

UNDER THE BRIGHT SKY

A Memoir of Travels Through Asia

ANDREW SCOTT

CAITLIN PRESS

2021



Arriving at Alappuzha by ferry at dusk, Kerala, India.



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PROLOGUE

These stories begin, as stories often do, with an unexpected encounter. It was 1974, an evening in September. I was getting ready to head across town when the sister of a friend asked if she could get a ride with me. Sure, no problem, hop aboard, I'd said, and soon the pair of us were rolling down Fourth Avenue, chatting amiably about our respective jobs. That ride was over far too soon for me.

I scarcely knew my passenger. Indeed I'd almost forgotten that my friend even had a sister. Shiane was her name, and she worked as a graphic artist for one of Vancouver's leading design studios. In less than half an hour, perched on the front seat of my Volkswagen van, looking as sleek and comfortable as a cat, she proceeded to cast an inexplicable spell on me. As we closed in on her destination, I searched for a not-too-obvious way of seeing her again. But she told me she was involved with someone, so I tried, with difficulty, to put her out of my mind.

The fact that Shiane and I were of different ethnicities was irrelevant to me. She was Chinese Canadian, I was white, and Vancouver was in the long, slow process of

Opposite: Sukhothai Historical Park, Thailand.

transforming itself from a predominantly white community to one that was multiracial and multicultural. The city was becoming worldly as well as scenic, and I felt some of that worldliness rub off on me. At work, for instance, as a shiny new employee of Canada Post, I found myself mixing with a much more diverse assortment of people than I was used to. The experience was daunting but also intriguing, a constant challenge to my many preconceived notions.

I'd been hired as a mail service courier. Like a swarm of colourful bees, the couriers would emerge from the huge downtown processing plant that was our corporate hive and spread out through the city each weekday morning. In gleaming red-white-and-blue vans, we cleared mailboxes, set out bags for letter carriers, delivered parcels and express envelopes, and handled airport runs. My task was to fill in for sick or vacationing drivers, a role that older couriers didn't want, preferring a regular beat. But I enjoyed the variety of working in a different part of the city each day, and I kept at it—on and off, part-time and full-time—for several years. That job helped me survive as I slowly built a modest career as a freelance writer and, later, as a magazine editor.

Many of my fellow couriers were Chinese Canadian, and I soon got to know a few of them. I was pleased to have Asian friends. It felt like a standard progression, no big deal, in a place like Vancouver, where Chinese people had always been an important part of urban life. By the mid-1970s, while I was working as a postie, the city's Chinese population had passed the thirty-thousand mark. Vancou-

ver had one of the largest Chinatowns—a compact, cheerful cacophony of shops and restaurants just east of downtown—in North America. As immigration ramped up, and the date approached for the 1997 return of Hong Kong to China, Vancouver’s Chinese community became a focus of attention. Everyone was expecting big changes to occur.

Over the next few years, my social circle would intersect with Shiane’s on infrequent occasions. Eventually, an auspicious moment arrived, when neither she nor I was seeing anyone else, and I asked her out on a date. She consented. More dates followed, and soon we grew very fond of each other.



The history of British Columbia’s Chinese residents dates back many years. A few misguided nineteenth-century scholars believed that the first Chinese landed on BC’s shores long before any Europeans. An author named Edward Vining tried to popularize the idea that a group of Buddhist monks, led by Hui Shen, a priest, had drifted in junks across the Pacific and visited the North American coast more than fifteen hundred years ago. Shen named the land Fusang, and his story was described in early Chinese historical texts but never substantiated.

The first Chinese visitors to definitely step ashore in BC accompanied the British fur trader John Meares from Macao to Nootka Sound in 1788. Mostly carpenters and metalworkers from southern China’s Pearl River Delta, they were hired to build a base and a small ship (named

the *North West America*) for the traders. The Chinese had been “generally esteemed a hardy, and industrious, as well as ingenious race of people,” noted Meares in his account of the expedition. “They live on fish and rice, and, requiring but low wages, it was a matter also of economical consideration to employ them; and during the whole of the voyage there was every reason to be satisfied with their services.”¹ The schooner constructed at Nootka was the first European-style vessel built on the BC coast.

It was not until the late 1850s that Chinese immigrants began to live permanently in BC. The lure was gold. Merchants came first, from the California gold diggings, followed over the next few years by several thousand miners, laundrymen, cooks and market gardeners. Many ended up going back to China. By the early 1880s, as the rush subsided, three-quarters of BC’s gold miners were of Chinese origin. One thousand Chinese labourers were employed building the Cariboo Wagon Road, while five hundred more helped construct the Western Union telegraph line. They worked in fish canneries and in Vancouver Island’s accident-prone coal mines. By 1885, seventeen thousand Chinese had been hired by Canadian Pacific to lay tracks for the trans-Canada railway.

Large Chinatowns sprang up in Victoria, New Westminster and Nanaimo, while smaller versions, often mining related, formed in Penticton, Cumberland, Hazelton, Boston Bar, Lillooet, Rock Creek, Quesnelle Forks, Ladner and many other places. But the most important Chinese community, of course, was in Vancouver—or Granville, as

the sawmill town was known in 1884. The census that year counted 114 Chinese heads at Granville, nearly all male, nearly all working at the Hastings sawmill. That number slowly grew to about 3,500 by 1911 and 6,500 by the early 1920s. In 1923, anti-Chinese groups such as the Asiatic Exclusion League persuaded the Canadian government to pass an act that cut off any further Chinese immigration. The act was repealed in 1947, and in the 1950s, Vancouver's Chinese population more than doubled. The community Shiane was born into, in 1953, was better educated and more affluent than its predecessors. Many of its leaders were born in Canada; they spoke English and worked in professional occupations.

Members of Shiane's widespread family maintained a tight network but were also fully integrated with Vancouver's larger non-Chinese population. In many ways they enjoyed the best of two worlds. Their friends (and partners) were as likely to be white as Chinese. They kept alive their favourite Asian cultural customs (especially cuisine-related ones) but also adopted anything the city had to offer that caught their eye.

Often, when people first met Shiane and me as a couple, they would jump to the wrong conclusion; Shiane must be a recent immigrant, they thought, while I was a long-term "Canadian" of comfortably European heritage. We laughed at this because the truth was quite the opposite: I was born in Wales and had emigrated from England, with my mum and dad and younger siblings, as a nine-year-old. Shiane was a third-generation member of a pioneer Canadian family.