

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**Chinese-Canadian Achievements,
Trials and Tribulations, Past and Present**

**Calgary Chinese Community Service Association
Public Forum
Calgary, Alberta**

May 5, 2001

Friends, I have been asked here today to speak about Chinese-Canadian achievements, trials and tribulations, past and present, during this event to kick-off Asian Heritage Month here in Calgary. Chinese-Canadian communities have much to be proud of today. However, I want to remind everyone that we still have a lot of work ahead of us in order to become an equal partner in Canadian society. I will be posing a number of questions and problems that I hope we will have a chance to discuss later.

Chinese-Canadians have a unique history in this country primarily because, for 76 years, we were singled out for institutional discrimination through legislation passed by different levels of government. What makes us even more unique is that, despite everything that happened in the past, we have risen to where we are today.

Historically, Chinese-Canadians have made great contributions to this country, often overcoming great barriers in our efforts to realize our dreams.

We are all aware of the importance of Chinese labour to the development of Canada as a nation, and to the growth of the Canadian economy. Unfortunately, throughout most of Canada's history, Chinese-Canadians have been viewed as cheap and expendable labour.

In 1858, the first major influx of Chinese to this country came to British Columbia during the gold rush in the Fraser River Valley. Soon there were about 5,000 Chinese in British Columbia. Many soon formed their own mining companies, after the Caucasians abandoned the mine sites for better prospects elsewhere; others went into service industries for the mining towns. In the beginning, Chinese were generally welcomed because of their industry, and their economic contributions to British North America.

In 1867, Confederation provided the impetus for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) so that British Columbia would be linked with the rest of Canada. Because Canada was dependent on the Chinese as a source of cheap labour to complete the CPR, 17,000 Chinese arrived between 1881 and 1884. Our first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald put the issue bluntly:

"The choice is only between Chinese labourers or no railway; there is no alternative."

I don't need to go into the story of the CPR since it is known to all of us. I consider this to be the first major achievement of the Chinese in Canada. When the CPR was finally completed in 1884, Sir John A. spoke in Parliament. He said,

"without the great effort of Chinese labourers, the CPR. could not have been finished on schedule, and the resources of western Canada could not also be explored."

However, these sentiments were not reflected in public policy or practice for in the following year an Act was passed "to restrict and regulate Chinese immigration." A \$50 head tax was imposed on all Chinese immigrants entering this country. The amount was later increased to \$100, and then \$500 in 1903.

The CPR's completion also threw thousands of Chinese out of work, and many became destitute, but could not afford to return to China. Facing social, economic and residential segregation, many moved into the mid-West and Eastern Canada. Most became owners of ethnic businesses and market gardens, retreating into their own enclaves to avoid competition and hostility from white Canadians.

Some moved to Calgary, where the Chinese community grew and flourished. As the west opened up to settlement, Chinese followed the human trail, establishing restaurants and laundries to service the new towns. While most of them struggled to make a living, and were subject to racist attacks, there were some notable exceptions.

Many of you would know of Louie Hong, of Cluny, East of Calgary, who arrived in Canada in 1909. He began his life in Canada as a cook on the CPR. He married in 1926, had 9 children, and ran a series of successful businesses. When he died in 1969, at the age of 84, he was a happy, well-liked, and highly-respected member of the community.

Many of you would also know Sam Sing, who was known as the King of Edmonton's Chinatown. Sam Sing defied the statistical average by standing six feet tall. Sing began with a hand laundry and ended with a two-storey import store where Chinese could congregate to shop and socialize. Sing also made a point of being a good friend to all the authorities. Since it was rumoured he headed up many of the community's gambling operations, he needed the law on his side.

