

Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy

UTACCEL Panel: Chinese Diaspora Leadership: from global citizens to global leaders

University of Toronto

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I would like to thank Tim Shen, of UTACCEL, for inviting me to speak on this panel today. I commend what your organization does, through innovative programs, which contribute to the development of leadership skills among our Chinese Diaspora youth.

What is the Chinese Diaspora? It includes all ethnic Chinese who live overseas, including those who lived in Hong Kong before July 1, 1997, and those who lived in Macao before December 20, 1999. Some of our ancestors left China generations ago, and many have intermarried. So, the Chinese Diaspora actually includes all those who identify and are proud of their Chinese heritage. Some don't look East Asian at all. Those from the West Indies can look very "black", and others from North America or Australia can look very "white."

I have always been fascinated by Chinese ethnicity, the identity of "Hua ren." It's not political but ancestral. I know that everywhere I travel, the moment an ethnic Chinese from south China finds out where I'm from, I will be asked which is my ancestral county, and then the name of my village. The last time this happened was last month in a seniors' centre in Winnipeg. The correct answers to these familiar questions immediately make me a member of the clan. This has actually helped me a great deal when I did my research for my PhD thesis on immigrant women to Canada from south China and Hong Kong. I had unbelievable co-operation with the interviewees because I was considered a village cousin.

A Caucasian friend once asked me how come she didn't have an ancestral village and I did! Well, she's not ethnic Chinese. In English, there is only one word for both concepts. In Chinese, there are two different words for ethnicity and nationality.

Up until recently, all the Chinese who migrated overseas were from south China. The earlier migrations went to Southeast Asia, to the West Indies, Central America, and in the 19th century, to North America and Australia. Everywhere the Chinese settled - despite severe discrimination in the earlier centuries - we became successful entrepreneurs and some accumulated great wealth. I believe the only reason that our success was limited to business was because most of the other professions were barred to us, except in Thailand. Global business leadership was always attainable.

I remember reading that the total net-worth of the Chinese Diaspora was trillions in USD. Since the middle of the 20th century, members have also gained prominence in the professions due to their educational achievements, and a few have excelled in politics. Together, we form a very large and increasingly influential world community, and interestingly, in a very interconnected way. It is the identity of being ethnic Chinese, "Hua ren", that places all of us into an extended family.

Besides the pride of ethnicity, what I find fascinating is the power of the Chinese language press, which reaches all Chinese communities world wide, and since there are ethnic Chinese in every corner of the world, its influence is unbelievable.

Ten years ago, I was invited to be the 1st Nortel Lecturer at the University of Wollongong, south of Sydney, Australia. To make a long story short, there was a press conference in Sydney the day after. I was taken aback that the Chinese press there was familiar with my background.

Six years ago, I spoke at UC Berkeley, representing U of T in the installation of their new Chancellor. One of the other UC Chancellors, who was ethnic Chinese, greeted me like a long lost sister. I asked him whether we had met before, and he said, “no,” but he knew all about me through the Chinese press. That evening, at the Gala dinner, he introduced me to his wife as someone he knew well.

All this shows the importance of the Chinese language. I must say, I have lost a lot of my reading ability due to a lack of practice. However, speaking Cantonese is no problem, and I’m learning Mandarin. Many of you would know that Chinese is the only ancient language that has survived intact, and is being used by a very large segment of the world population. I have heard westerners say that the Chinese language would be wiped out because of the computer age. However, it has been proven that messages are typed and sent in Chinese faster than in any other language. I can’t do it, but my sons can!

Many of the Chinese Diaspora communities are very old and established, such as the Baba and Nona societies in Malacca, Malaysia, that go back centuries. Here in Canada, recorded Chinese settlement started 153 years ago. In the past, the majority emigrated from China because of poverty. However, in the past five decades, conditions have changed in many western countries, as they have in Canada, and so have the reasons for ethnic Chinese migration worldwide. Ethnic Chinese are true global citizens who can survive anywhere and become successful.

