

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

A Question of Identity: Canadians of Asian Heritage

**GenerAsians Conference
Queen's University**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important conference which deals with a number of universal themes that affect all Canadians of Asian heritage - issues such as our unique identities within our families, our society, our country and more broadly, in the world. You all know that we are establishing ourselves as a prominent demographic force in Canada.

Promoting the celebration of Asian heritage has been one of my focuses in the Senate. My motion to have the federal government recognize May as Asian Heritage Month was passed unanimously in the Senate in December 2001, and since May, 2002, the federal government has celebrated Asian Heritage Month. This acknowledgement was merely an official recognition of the many groups who have been involved in celebrations across the country, from coast-to-coast, since 1993.

Why is it so important to celebrate our heritage with the rest of Canada? Because we are proud to celebrate our contribution to the building of Canada as a country in the past, and our active participation in Canadian society at present.

Like any other visible minority, our identity is closely tied to our heritage because we look different, and no matter how some of us may distance ourselves from our cultures, we are still asked, "Where are you from?" And if you say, "I am from Canada," they will say, "No, where are you or your parents really from?" I am sure you have all heard that before. One must try to take comments like these with a sense of humour because it's really just human curiosity.

In my case, even after I was appointed to the Senate, I was presumed to be more Chinese than Canadian by some on Parliament Hill, and the Chinese were "my people", and somehow, I seem to be connected

systemically to what is happening in China, and not Canada. If that were the case, why am I a member of the Canadian Senate?

I have had senators who said to me that they have never had any close contact with Asians before. So, that's why we need to create awareness of our existence as Canadians.

I am sure you all know that I am proud of my heritage. I believe in the distinct advantage I have because I have the best of both worlds. Like many of you, I am bi-cultural. We have different ways of looking at things, and analyzing situations, from both the eastern and western perspectives, which can be useful in Canadian society. I have been told that I have an Asian outlook on Canadian situations.

When asked, I tell people about Hong Kong, China and England where I spent my youth. That was the world I grew up in, and it made me who I am. I have the advantage of being able to think like a person from Hong Kong, from China, from England, or from Canada.

Even though I was not born here, I have lived in Canada for over 45 years. Like many of you, who were either born here, or have been living here for many years, when I think of home, it's Canada. I'll explain why.

If you are from Hong Kong, or your parents came from Hong Kong, you will understand when I say that, before July 1, 1997, the Chinese in Hong Kong had no country. Growing up in Hong Kong, we had British passports, and later, when the British government knew that the sovereignty of the colony had to return to China, these passports were changed to Hong Kong passports, which did not give the holders the right of abode in Britain. This was because the British Government was afraid that the British Isle would be swamped by the Chinese from Hong Kong. What they failed to realize was that, people would only go where they could make a decent living, and in this respect, Hong Kong was a much better bet than Britain. In fact, there was an influx of young people, many from Britain, to Hong Kong around 1997, precisely because of the good job prospects.

I remember as a child in Hong Kong, I often wondered what nationality I had. I certainly wasn't a citizen of China or of Britain. Somehow, I didn't belong. I came to McGill to study in 1958, where I met my future husband, a Canadian. When we got married in 1962, my existing

British passport enabled me to become a Canadian citizen immediately. I realized then that I finally had a country. Canada is where I belong, where our sons were born, and where I raised my family. Canada is where my loyalty lies.

Historically, immigrants from Asian countries had a very harsh experience in Canada because of its earlier “white Canada” policy. But since the Second World War, conditions have improved gradually, and since the end of the 1960s, because of the introduction of the points system, the number of Asian immigrants has increased dramatically because of their excellent qualifications. According to Citizenship & Immigration Canada, the largest group of immigrants entering Canada since the 1980s was from Hong Kong, and in recent years, from mainland China. So, I am not surprised that one of the conclusions in a report called “*the New Canadian Identity*” for the Communications Bureau of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, written by Queen’s professor Matthew Mendelsohn, is that Canada is becoming an Asian country.