We should now reflect on how the Chinese community managed to survive against all odds. Besides the fact that they were hard-working, and entrepreneurial, the formation of associations based on geographic origins, eg. the Toishan Association, and surname associations, as well as secret societies, eg. Chikungtung, was the basis of their survival in a country where not only individuals, but all levels of government practiced racial discrimination. These associations were not unique to overseas Chinese because they were modeled on those that existed in China. Surname and native place associations were formed whenever people moved from one part of the country to another. Chinese culture, therefore, served as the backbone of the community's survival in Canada.

During WWI, a labour shortfall led to a demand for Chinese labour again, and a new flood of immigrants arrived. At the war's end, anti-immigrant sentiment flared, and again, the Chinese-Canadians were seen as competition, especially when they had moved into new occupations such as land ownership and farm operations. It was in 1923, in this xenophobic climate, that the government passed the *Chinese Immigration Act*, which stopped Chinese immigration for 24 years, and led to a decrease in the Chinese population in this country.

For reasons of mutual help and protection, Chinatowns, which also served as socio-cultural enclaves, sprang up in cities across Canada. Merchants became the leaders of the communities. In order to act as spokesmen for Chinatowns with the authorities, Benevolent Associations

were formed. The first such organization was the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria, founded in April, 1884.

At the outset of World War II, Chinese-Canadians wanted to prove their patriotism by contributing to the defense of their chosen country. Despite the Canadian government's active resistance to Asian involvement in the war effort, many Chinese-Canadians volunteered for duty, serving their country on missions in Europe and Southeast Asia, often undertaking dangerous missions with little hope of return.

With about 600 men and women serving in the military, Chinese-Canadians contributed more manpower than any other ethnic group to the war effort. But the community's contributions went well beyond providing manpower - they also contributed approximately 10 million to the Victory Loan Drive; more, per capita, than any other group in Canada, besides participating in the Red Cross and other service work.

Little has been written in the official history books about the Chinese-Canadian men who served their country in wartime. Even less has been written about the women who served. One of these women was Margaret Jean Gee, the first Chinese-Canadian pilot officer (reserves) of the R.C.A.F. Following the war, she became the first Chinese-Canadian woman to be called to the Bar in British Columbia on May 28, 1954.

The significant participation of Chinese Canadians in the war, together with the lobbying efforts of civil rights activists, led to the improvement of the status of the community in Canada. I consider this to be another major achievement. In 1947, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and Chinese-Canadians were enfranchised, which led to an economic shift in the community from a traditional dependence on small ethnic businesses, such as laundries and restaurants, into the professions.

Since then, there has been a gradual, if slow, change in the immigration regulations of this country, but the colour barrier remained in effect until 1967. However, an increasing number of Chinese women and children did join their husbands and fathers, and the Chinese "bachelor society" was gradually replaced by family-oriented communities.

In 1967, the "points" system in immigration was introduced, and all discriminatory clauses were removed, which ushered in a new era of Chinese immigration to this country.

This change in Canadian society towards tolerance was further reflected in two very important pieces of legislation. Both the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom (1982) and the Multiculturalism Act (1988) are based on the fundamental understanding that the rights of the majority should not preclude the rights of a collective minority or of an individual.

By 1996, the majority of immigrants to Canada, who described themselves as being of Chinese heritage, had arrived after 1967. A significant portion of this influx came from Hong Kong, in anticipation of the change of sovereignty of the colony to China in July, 1997, and attracted by the Mulroney government's introduction of the investor category to business immigration in 1986.

I would like to point out that, by the 1990s, the Chinese communities, unlike in the earlier period when most of the migrants came from South China, had become very diverse. Those of Chinese origin came from many different parts of the world, and they formed different communities. So, when I refer to Chinese-Canadians today, I mean Canadians of Chinese descent, many of whom can't speak the language, don't know the culture, and may have been in Canada for a few generations.

At present, Canada's knowledge-based economy is in direct competition with other immigrant-receiving countries for educated applicants. Since 1995, China has been Canada's largest source of skilled immigrants.

Today, Chinese-Canadians participate scientifically, intellectually, artistically, economically and politically at every level of society.