Today, migration patterns are different and much more mobile; ethnic Chinese go wherever the best opportunities lie, even as the Chinese economy continues to expand. Today, return migration is also common, particularly for the younger generation; many of you are here this evening. Yours is the global generation; you can thrive anywhere in the world. At the same time, you are attracted by the dynamic and entrepreneurial environment in China, just like two of our sons, who were born and raised in Canada, and now live in China.

I have travelled to many countries in the world, and have seen how the Chinese communities have left their mark. Chinese schools proliferate, and the cultural emphasis and importance placed on education is felt in the wider community. On one of our trips to Malaysia, we were touring on a Sunday, and I heard bells ringing. I questioned our guide, and he said, “Oh, it’s the Chinese school. Those Chinese are always going to school!”

In Havana, we went to Chinatown where a rather dilapidated Gateway stood, and we noticed the Chinese heritage in some of the faces of the locals. This mixed heritage is evident in people throughout the world, be it in the Caribbean, North, South and Central Americas or Australia.

In South East Asia, the Chinese Diaspora played a crucial role as entrepreneurs and financiers in the past, but they got into trouble, because, despite their financial influence, they had no political power. When we were in Cambodia, and needed to change some money, we found out from our guide that many banks and money changers are still Chinese owned, even though many of them were driven out during the political turmoil not that long ago.

In Indonesia, racial attacks against Chinese Indonesians happened only a little more than 10 years ago - their properties were confiscated, and their businesses were looted. Publishing anything in Chinese or displaying a red lantern, could land you in jail. Now, Chinese symbols are visible everywhere and Mandarin is even part of the national curriculum studied by schoolchildren. Why? That's because many ethnic Chinese have entered politics, and are assuming prominent positions.

The most recent Diaspora community has emerged in the African continent as China increases trade there, and now there are an estimated half a million Chinese Africans. For example, in Mikhotlong, a remote town in one of Africa's poorest countries, Lesotho, the gas station, the ironmonger, hardware, general store and furniture wholesaler are all Chinese owned. Four of the enterprises are owned by Chen Juo-feng, a 22 year old from Fujian province in China.

My husband and I were in a cab last week, and our driver was from Ethiopia. When he found out that we were of Chinese origin, he was very excited to tell us about the fantastic highways they now have in Ethiopia, and the dam that's being built at the head water of the Nile, all constructed by the Chinese. Most significant was his opinion that Ethiopians don't like dealing with the Americans because they always want something, but the Chinese don't talk much - they just get the work done!

Here in Canada, the influence of the Chinese Diaspora is strongly felt, particularly in Vancouver and Toronto. Even though the first recorded groups of Chinese started arriving in Canada in 1788, sizable settlements didn't happen until 1858 with the gold rush in BC. After the 2nd World War, there were waves of immigration. Of significance are the family reunifications in the 1950s and 60s, the large influx from Hong Kong beginning in the 1980s, and, since the latter half of the 1990s, from Mainland China.

I came to Canada during the major changes to Canadian immigration policy in the 1960s. I came on a student visa to study at McGill, and I wasn't supposed to stay here. Even before that, as a Hong Konger, I was always part of the Chinese Diaspora as Hong Kong was a British colony.

Even at an early age, I was aware of the responsibility of the Diaspora to help China, from watching and listening to my father. Throughout his life, he acted as a bridge between the broader community and China. As an influential Hong Konger, he was very effective in introducing people from Hong Kong and abroad to invest in China starting in the 1970s.

Many people from south China, or those who have visited Guangzhou, would know the 5 Star Garden Hotel, the first in China. My father said China needed it, so he formed a Hong Kong company to build it, with the promise to gift it to China after 20years. We were at the grand opening in 1985 and at the 20th anniversary when it was gifted to China in 2005. That was only one of the many generous things he did, so selflessly, but he was not alone.