It is fascinating to read the findings in this report, supported by others such as those from the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, as well as reports from the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada on “*Canada Asia*”, that confirm one finding - that the younger generation of Canadians - that is you - only know of a Canada that celebrates multiculturalism, and that constitutionally guarantees equality rights for its citizens. As Michael Valpy wrote in the *Globe and Mail* in 2003, yours is “the most deeply tolerant generation of adults produced in a nation known for tolerance”. Diversity is a source of pride to Canadians because it is our norm.

Canada is the only country in the world that has passed an Act on Multiculturalism. What does that mean? Our multicultural policy encourages us to maintain our heritage and cultural ties, while simultaneously being a part of Canada. This diversity, founded on tolerance and respect for each other, is at the heart of what it means to be Canadian. Our approach is unique in the world, and for the most part, it is successful.

So, what does it mean to be a Canadian of Asian heritage? One of the most wonderful outcomes of a multicultural policy has been the success of Asian Canadian authors. The influence of Canadians of Asian heritage on our collective culture is clearly evident when we examine the current state of Canadian literature. The voice of Canada, as it is reflected to the world, is

increasingly multicultural. There are many writers of Asian descent who have won numerous national and international literary awards, eg. Paul Yee, Michael Ondaatje, Anita Rau Badami, Joy Kogawa, Wayson Choy, and Rohinton Mistry, just to name a few. Toronto's M.G. Vassanji is one of only two authors who have won the \$25,000 Giller Prize for literature twice.

Canada is benefiting from the diversity of these new voices. Nationally, our culture is maturing, as we recognize and integrate new visions of our past, present and future into our collective story. Internationally, we are now recognized for our dynamic literary style. Through our literature, we suggest to the world that our brave, multicultural experiment is a success.

Beyond literature, I have noticed a change in the representation of Asian Canadians in the media of late. On television, in films, in the news, Asian Canadians are beginning to appear more frequently. This is progress, but we still have a long way to go. Approximately 15 years ago, our second son, who was in the Radio and Television Arts Programme at Ryerson University, told me that it was almost impossible for a visible minority to make it on television. A lot of progress has been made since then, but we are still not there yet. For the most part, the diversity I see in the streets is not reflected in the media, and until it is adequately reflected, I believe most people in Canada won't realize how much Canada has changed over the last decade.

Another gift of multiculturalism to Canada is food. What is Canadian food? It is the foods that we grew up with; it is the food that our mothers spent hours preparing; it is food that I prepare for our children and grandchildren. In Toronto, we have an amazing number of cultures, and so we are privileged to have a vast selection of foods to choose from. Fusion cuisine is becoming the norm in Canadian society.

One of the best ways to learn about other cultures is through an appreciation of food; of sharing and celebrating others' cuisine which opens the heart to new friendships. I love trying different foods, especially at friends' homes. Many Canadians have been introduced to the joys of new cultures through exploring the diversity of food markets, as well as restaurants that are scattered throughout our cities.

Is Canada becoming an Asian country? Sheer numbers alone are changing our relationship with the rest of Canadian society. There are now more than three million Canadians of Asian ancestry which represents about 10% of the total population. In cities like Vancouver and Toronto, the number of Asian Canadians is constantly growing. We are the next-door neighbours; the colleagues at work, or the bosses. In Vancouver, we now represent 35% of the population; in Toronto 27%. In Calgary, 15% of Calgarians identify themselves as being of Asian heritage.

So, in 2005, what does it mean to be a Canadian of Asian ancestry? Some people worry about being known as “hyphenated Canadians”, which I believe is a derogatory term. I asked my seat mate in the Senate, Senator Marie Poulin, who is a proud French Canadian from Ontario, whether she has ever been called a “hyphenated Canadian”, and she said she had never heard of it before. So you see, the term is only used to put people down.

