

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

**Community, Leadership & Government:
Canadian Women of Chinese Heritage**

85th anniversary of the YWCA in Hong Kong

December 3, 2005

Honoured guests, friends:

Before I begin, I want to thank your President, Mona Leung, and the organizers of this conference, for inviting me to speak today. It was a real surprise when I received Mona's phone call this past summer, especially when I hadn't spoken to her for a very long time. It is indeed an honour for me to take part in your 85th anniversary celebration of the YWCA in Hong Kong. Congratulations on achieving this milestone.

Today, I am going to speak on the role played by Canadian women of Chinese heritage in Canadian society and in our government. Our roles must be considered in the context of double jeopardy, as women, and as members of a visible minority group in Canada, of which the ethnic Chinese are the largest group. Just to clarify, the definition of "visible minority" (according to our Employment Equity Act), is anyone who is non-Caucasian in race and non-white in colour.

Being of Chinese heritage can help or hinder our ability to contribute in Canadian society as I will show through individual examples. Since the topic is very large, I have limited the scope of this discussion to community, leadership and government.

I wonder how many of you know that there were very few Chinese women in Canada before WW2? It was partly because of the Chinese culture and tradition of leaving the women behind in China to look after their mothers-in-laws and the children, as well as to tend the graves of their ancestors. The Chinese exclusion in Canadian legislation also played a large part in preventing Chinese men in Canada from sending for their wives and family members between 1923 and 1947. Despite discrimination in Canadian society, six Chinese Canadian women joined the Armed Forces

during the 2nd World War, and many joined the St. John Ambulance in civil defense. Others actively fundraised for the war effort.

It wasn't until after WW2, after persistent lobbying by Chinese Canadian veterans and other human rights group, that Chinese exclusion was removed from Canadian Immigration law, and families were able to reunite.

Despite the entrenched institutional racism against ethnic Chinese, and the fact that there were so few women, we did have some very prominent exceptions. One of these rare women was Gretta Wong Grant, whose father was affluent enough to put both his daughters, as well as his sons, through university. Gretta was the first Chinese Canadian woman to become a lawyer in 1946. Do keep in mind that the legal profession was deeply entrenched in masculinity, white dominance, and class privilege, so the fact that Gretta had made it was extraordinary. She didn't just practice law; she raised 4 children, and served on many community boards.

During the post War years, by far the most outstanding community activist was Jean Lumb. Jean was born in Canada, but like all the Chinese at that time, she had no vote.

Jean was not as fortunate as Gretta Grant because her father couldn't afford to send her to university. Money had to be put aside for her brother's higher education. She was taken out of school at age 12 to work with her father. Fortunately, at night, he would teach her himself, using her brother's textbooks, and he became her mentor.

In 1947, the Chinese were finally given Canadian citizenship, and could bring members of their families to Canada. Jean became one of the most active participants in lobbying the federal government to speed up the reunification of Chinese Canadian families. She was the only woman in the ethnic Chinese delegation to Ottawa in 1956 to meet with Prime Minister John Diefenbaker.

Besides being a champion for changing Canada's immigration laws, Jean was a voice for the preservation of Chinatowns across the country. She became an important link between Chinese Canadians and mainstream Canada, helping to share Chinese thoughts and feelings with government officials. Because of her many achievements, she became the first Canadian of Chinese heritage to receive the Order of Canada in 1976.

In 1997, the Jean Lumb Foundation Awards were established for young Canadians of Chinese heritage. Besides caring for her community, Jean was a loving wife, mother and grandmother. She passed away a few years ago, leaving a legacy of community service which is carried on by her daughters.

In Jean's case, being ethnic Chinese gave her a reason to be active within her community, to fight for justice, and consequently, she gained prominence in Canadian society.

I have to say that, until recent years, there weren't that many well known Canadians of Chinese heritage, men or women. I think that was partly because of the poor treatment members of the community received, historically, from Canadian society, and partly because of the Chinese cultural characteristics of keeping quiet and just working hard. For the latter reason, many have done very well financially, if not politically.

