



SCOTT NORSWORTHY

## EAST-WEST CONNECTION

TEXT Claudia Carmen Chan

### CHINESE-CANADIAN WOMEN ARCHITECTS SHIRLEY SHEN AND VANESSA FONG REFLECT ON THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES.

Amidst the diversity of emergent narratives on culture and identity, I've been thinking about my own experiences with architecture, as a Chinese-Canadian woman. I found myself reflecting on how, like architecture, Chinese culture is founded on structure, order and relation.

The ancient Chinese were fascinated with numbers and mathematical patterns, acquiring a sophisticated understanding of how they relate to alchemy, divination and astronomy. Certain arrangements and sequencing of numbers were imbued with cosmic significance. The ubiquitous yin/yang symbol stems from this set of inquiries; in the classical text *I-ching*, this dualism represents a philosophy of balance which permeates language, culture, food and traditional medicine, collectivizing those indigenous to China and its diaspora across time and place.

It is no wonder, then, that mathematics is the most essential of extra-curriculars, insistently instructed to the ambitious and diligent Chinese student. More than mere calculation, mathematics is tied to ancestral wisdom that provides the guiding principles governing all facets of daily life. For many children of Chinese ex-pats, the study of mathematics

takes its place alongside the cultural activities of calligraphy, watercolour painting, Chinese language, piano and ballet, all practiced with rigour to complement scholastic pursuits. For the artful but pragmatic-minded, architecture is seen as an especially promising vocational choice that blends both creative inclination and an aptitude for mathematics.

To explore how these cultural notions play out in practice, I spoke to two emerging Chinese-Canadian female architects at the helm of their respective practices. UK-born, Toronto-raised Vanessa Fong leads VFA // Architecture + Design in Toronto. Shirley Shen is co-founder of Vancouver-based Haecity Studio Architecture and registered in Washington State. She was born in Richmond, BC, and has bounced back and forth across the Pacific Ocean between Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States and Canada.

The determination and discipline ingrained in Chinese culture guided both Fong and Shen through McGill's School of Architecture; they graduated a couple of years apart. Fong's formative trajectory, like that of many Chinese youth, was steered by her parents, whereas Shen's was self-directed. In both cases, the structured and community-minded framework of their youth allowed each to foray naturally into the role of engaged architectural practitioner.

In addition to her triple full-time occupations as mother of three boys, architect, and business owner, Fong has been active with Ontario Association of Architects (OAA). She was a Council member for five years, has held the position of VP of Communications for four, and is currently on the OAA's Discipline Committee. Similarly, Shen is both the Creative





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**OPPOSITE** For the Cleaver Residence, architect Vanessa Fong of VFA chose a clean limestone exterior to foreground a layered landscape design.

**ABOVE** Curio House, designed by Shirley Shen's firm Haeccity Studio Architecture, is a multi-generational home in Richmond, BC. The layout refers to the traditional Chinese courtyard typology and to principles of feng shui in its hierarchy of spaces.

Director and co-owner of an architectural practice; outside of the business, she's recently undertaken a new teaching position at the UBC School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, is mother to a toddler son and advises the City of Vancouver as a Heritage Commissioner.

Both Fong and Shen note that their training never fully prepared them to be the only young Chinese-Canadian, female architect in the room—an experience familiar to both. Most of Canada's architects are still white and male; to change this dynamic demands courage and clarity of voice. There are few role models for their intersectional identity in Canada: prominent among these is architect Brigitte Shim of Shim-Sutcliffe, who Fong cites as an inspiration.

When Fong first joined the OAA Council, she was the only female visible minority Councillor under fifty. Since then, she's been actively creating space for other young BIPOC professionals to bring new energy and representation to the Board of Governors. "Diversity is important to change the groupthink mentality," she says. She's also intentionally kept the makeup of her own firm diverse: 10 of her 13 team members are female and come from different cultural backgrounds.

Shen recalls being very much treated like a model minority when living in the States. In her book *Color of Success*, Ellen D. Wu describes this typecasting as referring to visible minorities that are "well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically unthreatening and definitively not black." To be placed on such a racial rubric implies that one is always kept subordinate to the "golden" white standard, while at the same time being regarded as favoured or privileged over those of other racial backgrounds. It's an unfair and

faulty triangulation that can feel impossible to extricate oneself from.