Sharing one's success with China is common to the Chinese Diaspora around the world. The Chinese economic miracle, which has seen the rise of China as a global economic power over the last decade, would not have happened without the help of the Diaspora population. Overseas Chinese have contributed up to 60 percent of China's total foreign direct investment.

Those who have studied modern Chinese history would also know the contribution of the Chinese Diaspora to the Chinese revolution against the Manchus. In fact, the Chinese in Canada stood out as the one group that gave the greatest financial contribution towards the revolution, and the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911.

The Chinese Diaspora didn't only invest money; we have also contributed human resources throughout the centuries. Academics and professionals have gone back to China to do business and teach. Factories are built, hospitals are established, and many schools, colleges and universities exist because of their support. In fact, the Diaspora population is so important that there are museums in China that exhibit their contributions. I have personally visited two, one in Muiyuen and one in Guangzhou.

In host countries, such as Canada, the ethnic Chinese have contributed, and continue to support Canadian communities financially, professionally, as well as in human resources. A few names come to mind: Lap Chee Tsui, Tak Mak, Milton Wong, David Lam, Michael Lee-Chin and Raymond Chang. Many universities, such as this one, have created programs that link both professors and students in Canada and China. In your way, you are helping the youth of China.

While there are numerous successful ethnic Chinese scientists, scholars and entrepreneurs in many countries, we are still often marginalized in terms of positions of power, and are often treated as outsiders because we look different. In Canada, as in other western countries, there are few examples of outstanding political leadership.

Here in Canada, according to the last Census in 2006, the self-identified Chinese Diaspora population was over 1.3 million, and approximately 300,000 Canadian nationals live in Hong Kong and Greater China who may have Chinese language skills; most are very highly educated. As well, most of the recent immigrants from mainland China for the past decade and a half are economic immigrants, thanks to our stringent points system. Do you realize that out of 308 Canada Research Chairs, who are foreign born, close to 1/3 are from Mainland China?

Despite the potential Canadian comparative advantage resulting from this demographic, Canada has not benefitted from China's rapid economic growth. Our share of China's trade has actually fallen, while countries like Australia have seen increased trade because China was a priority, and they capitalized on the strength of the networks of their large Chinese Diaspora population.

In Canada, the Canadian government and Canadian corporations need to start recognizing the potential of our Chinese Diaspora population who can help Canada build bridges across the oceans. If the Diaspora population is not given the opportunity to attain positions of leadership, your generation will leave, which will be a great loss to Canada. It's a worry that only 16% of the Canadian expats living in Hong Kong consider Canada to be their "home". While many Canadians still think that people are beating down our doors to get into

Canada, little do they know that the world has become extremely competitive, and young people like you are very mobile.

Giving the Chinese Diaspora the chance to take on positions of leadership is about bringing many different perspectives to the table in order to draw on the creativity of every member of the group. It may allow a company to develop networks it would not otherwise have made, or to draw on global best practices to influence the organization. While it may be risky for an organization to rock the boat by allowing for different perspectives, the potential payout in terms of innovation is well-worth it. The alternative is uniformity, stagnation and limited growth.

In Canada, we are well known as hard workers and good organizers. We participate in civil society and promote diversity, entrepreneurship, innovation, and philanthropy. So what's missing? Political power that is commensurate not only with our percentage of the population, but with our success in all other fields. I have to say, South Asian Canadians are doing much better in political representation than ethnic Chinese.

We are doing so poorly in Ontario that, out of a population of almost 650,000, we have one MPP. We did better municipally last year in the GTA. In Ottawa, out of 308 MPs, there were 4, out of a total population of over 1.3 million. In the Senate, out of 105 seats, there are two of us. Do we have a problem? Yes we do.

I am here today to encourage our Canadian youth of Chinese heritage to take advantage of their Chinese Diaspora networks, and become leaders both in Canada and around the world. Does that mean you should all go out and get into politics? Only if it suits your personality. Many of you would know this Chinese saying - "Good iron is not made into nails, and good sons don't become soldiers." What about politics for our sons and daughters?