I went to Canada to university in 1959; there were very few Chinese students in Canadian universities at that time. You could still see many of the lonely old Chinese men in Chinatowns who were victims of Chinese exclusion in Canadian Immigration law.

In 1967, the points system was introduced which effectively abolished all racial bias in Canadian immigration law. By then, an increasing number of Chinese students, particularly those from Hong Kong, had come to Canada to study, and many stayed and became Canadian citizens.

After the 1960s, the Chinese Canadian communities across Canada evolved because of immigration regulation changes. Chinese women were able to immigrate to Canada based on their own education, skills, and training, and not just as dependents of men.

So, what became noticeable in Canadian society was that, women of Chinese heritage were no longer the ones working only in blue collar work, helping in Chinese restaurants and grocery stores, or as clerks in offices and department stores. Many were professionals and owners of businesses.

I'm sure it will not surprise you when I say that women are the backbones of societies, because we are the ones educating and bringing up

the next generation. By the 1970s, mainstream Canada noticed that there was a critical mass of younger women of Chinese heritage who were well educated, and who were active in their communities. Increasingly, we were becoming the middle and upper classes, and setting the example for our children.

I still remember attending a Chinese Canadian social function in the early 70s, and overhearing the remarks of a couple of Caucasian women who worked in the coat-check. One said to the other, "These Chinese women have such beautiful coats!" I believe the general perception of the ethnic Chinese had changed from "poor" to "affluent." Of course, there would be a backlash!

Despite laws passed by the Canadian government, systemic racism is difficult to obliterate. Racism is often caused by the fear of competition, or simply the fear of change.

So, as is typical in the history of the Chinese Diaspora everywhere, overseas Chinese always seem to take 2 steps forward and 1 step back, and that was what happened in Canada in 1979. A CTV documentary called "Campus Giveaway" on the program W5, accused Chinese students of taking away spaces in Canadian universities from white students.

Two very important facts were apparent. The first was that, looking Chinese does not make one a visa student; many of the students shown on the program were Canadians or landed immigrants. The other was that, university admission is based on high academic standing and ability, and not the colour of one's skin. What made matters worse were the remarks by a government minister who blamed Chinese students for the fact that their son couldn't get into medical school.

The reason I bring this up is that one of the most active member of the Chinese communities in fighting this accusation was Irene Chu from Hong Kong, the coordinator of the Council of Chinese Canadians in Ontario Conference. After the conference, an ad hoc committee was formed called the "CCCO against W5" to help the ethnic Chinese students. Demonstrations were held, demanding an apology from the TV station. This protest led to the formation of the Chinese Canadian National Council. Irene was later appointed by our (Mulroney) government as an Immigration Judge, and later, as an Immigration Appeals Judge.

By the end of the 1970s, the Chinese communities were not only affluent; many members were well educated and could stand on their own. Irene Chu never went into politics. She is one of the more outstanding ethnic Chinese women who continue to be active in the community in Toronto. In her case, like Jean Lumb, being ethnic Chinese gave her the reason for activism within the Chinese community in Toronto, and she also gained prominence in Canadian society. Jean and Irene showed that some ethnic Chinese women are not afraid to challenge authority!

Beginning in the 1980s, there was another major change in the Chinese Canadian communities across Canada. Many of you would know of the tremendous influx of immigrants from Hong Kong into Canada, after the signing of the agreement between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain and the Chinese leadership in Beijing in 1984, upon the return of the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China. I still remember those days whenever we came back to Hong Kong. Emigration became such a hot topic that there were magazines devoted to advising potential emigrants.

Many immigrant receiving countries, including Canada, instituted business and investor categories into their immigration programs. Many of you will remember the fear of the future in Hong Kong; the economy went into a slump, and there were long line-ups in front of foreign consulates for visas to emigrate.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, immigrants from Hong Kong made up the largest percentage of immigrants into Canada, over-taking the numbers from Britain, U.S. and other European countries. Because of the business and the investor categories in Canada's immigration policy, the status of the Chinese communities, in the eyes of many Canadians, changed from "affluent" to "super rich." And anyone from Hong Kong had to be RICH!

