

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **First Conference for Students of Chinese Heritage**

#### **York Region School Board**

**October 30, 1999**

Friends:

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your first conference for student of Chinese heritage. Since I came to this country as a student, I am going to talk about my own experiences as a Chinese student here in Canada, and look forward to your questions afterwards, in English or in Cantonese.

I came to McGill University in Montreal as a sophomore in 1959. There were very few Chinese students at McGill at the time. I was one of a dozen Chinese girls in the university. As for the Chinese boys, there were also very few. When we had a Chinese Students' Association meeting, we could all fit into one room at the Student Union. When I first met my husband in 1959, he was a final year medical student at McGill. Out of his class of 92, only two were of Chinese descent. Aside from my husband, who came to Canada when he was seven, the other student was from Hong Kong.

Today, the number of students of Chinese heritage in most Canadian universities, especially in major cities, is huge. When I went to graduate school at the University of Toronto in 1995, I couldn't believe the number of Asian students on campus. Now, a quarter of the student body is of Chinese descent. So a lot has changed over the years. This is probably also true in many of the high schools in the greater Toronto area.

Did I feel isolated when I first came to Canada? Well, yes and no. Isolation is a state of mind and this is something I would like to speak to all of you about. How you fit into a new environment, and not only survive, but thrive. Now, with the number of students of Chinese descent, especially in the Toronto area, there is no longer that feeling of isolation. But if you are going to succeed in society and in Canada, you have to know how to fit in. To make friends and be happy with your environment.

Coming to Canada to study was not a shock to me because I had the opportunity to study in a public school in England before that. I learnt to adjust in a foreign environment then. From that experience, I had skills to fit into my new environment in Canada. It always helps to be able to make friends easily. However, looking back, I could have worked a lot harder, done a lot more at university, but I didn't. I met my future husband then and was too busy going out with him at that time and there were different priorities in my life then. Thinking back, I wish I had taken the time to be involved in extra-curricular activities at McGill. Over the years, I have been making up for lost time by being involved in my community.

Was I lonely when I first arrived? Yes I was. Many of you here are in high school and most of you are living at home with your parents or with relatives, so you still have a support system there. My experience was quite different. I was half a world away from home and Canada is not England, a country I came to feel at home in. So I had to use my survival skills. This is what is referred to as “Emotional Quotient” or “E.Q.” in your programme today. I know we will learn more about this from Dr. Ng later on. The times that I felt really homesick were late at night when I couldn't get to sleep, which fortunately wasn't too often. I used to dream of good Chinese home cooking, which was not available at that time. It's amazing how we always relate our well being with the food we are used to.

Many of you who were not born in Canada may feel that you are disadvantaged because of language. Here you have to use English as a medium of learning and studying and it is not your mother-tongue. Those of you from Hong Kong have had more English training than those coming from China or Taiwan. However, you must look at it this way. You now have the advantage of learning, using and being able to work with another language. In fact, English, as you know, is an international language and it is a great advantage for you to be able to work in it.

Some of you may feel that you are discriminated against by others just because you are different, you look different, and you come from a different culture. I will tell you how I have always handled a situation like that. Be confident in yourself and your abilities. If you believe, truly believe, that you are as good as the other person, no matter what they do or what they think, it is not going to affect the way you live or the way you work. Be confident. It has always worked for me.

You must always be proud of who you are, no matter what your background is. Just remember that no matter how important some people may seem, if you go back in their family history, there are bound to be skeletons in their closets. Don't worry if you come from a humble background because everyone in the world has poor ancestors. My paternal great grandfather was an economic migrant in San Francisco during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who later went back to China. You must know that there will always be those better off than you, and those with much less than you.

I believe everyone should be proud of their cultural background, and today, because I'm speaking to students of Chinese heritage, I'll talk about Chinese culture. Growing up in Hong Kong, I was used to seeing a lot of people who felt like second class citizens because they were not English and they were not white. I hear the same stories again and again from ethnic minorities in this country. As a child, I could never understand why a person had to be white and speak English to be able to succeed. The world is made up of many different races, and success and happiness in life does not depend on what colour you are or what language you speak.

I know it is incorrect to generalize, but it is true that different races and cultures have their own characteristics. Our sons used to tell me that the general belief that Chinese are supposed to be good in math and science is a fallacy because it didn't apply to them, or maybe something had dropped out from their genes! However, you all know that in Chinese culture, there is a lot of emphasis on hard work, family values and scholarship. There are exceptions, of course, but this does apply to the majority of us.

I remember arriving in Canada and wondering why things were done so slowly in this country. At that time, what took a day to accomplish in Hong Kong usually took weeks in Canada and I was not able to understand that. Those who come from Hong Kong would know what I mean. As an example, you can have something made in a day in Hong Kong which would take weeks here, such as a pair of glasses or a dress. Gradually, I got used to the Canadian way of doing things. I have noticed over years that certain segments in the business community here have changed in their speed in getting things done, which could well be from the influence of new immigrants into this country. Hong Kongers work long hours and there isn't much difference between week days or weekends. I'm afraid I'm still like

this. I work up to 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

The cultural advantage that we have in stressing scholarship and hard work does make it easier for students of Chinese heritage to compete in schools here. As someone from Hong Kong, hard work just comes naturally from my training. I see from the results of the high school graduations here that it is the reason why so many students of Chinese heritage do so well. We are not necessarily smarter or have higher I.Qs, but we work harder. You must all know the saying in Chinese, "If you have half the brains and you work twice as hard, you will succeed just the same." That of course, does not always apply, but that is the way we are brought up. I think it's just the adults' way of telling children that they have to work hard, regardless of whether they're smart or not. I still remember my late father saying that unless you can take hardship, you are not worthy of being a person.

