

Complicated Times for Chinese Canadians

**Message from
The Honourable Yuen Pau Woo
Senator, Parliament of Canada**

for

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Seeking Common Ground Among Immigrants
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There has never been a more complicated time to be part of the Chinese diaspora. About 50 million people who identify as ethnic Chinese live outside of the motherland, and they can be found in all corners of the globe. Yet more leave the mainland every year, in some cases adding to the already significant numbers of Chinese in their adopted countries and in other cases building new Chinese communities in places where Chinese people are still considered exotic.

Canada is one of those places with an already significant Chinese population and it has long been seen as an attractive destination for aspiring immigrants. As such, the Chinese community is poised to grow because of the relatively young demographic that is already in the country, and the continued inflow of immigrants from the People's Republic of China.

The new arrivals will join hundreds of thousands of former compatriots from the mainland who came to Canada in large numbers since the late 1990s. But they will also join hundreds of thousands more who came in the previous four decades from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and beyond. In the pre-war period, the number of Chinese people who came to Canada was constrained first by the Head Tax, and then choked off by the Asiatic Exclusion Act, but many Chinese did enter the country in the late 19th and early 20th century and were in many ways pioneers in the building of Canada. Their descendants – third and fourth generation Chinese Canadians – are also an important part of the Chinese mosaic in Canada, in part because many of them have achieved great success in their fields of work, paving the way for the greater acceptance of new immigrants who arrived in subsequent decades.

The multiple waves of Chinese immigration to Canada – arriving at different times from different parts of the Chinese world – make any generalizations about the Chinese community in Canada very difficult. A third generation Chinese Canadian (who likely does not speak much Chinese) does not, on the face of it, have much in common with his or her Chinese neighbor who grew up in Shanghai. Even first-generation immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan who do share a

common script with more recent PRC arrivals may have difficulty connecting with their cousins from the mainland.

Yet, the vast majority of Chinese Canadians – of all vintages – identify as ethnic Chinese, and in different ways and degrees, they find ways to connect with their heritage. There is a dizzying number of Chinese societies, associations, charities, and clubs in Vancouver and Toronto covering the vast spectrum of human endeavor, from business to badminton, war veterans to lawyers, Qigong practitioners to boating enthusiasts.

Over time, the various Chinese sub-groups in Canada have learned to work with each other, or to at least co-exist. Community in-fighting has not been a major problem in part because Chinese Canadians have kept a relatively low profile in society, including in politics and other forms of civic leadership, thus avoiding public controversy and the limelight of mainstream attention. While there are a number of very prominent examples of Chinese Canadians occupying high political office at the provincial and federal levels and in other forms of civic and business leadership, the community as a whole has long been under-represented in these leadership positions, relative to its size in the Canadian population.

As the number of Chinese Canadians grows, and the concentration of Chinese communities in particular municipalities and provinces lend greater collective weight, there is increasing discussion about the need to redress the under-representation of Chinese Canadians in leadership positions across “mainstream” Canadian society. This discussion, in turn, is creating an opportunity for the different sub-groups of Chinese Canadians – new and old – to interact more closely and to work together where ever possible. The interactions between different groups sometimes bring out stark differences in political values, ways of doing business, and personal conduct.

One of the most challenging of these differences is the relationship of Chinese Canadians to the People’s Republic of China. There are those who have never set foot in the PRC; others who experienced persecution during the Cultural Revolution; yet others who are exiles from the Tiananmen protests; Hong Kong and Taiwanese Canadians whose views are colored by contemporary developments in their native lands; and a vast number of newer arrivals who grew up in the post-reform period and who have only known China as a rising economic and political power in the world.

It is precisely the reality of China as a rising power, and an increasingly assertive rising power at that, which compounds the challenges of being Chinese in the western world today. Geopolitics and global economic competition are shaping public attitudes towards China that sometimes border on the hysterical, with Chinese populations in western countries often caught in the middle. It doesn’t help that Beijing is taking a more paternalistic approach to what it considers to be *its* “Overseas Chinese”, even if most members of the Chinese diaspora are in fact citizens of their adopted countries. The insidious question of divided loyalties is once again rearing its ugly head.

For most Canadians of Chinese background, there is no contradiction between their ethnicity and cultural background on the one hand, and their commitment to Canada on the other. Indeed, many would say that their efforts to build stronger ties between China and Canada are good for both countries, and therefore a demonstration of their commitment to Canada. But those of us who share this view need to be sensitive to the many Canadians who do not know much about modern China and its place in the world. We have to explain with patience and understanding the reasons why stronger relations between the two countries are good for Canada and how they can be enhanced without undermining Canadian values. Which means Chinese Canadians also have to be at the forefront of exposing and opposing efforts by parties that seek to undermine these values on Canadian soil and against the interests of Canadian citizens. We live in complicated times indeed.