

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Is it really a Chinatown mentality?

Association of Chinese Canadian Professionals (ACCP)

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Good evening, ladies & gentlemen, friends:

I wish to begin by thanking Dr. Edmond Wong for inviting me to speak this evening. This gives me the opportunity to explore with you my understanding of the problems that still exist in the ethnic Chinese communities across Canada.

Please note that I said “communities” in the plural. There are many ethnic Chinese communities in Canada, the differences being: the area of the world from where we came, (such as Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, West Indies, South America, India, South Africa etc.) and when we arrived in Canada in the context of Canadian history. Those of you who speak Chinese would know that the characters for Chinese ethnicity and nationality are two different words, but it’s one and the same in English, and therefore, all ethnic Chinese are viewed as one homogeneous group by mainstream Canada.

Those of you, who have been here for generations, your ancestors came mainly from the rural areas of the southern part of Guangdong province. Those who came to Canada after the last racial barrier was abolished in Canadian immigration in 1967 are mainly from Hong Kong. Since the late 1990s, the largest group of immigrants is from all over mainland China. They are Mandarin speakers, as compared to former immigrants, who speak Cantonese and/or the village dialects of south China.

Every one of us knows that our perception of our surroundings, and of the world we live in, is influenced by where we came from, and the type of circumstances we grew up in.

Last October, Dr. Edmond Wong wrote to invite me to speak to the ACCP. In his letter, he mentioned the Chinese communities' concerns about "the introverted, Chinatown mentality" among the Canadian born ethnic Chinese. Some of my other Canadian born Chinese Canadian friends call it the "victim mentality." The descendants of the ethnic Chinese who arrived early in the history of Canada, as a large group, seem to have carried the memory of oppression, passed down through generations. In Dr. Wong's letter, he also mentioned the "glass ceiling," which you all know, does not only apply to ethnic Chinese, but to all Canadian born children of non-white immigrants. Ever since I became a Senator in 1998, I have become very sensitive to these issues which are holding back progress in the Chinese Canadian communities.

In an article in the *Globe & Mail* in January by Anthony Reinhart, the writer told the story of Mohamed Dhanani, whose family fled persecution in Tanzania. As a non-white youngster growing up in Canada, he felt that he had to excel among his peers because he was "different." With a few of his friends, they left their corporate jobs and went into business for themselves, because "we looked around," he says, "and we saw the ceiling." This sounds familiar, doesn't it? This is the ceiling that has made many of the children of non-white immigrants feel less connected to Canada than their immigrant parents.

I hear the same sentiment from my own children. Our son told me, a few years back, that there was no chance that someone like him would ever make it to the top of a Canadian corporation. It has nothing to do with intelligence, education and language skills. It's to do with his surname, and his ethnicity.

I understand what he said, but it does not mean that I accept it. It is time that this should change, and hopefully, I am doing my part in helping to change attitudes in Canadian society.

As non-white immigrants, ethnic Chinese were the earliest and largest group that came to Canada. Some of the ethnic Japanese, like the ethnic Chinese, have been here for many generations. And, as long as you look different, and you happen to have a non-French or non-Anglo surname, you are immediately viewed as "the other".

What do Canadian born children, (irrespective of their skin tone) expect from Canadian society? Equality. Isn't that what they learn in school? And when they experience systemic racism, they try to solve it in their own way.

I know of four peaceful responses to this situation:

1. Adopt a “victim mentality,” and accept that you will never become the boss of a mainstream organization, or of the public service, no matter how smart you are, how well educated, and how hard you work.
2. Try to hide your identity and pretend to be white. The term for these people is “banana”, white on the inside and yellow on the outside.
3. Be independent and establish your own businesses and professions, and remove yourselves from the irritation of systemic racism
4. Fight back by being involved in the community and politics, and speak publicly about this problem and help to change Canadian attitudes.

In the Chinese Canadian communities, no matter where we came from, the “victim mentality” and the “bananas” exist, but going into the professions, like your membership here, and owning our own businesses, are much more prevalent responses. In the early days, (after the completion of the CPR and the introduction of the Head Tax in 1885) owning their own businesses was the only way out for the enterprising Chinese, many of whom had laundries, restaurants, market gardens and grocery stores. They were limited to these businesses because that was the only niche in a white society the Chinese were allowed to fill.