We noticed that exclusive retail stores all hired Cantonese speaking staff, and corporations targeted their sales pitch to the Chinese communities. In cities like Toronto and Vancouver, we saw advertising in both English and Chinese.

One of our sons was asked repeatedly by taxi drivers whether he was from Hong Kong, and when he said no, but his parents were, it was always followed by, “then you must be rich!”

With this perception also came envy, and there were criticisms of “monster homes”, and rejection by neighbourhoods to the development of malls catering to the large Chinese immigrant population, especially in Toronto and in Vancouver. This, despite the fact that these neighbours were the ones who benefited the most from the massive increase in the values of their own properties.

It was during this time that it became much easier to find good Chinese restaurants and shops. Chinese television and radio stations were available, and so were many Chinese language newspapers. Within mainstream Canada, ethnic Chinese began to gain attention, not only from Canadian corporations, but also from politicians. So, despite racial slurs, especially in the mainstream press, being of Chinese heritage could be an advantage.

Since immigration from Hong Kong was such a hot topic, I was approached to be on the cover of an American magazine, *The World Monitor*, which featured emigration from Hong Kong to North America. I told them that I was not a new immigrant, and that I went to Canada in 1959 on a student visa. That didn't seem to matter, and so, in 1989, I became a cover girl!

What was happening to the women in the Chinese Canadian communities in the 1980s? Community activists like Irene Chu, of whom I spoke earlier, opened the way for women of Chinese heritage to go into politics.

Given the long history of the Chinese in Canada, ethnic Chinese women in politics today are still very few and far between. The problem is not just ethnicity, but the fact that they are women. Canadian women are generally not taken seriously by political parties, both federally and provincially. They are often treated as “token” candidates by being put into “unwinnable seats.” Please keep in mind, the political system in Canada has many different levels of government. To prove my point, women's representation in our federal parliament today (in Ottawa) is only about 21%, as compared to the population of Canada, of which over 50% are women.

Despite what I've just said, I'm going to name a few successful female politicians of Chinese background. Among the immigrant families who came to Canada from Hong Kong was the Chow family with their daughter, Olivia. Olivia first went into politics in Toronto where she was elected as a Public School Trustee in 1985. Subsequently, she was repeatedly elected as City Councilor, in my home city of Toronto, and has been voted by the readers of a local magazine as the best City Councilor 7 years in a row.

Being fluent in Cantonese and English, Olivia has popular grassroots support in her riding, many of her constituents being ethnic Chinese. We often see her in the media being interviewed. Her political influence is even greater since her husband, Jack Layton, was elected federal leader of the New Democratic Party.

By the 1990s, the younger generation of ethnic Chinese women became involved in politics. I will mention a couple in the province of British Columbia. Ida Chong, who started her political life as municipal councilor, was elected in 1996 to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. In 2005, she became Minister of Community Services and Minister responsible for Senior's and Women's Issues.

In the same year (1996), Jenny Kwan was elected to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. In 1998, she became the first Chinese Canadian cabinet minister in the history of the province of British Columbia when she was appointed Minister of Municipal Affairs. Because of the subsequent change in government, she is now a member of the Opposition in the Legislature, while Ida Chong is now in the Cabinet. British Columbia is way ahead of Ontario, which has a larger ethnic Chinese population than British Columbia.

You may wonder why, up till now, I haven't mentioned our federal government (in Ottawa). The first and the only ethnic Chinese female elected to Ottawa is Sophia Leung in 1997. She was hand-picked by the then Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to run as the Liberal candidate in the winnable riding of Vancouver-Kingsway, to the consternation of other liberals who were running for nomination. To repeat my point earlier about political parties not taking women candidates seriously, the majority of women have the additional disadvantage of having less access to money, to

networking, as well as to power structures, just to get nominated to represent the party.

Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien used his power of appointment to ensure that at least 75 Liberal women would run in the 1997 election. The fact that he made a great effort to ensure more female representation in Ottawa will always be remembered.

