

**Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

**Hong Kong Immigration to Canada Panel Discussion**

**The New Silk Road: Hong Kong Immigration to Canada,  
Past, present & Future**

**Munk Centre for International studies**

**March 3, 2006**

Prof. Bewell, Prof. Peng, Ms. Chow, Prof Fong, Prof. Yu & all participants in this seminar:

I find the title of this discussion “The New Silk Road” intriguing. How does one compare Hong Kong Immigration to Canada, Past, Present and Future to the Old Silk Road? The first thing that comes to mind is the Roman reference to the Chinese as the “silk people” or “Seres” in 53B.C., when they first came across silk fabric during their campaign against the Parthians. So, “Silk Road” at the present time means the movement of people and trade of the Chinese in Hong Kong. Since Canada was the main destination of Hong Kong immigration in recent years (between 1990 and 1994, 57% of all emigrants from Hong Kong came to Canada) this traffic could be perceived as “the New Silk Road.”

Until recent years, all movement of people from China to the western world had been either through Hong Kong, or directly from Hong Kong, because from 1843 until July 1, 1997, Hong Kong was a British Colony (the ratification of the Treaty of Nanking). As an important port for shipping, Hong Kong was the port of embarkation for Chinese labourers who went abroad to work. Until recent years, those who emigrated from China were all from the coastal areas of south China because Canton (Guangzhou) was the city opened for trade with the West under the Ch’ing dynasty. Hong Kong was also the main conduit for the transfer of money from Chinese labourers abroad to their families in China.

Please note that up to the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there wasn’t such a thing as passports or visas. Anyone, from anywhere in the world, who wished to go to another country to work was able to do so as long as the passage was paid.

The first major wave of Chinese migrants came to Canada because of the gold rush in B.C. in the 1850's. Initially, they came to Canada from San Francisco where they had gone because of the gold rush there. They were joined by migrants from China. Few of them made their money in gold mining because the Chinese were not allowed to work the mines until the white miners had moved on. Most of them ended up working as ranch cooks, house boys, market gardeners, or opening laundries and restaurants.

The next wave of Chinese migrants, who came to Canada at the end of the 1870s, were labourers brought in by contractors to build the most difficult section of the CPR in B.C. Some were railway men who had worked in California, but the majority of them were poor peasants from south China. The reason for the push factor of Chinese emigration from Guangdong province was the large increase in population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there just wasn't enough land to feed the people, so many left in order to make a living.

When the CPR was completed in 1885, the Dominion government tried to stop more Chinese from entering Canada, and a head tax of \$50 was imposed in 1885. This did not discourage the Chinese from entering Canada, so the head tax was increased to \$100 in 1900, and to \$500 in 1903. Even this amount was not enough of a deterrent, and in order to keep Canada a white country, Chinese immigration was stopped by the Immigration Act of 1923, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. All this has been very much in the news in recent months, especially during our federal election. With the imposition of the head tax, and Chinese Exclusion, Canada had followed the policy of the U.S. towards the Chinese.

The Chinese communities were mainly made up of poor labourers since the wealthy and the educated did not leave China, with a few exceptions of enterprising merchants and school teachers who taught at the Chinese schools abroad. For that reason, the image Canadian society had of the Chinese were that they were poor, dirty and willing to accept lower pay than white workers.

Up to this point, it is important to note that there were very few Chinese women in Canada. This was primarily due to the Chinese tradition that women were expected to stay home to look after the mother-in-laws, raise the children, and tend to the graves of the ancestors. Besides, the men

were only abroad with the hope of making enough money to send home to help to support their families, and to retire back in their villages in later years.

There were some men who wanted to bring their wives, but the expense was prohibitive to the majority of labourers. Besides, they were living in conditions not suitable to couples. The few Chinese women in Canada were mostly wives of merchants, school teachers and ministers of the church, or their household servants. For that reason, the Chinese communities were known as bachelor societies. There were few Chinese children born in Canada, and they were denied Canadian citizenships.

Between 1923 and 1947, because of Chinese exclusion, only a handful of Chinese entered Canada. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Chinese Canadian veterans, Chinese community leaders (eg, Jean Lumb), as well as other human rights activists, lobbied the federal government to repeal Chinese exclusion from the Immigration Act, and at the same time, to give citizenship to Chinese residents in Canada. This opened the door to further Chinese immigration, as well as family reunification of Chinese Canadians. So, where does Hong Kong come in? Hong Kong remained the main port of embarkation for the Chinese from mainland China who wished to emigrate abroad.

Right after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the civil war in China was a major push factor in Chinese emigration, while the change in Canadian immigration policy, particularly with respect to family reunification, was a major pull factor. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, with the subsequent closing of the Chinese border to the outside world, Hong Kong remained the only port for those in China who wished to emigrate, if they were able to cross the border to Hong Kong. One hears of stories of escape over the border in Shenzhen or by water on leaky boats, and a few actually swam to Hong Kong. The majority who managed to get to Hong Kong stayed and became citizens there.

