. It's cool! There are stickers, ergonomic tote bags, embroidered caps in a deep green.



The issue? I would maybe google it for more... detailed explanations... but the phrase “wearing a green hat” (带绿帽子) implies that a man’s wife is cheating on them. The TCLT advertise these hats, and then they get dms upon dms that this is culturally taboo!

Being a child of immigrants places you in a purgatory where you struggle with the language of the place you are born and raised, but you also struggle with the language of your parents, of your ancestry. I mean language both literally and figuratively.

My Mandarin is OK. I grew up speaking it and over lockdown I taught myself to read and write. It’s enough for me to go to China by myself and travel for over a month, but it’s not enough for me to read novels and talk about post-colonial theory with my parents. Feeling that I was culturally inadequate started when I went to university and met Chinese people who I felt were ‘better’ at being Chinese than I was (whatever that means)... I must find happiness in purgatory. Millions of people have done it before me.

We also tend to imagine a false version of what our ‘ancestry’ actually is. My parents speak Mandarin but that’s not really their native language: both of them would’ve been speaking their local dialects growing up: many of their grandparents likely wouldn’t have understood Mandarin at all. As an example, I like to think about the distance between Spain and Poland as being roughly comparable to the distance between North China (where Mandarin Chinese is from) and South China. The script might be the same, but the local language is going to sound different.

Most of the middle class in China today couldn’t imagine a lifestyle that doesn’t involve eating a lot of meat, yet their parents, who most likely grew up in poverty, would’ve found meat to be a rare treat, a delicacy. The explosion of Chinese economic development in the reform and opening up era has resulted in a middle class wealthy enough to eat meat regularly, such that now we imagine cuisine to be so meat-centric to the extent that its way into the cultural imaginations of what it means to live in a Chinese way.

So... I wear the green hat :) and nothing explodes. I'm going to practice reading and speaking when I have the opportunity and the time, and I'm going to spend time improving my Mandarin. If I don't, that is fine, I am still enough.

### ***Green thumbs***

*The veganism might be a bit trickier here but I'll make it work*

- *My journal, the first day I landed in Toronto*

I'm not sure whether I made it work. Being in a new city with different shops and different kitchens has been a learning curve I have not mastered: my last week here was entirely composed of people feeding me upon realising that I wasn't eating super well, and I'm incredibly thankful for each and every meal.

I think the moment I go back to the UK and have pots and pans I recognise, my chopping board, my friend's soy milk maker, I will feast for days. I will get back to making stupid quantities of food, eating too much, and complaining about how I've eaten too much.

I spent my first day working pruning tomatoes in the anti-displacement community garden during pomodoro breaks. In sum I have spent probably about 10 hours in that garden, picking up cigarette butts, harvesting mint or tomatoes or shiso leaves... This garden grew out of what was previously a pile of rubble. It is something out of nothing, it is the story of Chinatown.

It was also the view from my desk in the community hub where I spent most of my days working and chatting with fellow organisers. I would see interested uncles come by the garden. They would be curious about a plant, cross their arms behind their backs and lean forward slightly to get a better look. I began to take their lead, going out into the sun, admiring the chives or the marigolds. All I would need to become an uncle is to pick up smoking, gain a couple kilos, and learn how to swear in Cantonese. I'm sure this will come with time.



## Home

好久不见！  
*Long time no see!*

*(The English expression comes from Chinese pidgin English; it follows a different grammar because the Chinese expression was transliterated into English. Other examples include 'gung ho' or 'no can do'. There's an extent to which some of these expressions became part of European-American vernacular as an insult to Chinese labourers, but also an extent to which Asian-Americans have been able to adopt these phrases as symbols of their own history.)*

In the past week or so I've been thinking that I'm ready to go home.

I want to return to England, find the British born Chinese people with similar values and worldviews to mine, build and support the community that I wish I had for myself growing up, the version where I didn't ever have to be ashamed of myself for being different, where I can be enough, enough for being, sharing in existence, in space, in food, in community.

I want to go to my third year house, a house by the river Cherwell, I will be busy and stressed and the sun will start setting at 4pm, but I can lie on the grass in the morning and breathe in the air and it is real air, no smoke, no dust, it is the crisp autumn air and the dew is seeping into my clothes but it doesn't matter because I am free.

But I realise that I have never been in the ‘home’ that I have described. I am nostalgically yearning for something I have never experienced. Travel is not the solution. If I want to find home, I need to build it, I need to stay. From the moment I arrived in Toronto I knew I was leaving, and that affected the relationships I have been able to make with this place and its people. So maybe one day, I’ll be in England, the place where I was born and raised, and think that I’ll want to go home, and it’ll mean Toronto, where the air is dirty and the streets are grid-based and the museums are expensive, but there is a community there that will welcome me again with open arms. All I would need to do is want to stay.

### ***My fortune***

*Vous allez surmonter un grand défi.*

*You will overcome a great challenge.*

- *Wing Noodles’ bilingual fortune cookie*

I ate the cookie. It was a bit stale... I think I accidentally tore open the packaging a couple weeks ago, letting the taste change a little, but it was still a really good cookie!

Many challenges await. I’m going to fly home, unpack and then immediately repack to go back to university. I’m going to sit my final exams and graduate. I’m going to learn Mandarin, pay taxes, and keep houseplants without killing them. It is my fortune that I get to have these challenges, and that I’ll get to overcome them.