In the first part of the 20th century, ethnic Chinese were not allowed in the professions, such as law and dentistry, even after they had graduated from universities with professional degrees. Some returned to China, but many went into the businesses their fathers and grandfathers had, because there was nowhere else to turn to make a living.

It is important to remember the historic context under which the Chinese migrated to Canada. During the second half of the 19th and the early part of the 20th centuries, China was at its weakest point in history. The country was overrun by Western Imperialists. And, from 1949 until the

late 1970s, the Bamboo Curtain kept China from the rest of the world. Families of the overseas Chinese left in China were persecuted by the Communist government. From the very beginning until the 1970s, the Chinese communities across Canada had to sustain themselves with virtually no diplomatic help from China, as in the case of the ethnic Japanese. I believe the “introverted, Chinatown mentality” developed over those years of struggle for survival in Canada.

We all know of the change that happened after the end of the Second World War. In 1947, with the repeal of Chinese Exclusion in Canadian Immigration, and the possibility of family reunification for the wives and children left in China to come to Canada, the Chinese Canadian communities were coming into their own. However, because of their past history of institutional and systemic discrimination, and because China was under Communist rule, closed in by the Bamboo curtain, the “Chinatown mentality” remained.

Even though Canadian society is very different today, I can still see that mentality as a hangover from by-gone days, despite the fact that Chinatowns have since become historical landmarks.

We all know that the biggest change in Chinese Canadian communities came with the influx of Chinese from Hong Kong beginning in the 1970s, due to the jitters caused by the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China. This group, rightly or wrongly, was viewed by Canadian society as “rich”, as compared to the earlier perception of the Chinese as “poor”. I have to say, both perceptions are incorrect.

The immigrants from Hong Kong, through their numbers, entrepreneurial acumen, and educational attainment, helped to move the perception of the ethnic Chinese immigrant communities in Canadian society up a few notches.

I came to Canada as a visa student in 1959 so I am not part of that wave of immigration. But, since I am from Hong Kong, and still have strong connections there, I do have a good understanding of the mentality of Hong Kong people.

In the mid 1980s, a US magazine was doing an article on the immigration of Hong Kong people to North America, and I was asked to be

on the cover. I explained that I had been in Canada since 1959, and therefore was not a recent immigrant, and did not qualify. However, I was told that as long as I was from Hong Kong, they still wanted me on the cover. That was how I became the cover girl of a magazine for the first time in my life! Somehow, this wave of immigration was big news.

From my personal observation, there is a difference between the ethnic Chinese who have been here for generations, whose ancestors came as railroad workers, or paid the head Tax to come to Canada, and those who came later from Hong Kong. Generalization is never accurate, but I have always sensed that the ones who came later seem not to have the mental burden the descendants of the earlier group have. I hope the recent acknowledgement of past wrongs by the federal government has helped to lighten this burden.

As someone who grew up in Hong Kong, I am also from that group that was relegated to second class citizens in the Colony. If you look into the history of Hong Kong, life was just as difficult for the Chinese there as it was in Canada. The difference is that, in Hong Kong, the Chinese population is the majority, and here in Canada, we are the minority. But that doesn't really explain why the "victim mentality" in the Chinese Canadian communities still exists.

What I learnt from a very young age was that, my parents and grandparents never accepted being second class. I want to add that my great-grandfather and grandfather paid the Head Tax to go to San Francisco at the end of the 19th century. They made some money and went back to China, and never looked back. No mention was ever made about the Head Tax. We were proud of our heritage. With good education, entrepreneurial spirit, intelligence and hard work, we knew we could excel.

Internationally, the situation is very different today in the Chinese Diaspora. Despite the fact that many Chinese Canadians don't have much affiliation with the Communist government in China, the mere fact that China is becoming an international economic powerhouse increases the stature of all ethnic Chinese worldwide. In addition, there are also opportunities for business and the professions in China and other parts of Asia that did not exist before, so the "Chinatown mentality" should be done away with. Ethnic Chinese will always be more welcome in China than Caucasians, as our sons, who are Canadian born, can attest to. But it helps if

you know the language. Today, our concern is more of that of a “glass ceiling” that prevents upward mobility in Canadian corporations and in the Public Service.

From my observation of our younger generation of ethnic Chinese growing up here, there is less acceptance of a “ceiling”, and that is the way it should be. Having the confidence to say “no” is a good start, even though it is not easy.