I came to Canada in 1959 on a student visa, and at that time, there were only a handful of students in Canadian universities. We saw more Chinese faces starting in the late 1960s. With the introduction of the Points System in 1967, immigrants to Canada could apply based on their education, skills and training, and not just family connections. Many students from Hong Kong started enrolling in Canadian universities because upon

graduation, if they were able to get employment, they could apply for citizenships.

Since the late 1960s, an increasing number of women with skills were able to apply to immigrate on their own, instead of as dependants of men. By the end of the 1970s, with an increasing number of educated immigrants in the Chinese Canadian communities, the status of the communities was raised in the eyes of mainstream Canada. I believe it was around that time that the Federation of Chinese Canadian Professionals was formed by immigrants from Hong Kong.

Diplomatic relations were established between Canada and China in 1971. When our former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau visited China in 1973, an agreement was signed which enabled close relatives of Chinese Canadians to immigrate to Canada. Chinese immigrants to Canada, whether they were originally from China or from Hong Kong, all came through Hong Kong, many having to stay there for a number of years for the immigration process. Statistically, according to CIC, some of these immigrants may have been listed as from China because that was their country of birth.

Immigration specifically from Hong Kong did not gain prominence until the 1980s. Many of these immigrants were born in China, and over the years, had obtained Hong Kong passports. (By then, because of the eventual return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China, the British government made the distinction between British passports and Hong Kong passports, for fear that the British Isles would be flooded with Hong Kongers.)

The negotiation between Britain and China over the sovereignty of Hong Kong caused jitters in the minds of many Hong Kong residents. By the end of the 1980s, because of the events at Tiananmen Square and the imminent return of Hong Kong back to China, many of the residents applied to immigrate to different countries. This was possible because Hong Kong was experiencing a period of economic prosperity, and emigrants were in good financial positions to make the move.

In order to attract investment capital, Canada, like other immigrant-receiving countries, introduced the business and entrepreneur categories for immigrants with business backgrounds and with high net worth. Between 1990 and 1994, almost 173,000 (172,840) Hong Kong immigrants landed in Canada. The volume of annual immigration peaked at over 44,000 in 1994.

Visibly, there were Chinese everywhere in the major cities, and malls reminiscent of Hong Kong started springing up; everywhere, one could hear Cantonese being spoken. During this period, we saw high-end retail stores hiring Cantonese speaking staff; Canadian corporations started advertising in Chinese to attract these wealthy immigrants. The status of the Chinese Canadian communities had moved from “professional” to “super-rich.”

It is only in recent years that Chinese immigrants enter Canada directly from China instead of via Hong Kong. In 1998, there was a modest increase in immigration directly from mainland China, as compared to the large numbers from Hong Kong. A major shift started to occur in 1995, with the gradual decline of immigrants from Hong Kong, and the gradual increase of immigrants from mainland China. By 2001, less than 2000 immigrants arrived here from Hong Kong (half of total # of Canadians of Chinese descent of 1 million are from H.K. – Can. Consulate General in H.K. Presently, 250,000 Canadians live in H.K.). In recent years, what is very apparent is that there is an increasing number of Mandarin speaking immigrants, whereas they all used to be Cantonese speakers.

Today, immigrants from mainland China are the largest group of immigrants arriving in Canada annually. I want to point out that this demographic may soon be overtaken by immigrants from south Asia.

Upon reflection, how has immigration from Hong Kong influenced Canadian society? I will go back to the comparisons between the “Old” and the “New” Silk Roads:

1. The movement of people declined as in the case of the Old Silk Road and Hong Kong immigration to Canada;
2. Trade declined along the Old Silk Road because the Sea Silk Road proved to be a much easier route for trade by the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; as in the case of Hong Kong investments, they are no longer pouring into Canada as in the latter part of the 1980s, and the first part of the 1990s (there was a large number of return migration because of economic opportunities).

What are the long term results? In both cases, we have the introduction of new races, cultures and religions into China from the “Old Silk Road”, and into Canada from the “New Silk Road.”

Cave paintings along the Old Silk Road showed peoples of different ethnic backgrounds, other than Central and East Asians. Interestingly, the most important commodity carried along this route was not silk, but religion. Islam was introduced. Even more importantly, Buddhism became a dominant religion in China.

Immigration to Canada has the same long term effects. For that reason, we have become the most multicultural country in the world. With the intermingling of peoples, we have incorporated their cultures and faiths.

Immigrants from Hong Kong, whether they remained in Canada or have returned to Hong Kong, (2001 H.K. census, between 1996-2001, 40% of the Chinese who have returned to H.K. were from Canada), their influence in Canadian society will forever be part of Canadian culture. Students from Hong Kong have brought their competitiveness to our schools, and the food culture in Canada is greatly influenced by Chinese cuisine. Religions, such as Buddhism, are increasing in influence. What is even more important to Canada as a whole, the immigrants from Hong Kong have helped to build a bridge between Canada and the ever growing economically powerful China which will forever benefit Canada as a country.