Being wedged into such a positionality leads many Chinese-Canadians to continually reach for white proximity, often subconsciously. It can thus place them in inadvertent competition with other Asians or cultural groups; it can also spur a kind of self-directed racism. Shen says, "Part of the reason I chose McGill for undergrad was because I thought that, demographically, there would be fewer Asians in Montreal. Had I gone to school in Ontario, it would have been harder to escape Asian culture—and at that time, having just finished high school in Hong Kong, that's what I wanted a break from. Hong Kong was very materialistic and capitalist to me. That culture didn't completely embrace me, and so I didn't completely embrace it, either."

After spending four years in Montreal, Shen felt an unexpected desire to return to the Far East to revisit her deeper ancestral roots. She travelled through mainland China for a year and a half, an experience that would help shape her Masters thesis at MIT in Boston, which addressed cultural relativity in architecture. She was especially interested in investigating how architecture can be used as a site for cultural exchange, as well as how it expresses cultural context.

"Cultural identity isn't static. Instead, it should be constantly reworked on the interior by the inhabitants," says Shen. "During the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, all of China was trying to express itself through massive building projects: they had to invent a whole new language on 'Modern Chineseness.' I found that a lot of the projects being built were very much about this outward expression, which, in fact, is pretty static."

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“Buildings don’t move or change that much, which is at odds with identity—something that is constantly changing,” Shen continues. “As someone who’s Chinese-Canadian in Canada, people see me as Chinese. I am other. I might be the same exact person, but if I’m in Hong Kong, they see me as Western. Identity is relational. It depends on who you’re interacting with. How people perceive me depends on where they’re coming from.”

Shen ultimately returned to the West, setting up her practice in a historic society building in Vancouver’s Chinatown; she co-leads the firm with husband and partner Travis Hanks. Her cultural knowledge and heritage emerges in Haeccity’s portfolio of built work. A recent project is a single-family, bungalow-style residence in Richmond, BC, which mirrors the spatial sequencing of the *siheyuan* courtyard typology, an architecture that carries a 2,000-year-old history of accommodating multiple generations and the customs of a collectivist culture. In 2019, she led a community revitalization project for Kam Wai Dim Sum restaurant, in an effort to help preserve and restore the vibrancy of Vancouver’s rapidly changing Chinatown.

For Fong, the disciplined approach of her inherited culture has influenced how she exercises business savvy in her practice. Born into a family of immigrants originally from Hong Kong and Macau, she understood just how hard her parents had to work to establish themselves in Canada. “I played into the demands of being a successful Asian,” she says. She consistently carried a 90%+ average in school, and in Grade 13, she was interviewed at Princeton for early entry into its Biology program. She describes how she purposefully failed all of her AP exams because the pressure became too much: it took her 23 years to confess this to her parents. “I couldn’t just say ‘I can’t go through with it’. I actually couldn’t have

an open discussion with my parents about it until this past summer. My mom told me that she remembers thinking how stupid I was at that time. In Chinese culture, you’re represented by your children, and their academic performance reflects on you as a parent.”

The success of Fong’s current practice arises, perhaps, from between these narratives of unspoken tension and relentless determination. It’s also the space where one contends with identity, where one negotiates with a constant push and pull of influences. How much does one let go of their heritage to be taken seriously within the dominant cultural narrative? For Fong, her growing body of work embodies a contemporary Canadian architectural language, with an emphasis on strong rectilinear lines and raw materials such as wood, brick and natural stone. Her architectural style aptly reflects Ontario’s landscapes, which are, after all, where she grew up.

Both Fong and Shen are carving space not only for themselves, but also for a new wave of young Chinese-Canadian women and other visible minority architects. Their examples will certainly help others to claim their hyphenated identities as an important part of their architectural practices. There is much to celebrate as we continue to witness the rise of young Asian women in Canadian architecture, making their influence felt in effecting policy change; creating cultural work that enriches our cities and rural landscapes; and tilting the conversation at large towards a true and fully integrative participation of people from all racial and gender identities in the profession. ▲▲

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