

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The Power of the Asian Diaspora

Asian Diaspora Conference 2010

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**Asian Institute, Munk Centre
for International Studies**

Good morning, scholars, students & friends:

I am happy to be here to open the Asian Diaspora Conference 2010, organized by the enterprising Asian Diaspora Group at the University of Toronto.

The Asian Diaspora is a huge topic. It has always fascinated me because of its social, cultural, and economic power, both to the adopted countries and to the countries of origin.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Asian Diaspora is having a global impact, and in the 21st century, it is transforming our world, as we see a shift in the global centre of power from the west to the east.

This morning, you will find that I will be speaking more about the Chinese Diaspora than those from other Asian countries, for the simple reason that I am ignorant about many groups from Asia, and the Chinese Diaspora is the one I am most familiar with.

Many of you here know Chinese, and would know that “Hua Ren” means ethnic Chinese who can be the nationals of any country, and the term “Jung Guo Ren” means Chinese nationals from China. Unfortunately, in English, there is no distinction between the two. So when I speak about the Chinese Diaspora, I mean ethnic Chinese, those whose ancestors might have left China generations ago. Perhaps, the same concept applies to the South Asian Diaspora from the Indian subcontinent.

I was born and raised in Hong Kong. Until July 1, 1997, ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, because it was a British Crown Colony, were considered part of the Chinese Diaspora. I can confidently say that I have personally seen and experienced what the Hong Kong Chinese have been able to achieve in Hong

Kong, and what they have done, and continue to do, to help China economically and socially, and I will elaborate on that later.

When we speak of the Asian Diaspora, there are two major groups that figure most prominently – the Chinese Diaspora and the South Asian Diaspora. These two ethnic groups are made up of very mobile and entrepreneurial individuals. We need only to look at the rapid changes in Toronto over the last decade to see the impacts of the shift in demographics.

In Canada, according to the last Census (2006) more than 10% of Canadians now report that they are of Asian heritage. In urban areas, this percentage is significantly higher. In cities like Vancouver and Toronto, Asian Canadians are reshaping our urban cultural landscape.

The Chinese Diaspora is the largest group of Asians that have migrated abroad, followed by those from the Indian sub-continent, of which around 20 million are from India. The Asian Diaspora has dramatically transformed nations around the world. So, it was not surprising that, in the recent Winter Olympics in Vancouver, there were Asians representing Canada, U.S. and Australia.

On our international travels, we always see local Asians speaking the native tongues. The South Asians in Hong Kong speak better Cantonese than many Hong Kongers. I remember as a child growing up in Hong Kong being very impressed by the business acumen of the South Asians there.

In countries around the world, Asian blood flows in many veins. On our travels and in my role as a public servant, I come across many people who tell me that they are Chinese, and they don't look at all Asian. A very good example is someone like Michael Lee-Chin, or my husband's blond and blue eyed cousins in Australia. These cousins may not know how to speak Chinese, but they certainly know how to order food in Chinese restaurants!

Those of Chinese origin can be found in every corner of the world, as one can see by the availability of Chinese restaurants. Filmmaker Cheuk Kwan has expressed the merging of Chinese and local cultures around the world very well in his Chinese Restaurant film series.

On our travels, we tend to gravitate to Chinese restaurants whenever we get tired of the local food, as we did 2 weeks ago in the south of Spain. The people who ran that restaurant spoke Chinese and Spanish. Many years ago, we visited Fiji, and the Chinese cooks we encountered were black, and they were very good cooks!

I had a chance to reflect on the impact of the Asian Diaspora on Canadian culture yesterday here at the Munk Centre when I participated in the Asian Foodprints Conference: Rediscovering Japan Through a Culinary Odyssey. We looked at the global impact of Japanese food, and how it has changed our world.

Aside from Chinese restaurants, one often sees Chinatown gateways in different parts of the world. When we visited Havana, we found a small thriving Chinatown with an ornate, though dilapidated, Chinatown gateway. Interestingly, we don't have a gateway in Toronto, and Toronto has the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese outside of Asia.

Chinese have been leaving China to trade in S.E Asia for hundreds of years, and some have settled abroad, despite the fact that successive Emperors have decreed that they were not allowed to do so on the pain of decapitation. In their new homelands, the Chinese not only dominate the economy, Chinese culture merges with the local culture, and creates a new hybrid culture that forms a unique identity. A good example is the Baba & Nona culture in Malaysia, which is a mixture of Chinese and Malay, with its own distinctive characteristics, developed over hundreds of years since the first Chinese men went there to trade.

In the 19th century, when gold was discovered in North America, and then in Australia, the Chinese came. By then, it was not uncommon for Chinese men to go across the ocean in order to make a better living. They, and those who came on subsequent trips, helped to transform North America and Australia.

Some of our speakers today will point out that this transformative process had encountered great resistance. Canada, like most western nations at the beginning of the 20th century, had an unfortunate past in engaging with its Asian immigrant populations.

We all know about the Head Tax imposed on Chinese nationals, and Chinese Exclusion in immigration. The South Asians, from the British Indian Empire, were marooned on the Komagata Maru for months and were not allowed to go ashore in Vancouver, despite the fact that they were citizens of the British Empire. During World War II, the Japanese Canadians were sent to internment camps in the interior of BC & Alberta, having been expelled from their homes & having had their properties seized. That was how the Asian Diaspora was treated in Canada until the second half of the 20th century.

In speaking about the impact of the Asian Diaspora, we need to remember that every society is always in a state of transition, as it adjusts to change.