Not surprisingly, given the Chinese-Canadian reputation for excelling in academia, many are making major contributions in the area of scientific research that are benefitting, not only Canadians, but also people around the world.

I will mention, with great pride, a few outstanding Chinese-Canadian scientists. If I should leave out anyone important, please be assured that it's due to my ignorance, as well as time constraints, and nothing else.

One of them is the molecular geneticist, Dr. Lap-Chee Tsui, who now heads up the international Human Genome Organization (HUGO) which provides a network for many of the scientists working on the global Human Genome Project.

No one can speak of eminent scientists without mentioning Dr. Tak Wah Mak. In 1987, Dr. Mak discovered the gene for the T-cell receptor, a major key to the working of the human body's immune system.

Another eminent scientist is Dr. Victor Ling, world renowned for his discovery of the existence and mechanisms of drug-resistant chemotherapy.

These are just three of the many individuals of Chinese descent who have made a significant difference in our world. Of course, Chinese-Canadian contributions are not limited to science. Immigrants of Chinese heritage have also contributed substantially to Canada's economic growth. All we have to do is to look around us. There are Chinese owned or controlled businesses everywhere. Very good examples are Husky Oil of Alberta, and in Ontario, Law Development, Vintage Inns of Niagara-on-the-Lake, and Grand Adex Developments in Vancouver.

We have even produced our share of sports stars. Every Albertan knows Norman Kwong who is here tonight. A legend in the world of football, he helped the Edmonton Eskimos win six Grey Cups, while setting over 30 new records in the game, for which he was awarded membership in 3 Sports Halls of Fame, and the Order of Canada.

In the media, the first person I can think of is my sister-in-law, Adrienne Clarkson, in her former role with the CBC. There are others such as Wei Chan and Pauline Chan. Forgive me for only mentioning Ontarians since I'm quite ignorant of media personalities in other provinces.

As a longtime supporter of the arts in Canada, I am particularly delighted by the development of the Chinese-Canadian arts community. Over the last few weeks, I saw films produced by Chinese-Canadians at a film festival, attended a modern dance (Gold, Maple and Dreams) in

Vancouver and an opera (Iron Road) in Toronto, all of which were wonderful artistic expressions of Chinese-Canadian life and history. In dance, I must mention the graceful Xiao Nan Yu, who is hailed by critics as the next Karen Kain.

Our writers are also capturing the hearts and minds of national and international audiences. Writers, such as Denise Chong and Wayson Choy, evoke the sights and sounds of Chinatown's past.

In the field of education, we have eminent scholars across the country. For example, in Ontario we have Julia Ching in Philosophy; David Lai in Chinese-Canadian studies in B.C., and Peter Li in Sociology in Saskatchewan and many, many others.

Over the last thirty years, Chinese-Canadians have also made inroads into politics, both in and outside Ottawa. A major milestone was the intense lobbying for the franchise after WWII. This victory permitted Douglas Jung, a WWII veteran from British Columbia, to sit as an M.P. in the House of Commons in 1957 as the first federal representative of Chinese-Canadians in Canada.

Another milestone came in 1980, when people of all races marched through the streets of Toronto protesting the W5 program "Campus Giveaway" that perpetuated blatantly racist stereotypes about the Chinese community, which brought about the formation of the Chinese Canadian National Council. Tonight, I have the honour to share the stage with one of its founders, Dr. Joseph Wong.

After the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, Chinese-Canadians demonstrated in the streets in support of the student movement in China. As a direct result of this show of support for democratic principles, Raymond Chan ran in the federal election, and was elected as a Liberal M.P. from Richmond, B.C.. He was immediately catapulted into Cabinet as the Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific Affairs.

At this time, I should mention others who were, and are, active in provincial, as well as municipal politics, such as Bob Wong, who held a cabinet post in Ontario, Gary Mar, your Minister of Health, and Ida Chong, an MLA in B.C..