On the subject of work ethics, I remember wondering why students in Hong Kong had to work so hard compared to students here. Those of you from Hong Kong, do you remember homework in grade one? Special coaching after school? When I came here at the end of the 50s, I was told that Canadian school children didn't have homework until the end of primary school. We end up going to the same universities anyway. I decided that students from Hong Kong learnt too much by rote. Can you imagine that I actually learnt English that way? That was the way we were taught then. I have been told that the education system in Hong Kong hasn't changed much over the years. For those of you who come from a similar education system, just remember that it's much more important to learn to think than just trying to retain information, as long as you know where to get the information when you need it.

Many of you have come to Canada from the other side of the world bringing with you a lot of different experiences. This gives you an advantage over local Canadian students who were born and grew up here, and who have not travelled outside of Canada or North America. You can draw on your experiences, which can have a positive effect on your studies and on the way you look at the world. Don't you agree that the more you have seen, the more you have travelled, the more you have experienced, the better you can apply your experiences to your everyday life, and to the way you analyze different situations?

When I first came to McGill, I was fortunate enough to see a big part

of Canada travelling with my mother from Vancouver Island all the way to Montreal, and having the wonderful experience of travelling around the Rockies as well. In residence at Royal Victoria College, to my amazement, I met many local girls who had never been out of Eastern Canada. Coming from afar does have its advantages.

As for the Canadian born students of Chinese heritage, I'm sure many of you will wonder, as other Chinese who have come to this country before you, whether you should completely abandon your own heritage and adopt a western culture and just pretend you are a white Canadian. Well, I have heard different arguments for that approach. Some believe that it is the only way you can fit into Canadian society and be successful. I don't agree, because you actually have a lot to lose and very little to gain by doing so.

The world is a global village, the more you know, the better off you are, so why abandon what you already know. Many of you know the term "banana" - yellow on the outside and white on the inside. That is a name given to Chinese who have abandoned their cultural heritage completely, and tried to become whiter than white. I see a lot of people like that in Hong Kong, never mind in Canada. They end up not being totally accepted in either culture. I'll always remember my late mother's comment in reference to these people, "They should look into the mirror and check the colour of their own skin." I really believe that if you disown your own heritage, you cannot possibly have confidence in yourself. If you try to be who you are not, you will have too much to hide. Be proud of who you are. If you don't like yourself, how can you like others and work well with them? What a waste it would be to abandon five thousand years of civilization. There is a lot that is good in Chinese culture.

In reference to Chinese culture, there are some aspects that are not suitable for this day and age, so why not keep what is good and learn the best of the West? You will then have the confidence to face life. You are all very young now, but in time you will realise that in your lifetime, you are going to need to draw on what you have learnt in the past, not only your own experiences, but that of your parents and grandparents, in order to solve certain problems that you may come across during your lifetime. I do this all the time. When I come across a situation that I've never faced before, I will think and try to remember how my parents or grandparents solved a similar problem. Did they handle it well? The same can be applied to people in the past in Chinese history - how did they handle different

situations? If you abandon your own culture, you'll have nothing to draw on.

I have mentioned earlier that in Chinese families, there is great stress on scholarship, and our parents expect us to work hard and do well and get high marks in school. At this time, I want to mention that it is wonderful to have high marks in your studies, but that isn't enough. In life, to be successful, 50 percent is your academic achievements and the other 50 percent is how well you get along with people, and how well you are accepted by them as well as can influence them. This is when you need people skills, and to have good people skills, you need to be comfortable with yourself. In any society, you must learn to fit in and make friends. There's a lot in our environment we have no control over, but we do have control over the way we solve problems and handle situations.

Now, I'm going to touch on a subject that anyone with Chinese heritage would recognize. I bet you that most of your parents still want you to be a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant or an engineer. Not that these are not great professions, but I personally believe that there's more to life than that. It is important that you recognize your own talents and allow them to develop. Your generation has many more options than ours, and you can so easily create your own occupations. One sees that everyday and it's very exciting and encouraging.

The Asia Pacific Region has been gaining importance over the years, both economically and politically. China is recognized as the largest emerging market of great importance for the new millennium. Here again, your cultural background can be of great help to you. All of you, if you are smart enough to keep your heritage, will have great advantage over others because you will be readily accepted into this huge economic sphere.

Just because you are born here doesn't mean you can't learn about China or the Chinese language. Our sons do exactly that. They were all born here and went to bilingual school - that is English and French - but they do know the importance of learning Chinese and familiarizing themselves with China, that is, with a lot of encouragement from me. I'm passing on the same encouragement to all of you. If you take my advice, you'll be in a great position to survive and do well in the new millennium.

I trust most of you here are either Canadian citizens or landed

immigrants. I can tell you from my heart that you have chosen to be a part of a wonderful country. Be proud of it, and make sure you are included in the life of this country, and be part of the political process. Being part of a society also means giving of yourself to that society. In other words, volunteering your time to your community and getting involved. No one is too young or too poor to do that. Remember, Confucius taught us benevolence, humanism, equality and harmony in society. This is as pertinent today as it was 2500 years ago. Be proud Canadians, and bring with you what is good in Chinese culture that will help enrich this country.

Now, I'm going to leave you to think about it. I'll be happy to answer your questions.