Why are there so few ethnic Chinese women in government, and I mean at any level of government? It's not just the women, you know, it's the men as well. I have often wondered whether it's because we don't come from a democratic tradition, be it China or Hong Kong. There is also the language factor. Being in public life, fluency in at least one of the official languages is important. But then, what about all the ethnic Chinese who were born in Canada? Could it be the chip on their shoulders preventing them from partaking in the political arena? Or, is it just a Chinese cultural tradition of not wanting to get involved in government? I really don't have the answer.

At the end of the 1990s, there were only three ethnic Chinese in the House of Commons in Ottawa – Sophia Leung, whom I spoke about earlier, Raymond Chan, and Inky Mark. That was very poor representation out of a population of more than a million! Raymond and Sophia had strong support from the Liberal party, and Raymond was made a Secretary of State for Asia Pacific. In the case of Sophia and Raymond, the Liberal party supported them partly because they were ethnic Chinese, and they were seen as representing the Chinese communities.

In the latter part of the 1990s, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien frequently boasted that there were over one million Canadians of Chinese descent, and that Chinese had become the third most spoken language in Canada. He also frequently visited China, and promoted trade with the Asia-Pacific region.

In September of 1998, I suddenly received a phone call from the Appointments Officer in the Prime Minister's Office, telling me that I was on a short list for an appointment to the Senate of Canada, and would I be willing to serve if I were appointed?

Can you imagine getting a phone call like that? Being a non-political person, I didn't have friends in high places, and neither had I met the Prime

Minister before. I was just a simple citizen doing my own thing for the wider community in Toronto. And in fact, I was also working towards my PhD in History at the University of Toronto.

I didn't know anything about the Senate of Canada, except that I knew an appointment to the Red Chamber (as it is called) would give me the opportunity to serve Canadians instead of only Torontonians. So I said, "Yes, I would be happy to serve, but how am I going to finish my PhD?"

I was then told that I would have time to sort this out, and that I would be hearing from the Prime Minister's Office again in a few days. After I hung up, I said to my husband Neville, "Guess who just called?" He was beside himself with excitement. I asked him to calm down, because chances are that nothing would happen anyway. After all, a short list was still a short list.

The appointment was confidential until the announcement by the federal government which happened within a few days. Then I was bombarded by the media because I was the first Asian in the history of Canada to be appointed to the Senate of Canada. I have often wondered why it took over 100 years!

Despite the fact that I couldn't take part with the other two senators in the swearing in ceremony, because our youngest son couldn't get back in time from China, I still had to be in Ottawa within 3 days of the announcement for briefings, and to start my office.

I ended up having my own private swearing-in ceremony. It was very hectic times for me, hiring staff, answering correspondence, and getting used to commuting by plane between Toronto and Ottawa to work. The most difficult challenge was to find out how things get done in Parliament; how to be an effective Senator, and how to find allies in Ottawa. I was a fresh water fish thrown into the ocean, but I was determined to swim and swim well.

I was also determined not to give up pursuing my PhD. So, I arranged a meeting with my professors to delay my comprehensive exams for a year to get my bearings in Ottawa. All that is history now, and I did finish my degree within 5 ½ years. In order to do that, I had no breaks and no holidays, and really had to manage my time well.

For me, being a Senator is being a public servant with the very important duty to serve Canadians. Senators are appointed to represent regions, and some are appointed to represent minority rights. I was appointed as one of the representatives of the province of Ontario, as well as to advocate for minority rights in Canada. When I spoke to the Prime Minister on the phone for the first time, he specifically asked me if I spoke Chinese.

As the first Asian appointed to the Senate of Canada, I was very quickly adopted across the country by many different groups; not only Asians, but also women's groups as well as immigrant groups.

So what do Canadian Senators do? I fly to Ottawa every week during Senate sessions. Taking a plane is like taking a bus to work, and I have learnt to use my time effectively while on the run, such as catching up with phone calls on my way to and from the airport; reading briefing materials in the airport lounges and on the plane.

In the Senate Chamber, we deal with debates and vote on legislation; we can also speak on any topic of our choosing that would pertain to Canadian society. We also sit through endless Committee meetings, and listen to witnesses, either in examining legislation or working on topics important to Canadians. This sometimes takes us across the country or abroad, in order to learn more about the topics. Based on our findings, reports are written and given to ministers of the government to effect change. We sit so much that it doesn't take too long for many of us to start spreading sideways. 37% of Senators are women.