Fortunately, unlike some countries, Canada is now considered a model in its treatment of its diverse population.

As mentioned before, the Chinese Diaspora is the largest in the world; an estimate has put the number at 55 million. Not only are the members of the Chinese Diaspora having a dramatic impact on their adopted homelands, they are also having a major impact on China itself.

Modern China has had a symbiotic relationship with its Diaspora population in modern times, from the Republican Revolution against the Ch'ing Dynasty, to the economic support provided by hard earned money being sent home from abroad, to investments in technology and development of businesses since the end of the 1970s.

When I went back with my family to our ancestral village on a few occasions, the villagers showed us what my family had done for them -the factories that were set up to make hats for foreign corporations in order to provide employment. We visited schools, a hospital, a community hall and even a bridge over the river. And I am only speaking about what one family did for one little village in one county. This is certainly not uncommon in China. Until the last decade, the majority of the funds to do all that came from the Chinese Diaspora in Hong Kong.

From a personal perspective, I watched how my own father did what he did to help modernize China. As an influential Hong Konger who had many friends from all over the world, he was very effective in introducing people from Hong Kong and abroad to invest in China. He formed a company to build the first 5-Star hotel in Guangzhou, because he said China needed it. He was one of a very few who made that initial step, starting in the 1970s, when Hong Kong people were afraid to travel to China. The rest, of course, is history.

The Chinese economic miracle, which has seen the rise of a China as a global power over the last decade, would not have happened without the existence of the Chinese Diaspora. Overseas Chinese have contributed up to 60 percent of China's total foreign direct investment. In Shanghai, one sees large residential complexes and shopping centres with Hong Kong names, because they are owned by Hong Kong people. There is a part of the Pearl River Delta that's called Little Taiwan because of the Taiwanese investments there.

The Chinese Diaspora didn't only invest money, they have also contributed human resources. Academics and professionals have, in recent years, gone back to China to do business and to teach. It is almost customary that, when members of the Chinese Diaspora achieve success, and become established, they share

this success with China. Exchanges exist at all levels, trade, culture, and philanthropy, between China and these transnational individuals.

The Chinese Government, on the other hand, is very much aware of the importance of their Diaspora population. For that reason, there are government Departments especially set up to look after their “Chio Bao,” and there are also museums built to celebrate the hard work and success of their Diaspora population, eg the Meizhou Overseas Chinese Museum, and the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Museum in Guangzhou.

From the Canadian perspective, almost 3 million Canadians – 10 percent of our population – currently live abroad, of which 250,000 live in greater China. Many people in the West are realizing that there are lots of opportunities in Asia. The Chinese and South Asian Diaspora in Canada are finding that their dual heritage is an advantage in doing business in Asia.

We often read about our successive governments not taking advantage of the Asian Diaspora that resides in Canada, especially with the growing economic might of China and India. Our share of China’s trade has actually fallen from 2 percent to 1 percent over the past few years, while Australia, a country with 2/3 of the population of Canada, has seen a tremendous increase in trade. In 2009 alone, their trade with China increased 30% to \$86 billion. Why is this? Australia may be close to China geographically, but it is making a point to be closer to China economically, because the government has assiduously cultivated the relationship by selling Australia’s brand, inclusive of education, trade and culture. It helps too when their Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, speaks fluent Mandarin.

Education is a top priority to the Chinese and the South Asian Diaspora. I want to tell you about my experience in Malaysia. There are Indian schools as well as Chinese schools for the descendants of these ethnic groups, besides the local Malay schools. I remember visiting a local town on a Sunday, and I heard bells ringing. I asked our Malay guide what that was, and he said that’s the ringing of the bells of the Chinese school, and he added, “Those Chinese are always going to school!”

In Canada, we need only to look at our universities, and our schools, which are filled to capacity with students of Asian heritage, many of whom have achieved high academic standing. Statistics Canada tells us that the majority of both first and second generation Asian Canadians attend university, which means that there is a highly educated group of Asian Canadians emerging in Canadian society.

At the moment, this group remains on the margins of political power. Canadians of Asian heritage are a tiny minority on Parliament Hill, e.g. Olivia Chow, from whom you'll be hearing later today. In Ontario, we have Minister Michael Chan, and M.P.P. Yasir Naqvi, just to name a couple. These exceptions prove that, given our levels of education, and our experience, we are underrepresented in the centres of power in Canada. I believe this will change over the next decade, because it must.

Asians are known to work hard, to value education for our children, and we respect our elders. We bring a great deal of social capital with us to our adopted countries. We are good organizers, and we promote diversity, business, and philanthropy. We are often entrepreneurs with innovative ventures.

In terms of social capital, one small group of South Asian immigrants, who have had a disproportionate impact on Canadian society, are the Ismailis, whose Imam is His Highness the Aga Khan. What sets them apart is their emphasis on the importance of educating women, as well as their great sense of community service. I have always been impressed by how much they see public service as being a requirement for success.

In Canada, in the past 20 years, we have seen generous philanthropy as well as large business developments owned by Asian Canadians, so our different levels of government need to recognize the new status of the Asian Diaspora as a large, effective and growing constituency, and harness their strength to help Canada build bridges across the oceans. With the example of what the Chinese Diaspora has been able to do for China, the same could happen in Canada if this group were given the opportunities it deserves. If our government does not capitalize on the huge potential accessible in our Asian Diaspora, the next generation will leave Canada to seek opportunities elsewhere, very often in their countries of origin, and this will be a great loss to Canada.

Now, I look forward to listening to the presentations of our many accomplished speakers.