In reference to appointed positions, the first person who comes to mind is David Lam, the former Lieutenant-Governor of B.C., who was very popular and highly-respected. In Ottawa, I count my sister-in-law, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, and myself, as being among the individuals who have been given the honour of representing the multicultural community in the capital. Now that we have a Governor General who is Chinese-Canadian, does that mean we've made it in Canadian society?

Upon reflection, I believe the answer is no. Everyone will remember the leaky boats which arrived off the coast of Vancouver, 2 years ago, carrying 600 Chinese migrants. I don't need to go into details since you all know how the media portrayed the events at the time. To be fair, there was some balanced reporting, but the intolerance of Canadian society showed through loud and clear. An old lady, from British Columbia, interviewed on television, said that all the migrants should be put back on those leaky boats, and pushed back to sea, and she added, "the leakier, the better." You wouldn't treat your dog that way, would you? Because of the similarities between the 19th century indentured labourers and the undocumented migrants today, I have the most eerie feeling that history is repeating itself, and we must not allow this to happen.

I was very disappointed that some in the Chinese-Canadian communities wanted to distance themselves from these desperate individuals. Just because we are comfortable, should we lose our compassion towards those in need? Do try to remember the conditions in which many of your ancestors arrived in this country. Were they all legal? Is it not only human to want to improve one's life in search of better economic opportunities? Global migration has been in existence ever since there were human beings.

Respect for rights and freedoms are what make us human. But we have a lot of work ahead of us if we want to reflect these principles in Canadian society, and in the case of Chinese-Canadians, we have to start right here in our own communities.

Individuals in the Chinese-Canadian communities have made great strides, but in my humble opinion, the communities, as a whole, have not. I believe it is because there isn't enough of an effort to learn one of the official languages so that many of us can participate in the activities of the mainstream community, for without language, there's no communication.

There are also too many conflicts among different groups, as well as individuals. A friend pointed out to me the scant number of recipients of the Order of Canada among Chinese-Canadians, as compared, say, to the Jews in Canada. We've been in this country since before Confederation, and we are high achievers, so what happened? Are we not doing enough to celebrate each other's achievements? Maybe, we need to do a lot more.

In the arts, media, as well as sports, we have excelled, but the number is not a good representation of our population of approximately one million. Is it because of a lack of mainstream media attention? Is it because we don't support each other enough, or is Canadian society not ready to embrace us yet? We need to reflect on these questions.

In the Canadian corporate world, as in the academic world, Chinese-Canadians, like many ethnic minorities, are hitting the glass ceiling. In the corporate world, there are indeed some with impressive titles, but they are but glorified salespeople. They are not in positions of authority. Even the younger generation doesn't believe they will have the opportunity to reach the top in Canada. I think it's very sad. For that reason, many have returned to the Far East.

We don't lack brains, talent, or industry, but we do need opportunities. I would like to leave these thoughts with the discussion forum and the audience, so that we can consider how we can make a breakthrough in this regard.

In government, even if we include appointed positions, I think the numbers are pitiful in relation to our population. We are not prevented from participating, but what happened? When Ujjal Dosanjh became Premier of B.C., the Chinese Press asked, "what's the matter; how come we've been in this country for so long and we haven't even produced a Premier?" It is simply not true that those of Chinese heritage have no interest in government, but only in business or science, as some have argued. It is up to us to educate the next generation to take charge of their lives by accepting their responsibility to speak out publicly for themselves, as well as for their communities. We cannot remain passive and accepting. We are Canadians, and therefore, we must get involved in the governing of our country since that is the only way we can control our destiny.

For those of us in a position to help others, we must do so. Canadians of Chinese heritage lack role models. We must extend a helping hand to those who need assistance. We should recognize talents and achievements, and celebrate them, and give credit where credit is due. We must allow others a chance to get ahead, instead of monopolizing positions of authority. In so doing, we, Canadians of Chinese heritage, will be able to make a much greater contribution to the future of our country.

Thank you.