

Keynote Opening Address by Senator Vivienne Poy

McCord Museum 2007 Colloquium

Golden Mountain: Canada and China, interconnected

Montreal, Nov. 1-3, 2007

Good morning fellow academics and friends:

One of the very first things a child from south China learns is the mystery of the Gold Mountains. I remember as a child the stories I heard of relatives who went there. The Old Gold Mountain was North America (San Francisco and British Columbia), and Australia was the New Gold Mountain.

My own great grandfathers on both sides of my family went to the Old Gold Mountain with dreams of making a fortune. They did fairly well, and returned to China and Hong Kong, and continued to prosper. The historical concept of Gold Mountain was almost mythical to the Chinese Diaspora.

Today's Colloquium is on the Chinese in Canada, and the interconnection between China and Canada. Since so much has changed over the years, does the myth of Canada as the Gold Mountain still exist?

The programme of this Colloquium encompasses many different aspects of Chinese Canadian life over the last century and a half. So, as an opening address, I will attempt to frame the topic in its historical perspective.

For centuries, the Chinese who went abroad were from the southern coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Until recently, the majority of those who came to Canada were from southern Guangdong province around the Pearl River delta, just north of Hong Kong.

Throughout the ages, human migration has been mostly for economic reasons. It was no different for the Chinese who came to Canada. One of the main reasons for migration in the 19th century was because there was a large increase in the population in Guangdong, and there was not enough land to

feed the population. In the middle of the 19th century, the news of the gold rush in California, and later in British Columbia, was a great incentive for migration. The wealthy did not leave their homes; it was the poor peasants who left, with the hope of finding gold, but most were disillusioned when they got there because of the local government regulations at the time.

By the late 1870s, the Chinese were brought into Canada as contract labourers to build the CPR. Many also worked in sawmills, salmon canning factories, or as ranch hands, cooks and house boys etc. Others, who were able to accumulate or borrow a small sum, started their own laundries, restaurants and cafes.

There were a few Chinese entrepreneurs who came to Canada because they saw business opportunities among their own countrymen, but they were very few and far between. They were the only ones who could afford to bring their wives and daughters, as well as household servants, and they became the representatives of the Chinese community dealing with the local government officials. One name comes to mind, and that is Yip Sang. His family in Canada has multiplied over the generations and prospered.

Many of the Chinese who came to Canada were very poor and illiterate, so it was easy to target them for discrimination. Canada's history of institutional and systemic discrimination will be covered by other speakers, so I won't go into it. I will however, fast forward to after the Second World war, when human rights activists, and Chinese community leaders, lobbied the government for citizenship for the Chinese living in Canada, and for reunification with their family members who remained in China. One of these activists was Jean Lumb, who became very well known, and was the first ethnic Chinese female to receive the Order of Canada (1976). Jean's daughter, Janet Lumb, who continues the family's tradition of activism, is one of our speakers later on today.

Through successful lobbying, in 1947, the Chinese Immigration Act was repealed, and Chinese residents in Canada were given Canadian citizenship. By the early 1950s, Canada welcomed many family members of Chinese Canadian men. Some of them also brought new brides into Canada. From then on, the Chinese communities across Canada were no longer bachelor societies.

Chinese communities experienced another change in 1967, with the introduction of the Points System. Women were able to immigrate based on their own training and education, instead of as dependants of men. Also, in the 1960s, many Chinese students came to Canada for higher education, and remained in Canada to work after graduation. Both male and female members of the Chinese communities across the country became known for their high levels of educational attainment.

The next big change in the Chinese Canadian communities came with the introduction of the “investor” and “entrepreneurial” categories in our immigration regulations. These were introduced to compete with other immigrant receiving countries, such as the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, in order to attract wealthy immigrants, especially those from Hong Kong, who wanted to leave the colony because of the impending return of its sovereignty to China. It was fascinating how, in the 1980s, the Chinese Canadian communities were suddenly perceived as super rich!

It didn't take very long for many of the heads of households to realize that Canada was not “Gold Mountain,” and it became necessary for them to return to Hong Kong to make a decent living, while leaving their families behind in Canada for the sake of the education of their children.

Interestingly enough, the fear of Hong Kong becoming part of Greater China did not affect the economy. Hong Kong stocks and real estate markets hit an all time high in June, 1997. The Asian economic crisis, which started in Thailand with the collapse of the Baht (July 2, 1997), and in the subsequent months, began to engulf all of Asia, was unrelated to the return of the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China.

By the mid 1990s, there was an interesting shift in the source of Chinese immigration to Canada. Up to that point, the largest group came from Hong Kong, but as the fear of the return of sovereignty to China subsided, and with Hong Kong's booming economy, many returned. Others who were going to immigrate did not do so. After 1995, our immigration statistics show that the majority of Chinese immigrants were from mainland China. Today, China remains the top source country of our annual immigration. The recent immigrants are Mandarin speakers, unlike the earlier ones, who speak Cantonese.

There are more than one million Canadians of Chinese heritage today, who play an important role in building bridges for Canada and the Canadian government with Greater China, both economically and culturally.

Historically, the most important link between Canada and China was Dr. Norman Bethune, who went to China in 1938 to help the Red Army to fight the Japanese invasion. He died from blood poisoning at the end of 1939, and since then, he has become one of the greatest heroes in the history of modern China.

In 1970, Canada established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, culminating in 1973 with an official visit by our former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Since then, there have been frequent reciprocal visits by heads of state between our two countries. However, this relationship has stalled since the Conservatives formed a minority government last year.

Friendships take a long time to build, and despite the differences in our ideologies, past Canadian governments have always believed in engagement in order to influence our friends. Friends help and learn from each other. This, as well as trade, are huge topics on their own, and will be discussed by other speakers in this Colloquium.

I believe, today, our best goodwill ambassador is Mark Rowswell, known as Dashan (big Mountain) in China. In case some of you don't know who he is, he went to China in the 1980s as a young man to learn Chinese, and soon had the opportunity to perform on TV in a traditional Chinese comic dialogue. It was broadcast nationally to an audience of 550 million, and he immediately became a household name. Now, 20 years later, he is still a performer and TV host, plus having many other interests. He is, by far, our best cultural ambassador.

This year, Hong Kong SAR celebrates the 10th anniversary of its return to China. It is a good time to examine the relationship between our two countries.

Today, one often hears about the Canadian Diaspora. 300,000 Canadians are now living in Greater China (mainland China, Hong Kong & Taiwan), the majority of them in Hong Kong. Besides those of my generation who left Canada for better economic or professional

opportunities, I know many young ethnic Chinese, who were born in Canada, are moving, or are planning to move, to Greater China because that's where the opportunities are. This also applies to many who immigrated to Canada as children and are educated here, but find that there is a lack of opportunity for upward mobility in Canada.

How the tables have turned! However, Canada remains a country where many mainland Chinese wish to emigrate to, and for that reason, China is our #1 source country for immigration. Today, besides economics, there are many other considerations for migration, such as human rights, freedom of speech and educational opportunities for the next generation, etc. And now, we can see that Chinese influence is very much reflected in Canadian culture. Chinese (both Cantonese and Mandarin) is also the third most spoken language in this country.

We have many speakers this weekend who will be covering various topics about the past and the present. This Colloquium is a real treat for me, and I look forward to learning from them their views on how we can move forward, economically and culturally, in terms of the relationship between Canada and China.

Thank you.