Edmonton Chinese Writing Club Uses Storytelling to Advance Anti-Racism Dialogue

Daoist principles and personal narratives take centre stage in a city-funded initiative spanning a writers' retreat, anthology launch, public symposium, and literary festival.

The Edmonton Chinese Writing Club (ECWC) brought together writers, artists, scholars, and community members for four events in October, exploring how storytelling and traditional wisdom can help address racism and foster inclusion.

Held October 3–4 and followed by an anthology event at LitFest Alberta on October 16, the activities were part of ECWC's City of Edmonton–funded project, "Anti-Racism Storytelling and Dialogue Rooted in Chinese Wisdom." The program featured a reflective writers' retreat and anthology launch at the Queen Elizabeth II Building, a public symposium at the University of Alberta, and a literary evening at the Rice Theatre in the Citadel.

Writers' Retreat Emphasizes Reflection and Connection

On October 3, approximately 40 writers, cultural workers, and community leaders attended a reflective writing retreat at the Queen Elizabeth II Building.

Grounded in Daoist principles, the retreat featured guided reflection on racism and identity, bilingual storytelling, and group sharing and writing facilitated by project committee members Grace Meikle, Dr. Mila Philipzig, Dr. Joe Wu, and Dr. Cathy Shi. ECWC member Tianlin Zhang led Tai Chi and breathing exercises, while local Chinese Canadian musicians from Small Band for Seniors provided further opportunities for cultural exchange.

The program emphasized stillness, listening, and self-reflection as ways to process difficult experiences and build resilience — a quieter approach to anti-racism that begins with inner transformation rather than confrontation.

Anthology Launch: *We Are Water and Light*

Later that day, ECWC launched its community anthology, *We Are Water and Light: Anti-Racism Stories Rooted in Chinese Wisdom and Other Asian Traditions*. The collection features 27 writers from Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and other communities, complemented by artwork from the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts and Chinese Canadian artists. More than 80 people attended the launch.

The event featured traditional Chinese music, readings by contributing authors, and remarks from MLA Nathan Ip, a strong supporter of the project. Ip later returned as a reader at the anthology's LitFest Alberta event.

In her opening remarks, ECWC president and project lead Dr. Cathy Shi explained how reading Dr. Daniel Fried's *The Activist: A Daoist Protest Manual* transformed her understanding of

Chinese wisdom. She came to see that it could offer not only personal comfort but also ways to respond to racism with dignity, understanding, and connection.
That realization prompted ECWC to apply for the City of Edmonton's Anti-Racism Grant and develop the anthology.

Dr. Mila Philipzig, the Managing Editor, hosted the authors' reading. The writers moved beyond accounts of discrimination to explore resilience, personal transformation, and lessons drawn from lived experience, interviews, and research. Their stories addressed topics ranging from intergenerational guilt and interracial relationships to public service and the overlooked histories of Edmonton's Chinatown.

Public Symposium Brings Diverse Perspectives Together

On October 4, ECWC hosted a public symposium at the University of Alberta's Department of East Asian Studies. More than 50 people registered to explore connections between traditional wisdom, social justice, and community dialogue.

Dr. Daniel Fried, chair of the department, delivered a keynote address on Daoist philosophy and social justice. An intercultural panel followed, featuring Filipino (Andre Tinio), Nigerian (Funke Olokude), Japanese (Paul Fujishige), and Chinese (former city councillor Jennifer Rice and MLA Nathan Ip) perspectives. The panel examined shared experiences of racism, distinct cultural challenges, and the importance of solidarity across communities.

Afternoon workshops explored the relationship between traditional wisdom and creative expression. Dr. Jennifer Quist presented on how Daoist ideas including quiet strength, non-resistance, and connection with nature can inform literary understanding. Fried then led creative writing exercises emphasizing flow, emotional truth, and nonlinear narrative. Participants explored how restraint and subtlety can convey strength in storytelling.

Breakout sessions facilitated by city archivist Jia Jia Yong, anthology associate editor Kevin Schultz, and community leader Andre Tinio focused on youth identity, intergenerational healing, and community advocacy, encouraging participants to share experiences and consider practical ways to strengthen their communities.

LitFest Alberta Extends the Conversation

On October 16, ECWC presented the anthology at LitFest Alberta, held at the Rice Theatre in the Citadel. Organized by Dr. Mila Philipzig and hosted by Kevin Schultz, the evening featured readings and reflections celebrating the 27 contributors. Approximately 40 people attended.

In her opening remarks, Shi connected her personal journey to the stories in the collection, emphasizing that the writers do not stop at describing discrimination but explore how people transform painful experiences into insight, resilience, and action.

MLA Nathan Ip joined the evening's readers, bringing selected stories to life.

Shi highlighted the importance of bringing together Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese voices, noting that racism is not the experience of any one community alone.

“Water shapes stone not by force, but by persistence,” Shi said, reflecting on the imagery behind the book’s title. “Light doesn’t announce itself; it just arrives, quietly, and suddenly you can see.”

Contributing authors shared excerpts from their work and the stories behind them. Their narratives explored guilt passed down through generations, the struggle to stop apologizing for one’s identity, and a white Albertan’s experience of learning what it means to be an outsider. Others recounted a family that chose love after being treated as enemies, the internalized racism people must learn to unlearn, and public service as a three-generation inheritance.

One contribution examined the deaths of two men in Chinatown, taking the writer beyond an initial search for a hate crime to confront a neighbourhood and its history that had too often been overlooked.

The evening concluded with heartfelt remarks from Ellen Kartz, executive director of LitFest Alberta, recognizing the value of bringing these seldom-heard stories to a wider audience. This year marked the second consecutive year that ECWC was invited to present at LitFest Alberta.

Stories Build Belonging

Founded in 2009, ECWC uses writing and storytelling to challenge bias, preserve cultural heritage, and strengthen community connections. The October events extended this work from reflective writing and creative expression to intercultural dialogue and public literary engagement.

Rather than presenting Chinese wisdom as a universal solution to racism, the project offers it as one cultural resource among many that can enrich conversations about social inclusion.
By creating opportunities for people from different backgrounds to share experiences, question assumptions, and discover common ground, ECWC has demonstrated how storytelling can challenge stereotypes and foster understanding.

As Edmonton continues to grow as a culturally diverse city, these stories offer an invitation to listen across differences and build a more inclusive community — one voice, one story, and one conversation at a time.