Recently, a friend’s son quit his well-paying job at a large corporation because he saw “the ceiling”. When the company knew he was going to give notice, there was an emergency meeting, and they pleaded for him to stay. His reason for resignation was made very clear to his boss – he expects to be the boss a few years down the road, and he knows that will not happen in that company.

I believe it is time to move on. Feeling victimized means we are stuck. In today’s globalized world, there are endless opportunities. The fact that the “glass ceiling” exists is detrimental to the Canadian economy, and to Canada as a country. We should be much more connected across the Pacific and to the rest of the world, instead of just to North America and Europe. Does our government know about this? Yes, but not much is being done about it.

There have been many recent studies of second generation visible minorities, and some wonder whether Canada’s multicultural policies are outdated. It is believed that, despite opening its front door to millions of visible minority immigrants, Canada has been too slow to unlock all the rooms inside. For this reason, children of visible minority immigrants feel less connected to Canada than their parents. I recognize that this feeling of disconnect is the result of the “glass ceiling” that exists. More recent immigrants can still have a foot in their countries of origin, especially if they have maintained their language skills, whereas, those whose ancestors came to Canada generations ago don’t have this advantage.

Some of you may have read the article about the Canadian Diaspora in the April edition of Maclean’s magazine. Those interviewed were children of recent ethnic Chinese immigrants who would have stayed in Canada if there were opportunities, but they left because their education and skills are not appreciated, and because there are better opportunities elsewhere. This group will, in no way, be “victims” in Canada. Their western education,

language and cross-cultural skills are contributing to the building of global structures in Hong Kong and Shanghai, with no benefit to Canada.

As a Canadian parliamentarian, this is worrisome to me. Especially when I read what our younger generation is saying, that “apart from being educated and growing up [in Canada] for a time, there’s not much of a connection,” “I wouldn’t call it home,” and “it feels like Canada hasn’t given me anything.” On the one hand, there is a lack of opportunities in Canada, partly due to systemic racism, and partly because mainstream Canada is “like a small club” and slow in accepting outsiders, (and anyone who does not look Caucasian is an outsider); on the other hand, globally, Canada’s economic opportunities are slipping away.

For those who don’t have the option to leave, and for those, like me, who want to do something about this situation in Canada, we need to get involved in our democratic process. There are different ways of doing this, such as running for political office, or influencing political parties by your support. For those who shun politics, get involved in your communities because each person can make a difference. The ACCP is doing the right thing by inviting people to speak on the topic and start a public debate. It is only by speaking that one can be heard. We can learn from the success of the Women’s Movement in the 1970s. As I said before, say “no” to situations you find unacceptable, and hold your head high. And I want to add that you can only do that if you are proud of your Chinese heritage.

Historically, ethnic Chinese have done well all over the world despite severe discrimination. All I have to do is look around this room. The early Chinese settlers in Canada were mostly poor peasants, who had to work hard and, at the same time, accept wages way below white workers, so this created competition, and they were called dirty and treated like sub-humans.

In the 1970s, when ethnic Chinese students excelled in large numbers in Canadian academic institutions, they were accused of taking university spaces from Canadian students, even though some of them were Canadian citizens or permanent residents. In the 1980s and 1990s, some of the immigrants from Hong Kong were wealthy and entrepreneurial, and hard-working, and envy set off another wave of racial attacks. You would all be familiar with terms like “monster homes” and “yacht people.”

We have to remember that discrimination will always exist as long as there are human beings. It is often caused by competition and envy as I just mentioned. In extreme cases, physical violence has been used against the ethnic Chinese communities, such as in earlier times in Canada and in South East Asia in recent years. Fair minded people will always respect the rights of others, and the attitude of the majority can be changed. We are part of the Chinese Diaspora which controls the economies in many parts of the world; we have excelled in just about every profession, so we have a lot to be proud of.

The “Chinatown mentality” belongs to the dust bin of history, and we need to put concerted effort into breaking the “glass ceiling” as the Women’s Movement did in the 1970s.

In Canada, for those of us who are in position to help, we must pave the way for others to follow. It is too often those who attain prominence that forget the ones who need a helping hand. Mentors are needed in the Chinese Canadian communities, and many of your members can take the lead. The important thing to remember is that we are anyone’s equal.