While in Ottawa, I also meet with Canadians as well as foreign dignitaries in my office. I attend a lot of meetings that are related to government or other public affairs; there are also a lot of socials with members of the governments of foreign countries. In the mornings, I have to dress appropriately for the entire day because there is never time to change. My days are usually very long. By the end of the week, I am always glad to get home to Toronto.

I also travel across the country attending community functions, speaking to groups of all ages, of many different cultures and backgrounds. I have so far traveled to all the provinces and to all the Territories in the past 7

½ years. It is not unusual that I keep going for weeks at a time without a break. It's fortunate that I have good health and stamina.

There are times when we attend functions for our ministers, such as tomorrow, when I am representing the Minister of Veteran Affairs at ceremonies at the Sai Wan War Cemetery. Every first Sunday of December, the Canadian government holds a Ceremony of Remembrance for our soldiers who died in the defense of Hong Kong. Tomorrow, the ceremony celebrates the 60th anniversary of the release of the prisoners of war in Hong Kong. Six of our surviving veterans; a few hundred high school students with some of their teachers, have traveled here from Canada, via a few stops in China. A tree will be planted and a time capsule will be buried with it. Ceremonies like these are very important to me because they connect my heritage to my role as a Canadian Senator.

You would guess that I have found my niche in my work as a Senator. Besides all the things I mentioned earlier, I also lobby Ministers for my constituents. This way, we cut all the red tape and get to the top. It's effective because I see the Ministers frequently. I have taken on very difficult cases, when my constituents have nowhere else to turn. People have said to me that they didn't know Senators would do that, and my answer is, "this Senator does."

One thing I should mention, Senators are appointed till the age of 75. Up till today, I am still the only ethnic Chinese but no longer the only Asian. In my case, I believe my ethnicity was a major factor in my appointment. So, sometimes, there are advantages to being a visible minority!

As I mentioned before, politically, ethnic Chinese are not well represented. At the moment, in Ontario, we only have one member in the Ontario Legislature, Tony Wong. This is a very poor representation for the largest ethnic group in Ontario of over half a million.

In 2004, M.P. Sophia Leung was asked by Prime Minister Paul Martin to give up her seat. Since the last election, no ethnic Chinese woman has won a seat in our federal government (Ottawa).

According to Statistic Canada, visible minorities now make up over 13% of the Canadian population, and this proportion is projected to increase

to as high as 23 % by 2017; ethnic Chinese are expected to be the largest group.

In cities like Vancouver and Toronto, the projected percentage of visible minorities will be over 50%, and again, the majority is projected to be ethnic Chinese. If we continue in the same trend in our political representation, the question is, “What will happen if government does not change while the population does?” This could become a very contentious political issue.

Besides elected or appointed representatives in government, it is important to point out that the dynamics of a democracy are enhanced by a bureaucracy that connects well with its citizens, as well as with the diversity of the society. There are frequent articles in the newspapers and magazines about the inequity in hiring in the public service. Here again, we are not doing well at all in the big picture.

However, there are some outstanding ethnic Chinese women in the Public Service, and I am going to mention only one of them. In Toronto, we have a very capable administrator, Shirley Hoy, who has been working for Metro Toronto for a number of years in various capacities, such as Acting Chief Administrative Officer and Acting Chief Financial Officer. In April of this year (2005), she became City Manager for Toronto, a very important position indeed. She has contributed a great deal to my home city.

Besides government and the public service, there are many other areas that belong in the public domain which are equally important in the reflection of leadership by ethnic Chinese women, such as the performing arts and literature, which are important because they set the tone of Canadian society. Writers, artists and film makers reflect how we see ourselves, define our identity and help to change popular ideas about who we are. The success of ethnic Chinese women in these fields is a good reflection of Canada’s changing identity. The fact that we have a multicultural identity means that Canadians originating from different parts of the world are finally being noticed.