Young people, like yourselves, might not want to be distinguished from others in Canadian society. I can only speak for myself in saying that my Chinese heritage only adds to my identity as a Canadian, because I represent the true likeness of a Canadian of the 21st century.

With the exception of the Aboriginal Peoples, we are all, after all, immigrants in Canada. It is this diversity - acceptance and sharing - that makes Canada the country that it is.

Consider this issue in light of the controversy last year over the wearing of headscarves by Muslims in France. The French argument was that the headscarf is oppressive to Muslim women, and that, by forcing everyone to be the same, they are eliminating prejudice. I believe people should have choices, and that forcing everyone to be the same offers those who discriminate the opportunity to attack anyone, or anything, they perceive as different from their perception of mainstream. And besides, many Muslim women I have spoken to, both young and old, choose to wear the head covering because they are proud of their religion, and it's a symbol of who they are.

In the Toronto Public School system, where the schools are now incredibly multicultural, the approach to religious diversity is to allow all students to practice religion as they choose. In fact, a booklet of prayers and readings from all faiths, chosen by a 40 member interfaith panel, was put

together so students can learn about one another's religious traditions. Students in Toronto don't understand why differences should be masked and buried. They like Canada's approach because it gives them the choice. They can embrace their heritage to the extent that they wish.

So Canada stresses equality, while celebrating difference. These ideas, embodied in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, while seemingly contradictory, coexist in Canada, and I believe that they are at the core of what it means to be Canadian. And, it is precisely because of the Charter that I support Bill C-38, "An Act respecting certain aspects of legal capacity for marriage for civil purposes", otherwise known as the same-sex marriage legislation, currently before parliament. If the Charter is to protect any of us, it must protect all of us.

As Asian Canadians, many of your parents may have been immigrants who do not view themselves as bicultural. For them, their identity may be more tied to the past than the present. Some may have one foot in the past, and one foot in the present. But I believe Canadians of Asian heritage, who grew up here or were born here, are firmly planted in this soil with both feet on the ground. Your parents may urge you to cherish your heritage; your peers may have other ideas. Ultimately you will find the happy medium, a place along the continuum of culture that embraces the world of your parents, and that of your peers.

Consider the example of Paul Yee, the well-known children's author, who said he initially rejected his roots, and Chinatown, because he was ashamed of it, and what it represented. But eventually, he embraced his past because it was the deep well from which he drew the inspiration for his wonderful stories. It was the magic of his grandmother's tales of ghosts that filled his writer's pen. We are richer if we take advantage of our heritage, and all it has to offer.

Many of you have the unique advantage of being multilingual and multicultural. You can move fluidly between cultures, seeing them as integral to your identity. Your generation has helped to create a new culture that blends the old, with the new; East with the West. In the dynamic milieu of a multicultural society, Asian culture has the opportunity to grow, and evolve, as it benefits from intercultural exchanges. Pan-Asian music, fusion cuisine, and truly cosmopolitan literature, are just some of the results of this unique experiment that is taking place in Canada.

Globally, an understanding of many cultures, and languages, is becoming an essential skill in the 21st century. In fact, the proportion of the world speaking English is in decline. As of 1995, English was already trailing Chinese as the second most-common native tongue worldwide. And by 2050, Chinese will be dominant, and Hindi-Urdu of India as well as Arabic, will surpass English in second place. Mandarin will become a “must learn” language in international circles.

In my own family, our grandchildren are of mixed heritage. They are part of the new Canada, and they are learning that having a Chinese background is really just part and parcel of being Canadian. Growing up with different cultures will open the door to the world for them. I find it interesting that, when our granddaughters come to our house, they ask to eat with chop sticks. They love Chinese food and all the exotic fruits from Asia. They love listening to me having long conversations in Cantonese.

Having an Asian cultural background has helped our sons, who were all born in Canada, to explore and feel comfortable in the East as well as in the West. They are multilingual, as well as multicultural. They grew up with English, French, and Chinese. This has enabled them not only to travel, but also to work anywhere in the world. Their strong sense of identification with their ethnicity does not, in anyway, exclude others. They feel at ease in Asia, Europe and in North America. These are the advantages you all have as Canadians in the 21st century.