In speaking of leadership in the areas of arts and culture, I will start with Chan Hon Goh, principal dancer of the National Ballet of Canada, and the first Canadian of Chinese heritage in that position. Chan was a young girl when her family immigrated to Canada from Guangzhou. She came

from a family of superb dancers, and, while her parents run the Goh Academy in Vancouver, Chan pursues her love of dance. When she first attended school in Canada, some students called her “Chink” and “Retard” because she didn’t know any English. She was also accused of “contaminating” Canada. She overcame challenges and obstacles to become the lead dancer in the National Ballet. Chan made it despite the fact that ethnic Chinese are often regarded as being strong in math and science, and not in the performing arts. Chan is also the author of *Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina’s Life*, in which she mentioned her first impressions and her life as a new immigrant in Canada.

Another immigrant family from Hong Kong came to Canada with their little daughter of 9 months. Her name is Mina Shum. Mina, who grew up in Vancouver, is now a successful film director and writer, with films such as *Double Happiness* and *Drive, She Said*. As an ethnic Chinese woman in the arts, her cultural background has actually given her an insight into making films about that particular culture. In recent years, she has been winning a number of awards, both in Canada and at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Many Canadians know the author Denise Chong who wrote *The Concubine’s Children* - a story of her grandmother’s life between China and Canada. Many may not know that Denise is an economist, who was Prime Minister Trudeau’s senior economic advisor, and also a freelance writer in Beijing, Toronto and London. *The Concubine’s Children* won many awards and was translated into Danish, Dutch, German and Hebrew. This book helps readers to understand what life was like for the early Chinese immigrants through the life and experience of a single woman.

Today, there are an increasing numbers of outstanding ethnic Chinese women authors, such as Judy Fong Bates and Lien Chow, who have moved their writings into the mainstream of Canadian culture. Judy wrote *China dog and Other Tales from a Chinese Laundry*, and *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. She is a delightful storyteller. In *Beyond Silence*, Lien discussed contemporary Chinese Canadian literature in the context that it is community based. Increasingly, Canadian literature is being defined by its multicultural voice.

Some of you know that I also have another public role as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto. In December 2002, I was elected

by the College of Electors of the Alumni Association; the term started on July 1, 2003 for three years. This was very interesting because I was still a student at the time. The appointment coincided with my finishing my PhD. My Installation became a historic event for the University because I received my doctorate in the same ceremony as my being installed as Chancellor on the first day of Convocations in November 2003.

I always think of the University of Toronto as a small version of Canada, even though the student body is much more diverse. The role of the Chancellor is that of ambassador within Canada and in foreign countries. Besides conducting Convocations, awards ceremonies, and representing the University by attending installations at other universities and colleges, I also added the role of assisting Faculty, academics and students, and no one who wishes to see me is ever refused. I pride myself on being a good listener. And how do I do all that on top of my role as Senator? I juggle my time carefully and efficiently. When I work for the University, I am also working for the good of Canadians.

I would like to reflect on our ethnic Chinese communities and how very diverse we are, since we have arrived in Canada from many different parts of the world; our only similarity is in our ethnicity, which can be viewed as a weakness, but using it positively, it can be a source of strength.

For all the women that I have mentioned, and many more that I haven't, showing leadership and being role-models are extremely important in our positions as public figures, particularly to the younger generation of Canadians.

Personally, I am always happy to speak to our youth, because they are the future of Canada and of the world. Over the years, I have been invited to speak at different high schools, universities, youth groups, as well as to academics, and clubs such as the Zonta Club, Women's Canadian Clubs and Rotary Clubs, in Canada and abroad, as I am doing here today. I believe by speaking, I can have a positive influence on my audience.

As Canadian women of Chinese heritage, our pride in our heritage is what makes us the way we are. Believe me, what we do is being watched critically by other Canadians, and those interested in Canada. At the same time, we are being judged by the rest of Canadian society so we need to set a good example in order to reflect well on our communities, not only in what

we say, but by our actions, and how we conduct ourselves in everyday life. Whether we are successful, or not, is not important; doing the right thing for future generations of Canadians is.