Canadian multiculturalism is often compared to the American melting pot that encourages a homogenous culture where difference is eliminated. But even in the United States, almost 20% of Americans speak a language other than English in their homes. I have discovered, in Asian American academic conferences, that their collective identity seems stronger than ours. For example, Asian Americans have many university study programs devoted to their histories in America. In contrast, we don't have similar subjects at our Canadian universities.

At the University of Toronto, I'm happy to report that that has changed. A pilot course in Asian Canadian studies was introduced in the Canadian Studies Programme at University College 2 years ago. I strongly believe that we need to recognize that Asian Canadian studies is integral in the study of Canada, at all levels of education.

Now, I'll come back to my motion to designate May as Asian Heritage Month in the federal government. I realized that in the U.S., Asian Pacific American Heritage Month was proclaimed by President Carter over 20 years ago. In Canada, Asian Heritage Month has been celebrated in May in different cities since 1993 by grass root organizations, but many levels of government, as well as many individuals, remain unaware of it.

For some reason, Canada's approach to multiculturalism leads individuals to identify with a particular ethnic identity such as Chinese Canadian, or Korean Canadian, rather than to identify themselves as pan-Asian. I believe there is a lot of advantage in adopting a pan-Asian outlook. Many Asian communities have told me how happy they are in making so many friends among Canadians of Asian background. In addition to building bridges between communities, I think cross-cultural alliances are important, and certainly, there is strength in numbers.

When I arrived in the Senate in 1998, I wondered why there was federal celebration of Black History Month, and there was no celebration of Asian Heritage Month. I should stress that, unlike Black History Month, celebrations of Asian Heritage Month are not about dwelling on the past. We celebrate the ongoing Asian contributions to this country. While we undoubtedly share in shaping Canada's past, we are also its future. As Professor Mendelsohn of Queen's University concluded that Canada is indeed becoming an Asian country which means we are part of the new face of Canada.

Well, what does it mean to be the new face of Canada? Well, it means we have a great responsibility to help shape the future of this country. We have to become more involved in different spheres of Canadian society. I have noticed that there are very few Canadians of Asian heritage in politics, on corporate boards, in our police forces, in the media, or in the Public Service. I am sure there are many areas of society that I am missing, but you understand my point. I am actively involved in helping to make that change happen, and I have confidence in all of you.

Not too many years ago, I was shocked to hear from one of our sons, when he was working at the Royal Bank, that there wasn't any chance for a non-white person to ever make it to the top of a Canadian corporation. That was a wake-up call for me. I want to prove him wrong. I have faith in your

generation because you will insist that you are equal to everyone in Canada, and that colour is only skin-deep.

I am heartened by the fact that, today, I am meeting more and more students who seem interested in public life. Today, more young Asian Canadians are pursuing careers that are not along the traditional career paths as defined by their parents. There are an increasing number of students of Asian descent studying in the Arts and Social Sciences. What this proves is that, as Asian Canadians, you don't accept the fact that you have to be slotted into cubicles, because you have gained confidence in yourselves, and you want to be able to compete, in any area, on a level playing field.

Five years ago, a report by the Asia Pacific Foundation pointed out the importance of the concept of identity among young Asian Canadians. It said that you had an identity that was fluid, and that you were able to communicate with both mainstream and Asian cultures, and bridge these cultures. So seize the opportunities you have wherever they may be! Canadian corporations should take heed, because you have the ability to do just as well in Asia as in North America.

Our sons told me a while ago that they are different culturally from white Canadians, as well new immigrants from China or Hong Kong. What they mean was that they are bi-cultural Canadians. They can live in China as easily as they can live in Canada. Their lives are certainly very interesting, as yours will be.

Now, my message to you is, be proud of who you are. You are a very big part of the future of Canada. Together, we will meet the challenges of the 21st century.