

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

“What does it mean to be a Chinese Canadian?”

Chinese Canadian Cooperation Society

Chinese Canadian Women Co-operation Council

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Friends,

First of all, I would like to thank the Chinese Canadian Women Co-operation Council and the Chinese Canadian Cooperation Society for inviting me to speak this evening. You must wonder why I choose the topic of “What it means to be a Chinese-Canadian. You must think, “That’s pretty obvious – after all, that’s what we are!”

However, have you ever thought what it means to be ethnic Chinese in Canada, or have any of you ever been asked, either by your children or friends? Are we ethnic Chinese who just happen to live in Canada? Or are we supposed to be “Canadian” and give up our Chinese heritage? And if we keep our heritage, does that mean that we are not going to be accepted by Canadian society?

These questions have been put to me a number of times by Chinese Canadians of different ages as recently as a couple of days ago, and that is the reason why I wish to speak to you today about my concept of being Chinese-Canadian. I look forward to hearing your views afterwards.

The Chinese Canadian community here is anything but homogeneous. As we all know, even though we are ethnically Chinese, we come from many different backgrounds, as well as many different geographic areas. Moreover, our relation to, as well as acceptance by Canadian society depends also on when we arrive in this country, and the circumstances of our arrival.

The majority of the Chinese who came to Canada from the mid-19th century up to the 1960s, were from Guangdong province, most of them speaking the village dialects of South China. When the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed after the Second World War, the wives and children of these early immigrants were allowed to come to join their husbands and fathers. Many of this group were from peasant background. They are the *Lao Huaqiao*, many of them were workers or ran ethnic businesses. After 1947, some of their children were able to enter the professions.

These were the Chinese-Canadians I met when I came to this country as a visa student in 1959. Many of the older generation still lived in Chinatowns. At that time, there weren't too many ethnic Chinese students in Canadian universities.

In 1967, the point system was introduced in Canadian immigration policy, making it possible for independent immigrants to come on their own merit.

Most ethnic Chinese who came from the 1960s to the early 1990s are included in this group. Most of them speak Cantonese and the majority emigrated from Hong Kong. Some came from Taiwan, and a few from China, because of family reunification.

These later arrivals generally came from a better-educated background, most had a good command of English when they arrived in Canada, and many were affluent. Many have been courted by the business community in Canada, and they also have significant interests in Canadian corporations.

Culturally, the differences between this group and the earlier group in the Chinese community are great, and there are few social links between them.

Immigrants from Hong Kong who had lived one or more generations under British colonial rule had been exposed to some form of British education, and possess some knowledge of the government system, not only of Hong Kong, but of Britain.

By the 1990s, the major source of ethnic Chinese immigrants is from mainland China, particularly since 1995. Many of this group are well-educated, young, and some have come to Canada with young children. Their life experiences are again very different from the last two groups, because many of them have grown up during the Cultural Revolution. They know what their parents have been through with the very harsh realities of the political and economic upheavals in China.

Many of this later group don't trust government because of their experiences in China. However, from what I've noticed, they also tend to be very protective of Chinese sovereignty, such as the reunification of Hong Kong, Macau, and now the rhetoric on the reunification with Taiwan. They feel very "Chinese" because they were citizens of a country that has built a wall to fence them in. This group speaks Mandarin and tends to socialize only among themselves.

In the mean time, the number of immigrants from Taiwan is increasing by leaps and bounds, especially in recent years, with the largest concentration in British Columbia. Despite the fact that they speak Mandarin, they don't socialize with the group from China. After all, the society in Taiwan is capitalistic, and in the last few years, it has also become increasingly democratic. Culturally, it is totally different, and in terms of its government's political position, it is diametrically opposite to mainland China.

In addition to the groups mentioned, there are also ethnic Chinese immigrants from South Asia, South America, the West Indies, South Africa, etc. So how do we define "Chineseness"?

Most of you would, sometime in your life, have heard that because we are ethnically Chinese, we are therefore "sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor," and that we must always have a sense of loyalty towards China. I have always wondered who has the right to say that? As far as I'm concerned, ethnic origin has nothing to do with political allegiance.

The concept that we are all children of the Yellow Emperor has been present since the beginning of Chinese history, but we also know that the Yellow Emperor is mythical. The myth was revitalized in Lynn Pann's book *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, a book about Chinese migration to different parts of the world. In fact, Pann's latest book, *The Encyclopedia of the*

Chinese Overseas, by Harvard University Press, will be out soon for any of you who are interested.

Now, this concept has caused a great deal of dilemma for many overseas Chinese who are courted by both the governments of China and Taiwan. Canada used to recognize the government of the Republic of China, and since 1970, it recognizes the government of the People's Republic of China.

On the subject of political allegiance, I remember that prior to the changeover of sovereignty of Hong Kong, many people were saying that the Chinese government would always consider those of ethnic Chinese origin born in Hong Kong, and those who had been resident of Hong Kong, to be their nationals, no matter where they were, how long they'd lived in another country, or what nationality they held. I was amazed, and wanted to find out the origin of that concept.

It all began with the Nationalist Chinese government in 1927. Dr. Sun Yat-sen was very well received by overseas Chinese, particularly in North America, who gave him great financial support for the revolution. When the Nationalist government was established in 1927, it was decided that the same resource of all ethnic Chinese worldwide should be tapped.

During the Second World War, both the Nationalist government as well as the Chinese Communist Party made use of their ethnic Chinese cousins overseas, not only in financial assistance but also in manpower. Some returned to China to fight in the war. The overseas Chinese who went back to fight in China in the Second World War were mainly involved in guerrilla activities against the Japanese.

Some of the ethnic Chinese in Canada have had family here for over one hundred years. So what does it mean when the Chinese government refers to all ethnic Chinese throughout the world as "Chinese nationals"? In fact, those of us from Hong Kong have to make official applications to the Hong Kong government if we wish to rescind our "Chinese nationality," no matter where we live in the world even though we were British subjects before 1 July 1997.

Chinese have been settling overseas ever since the Ming Dynasty. We all know that people migrate because they want a better life for themselves

and their children. Each one of us here this evening has our own reasons for being in this country. In my case, I became a Canadian because I married one. I have always jokingly referred to myself as an “accidental Canadian.” Since people have been migrating from China to different parts of the world for hundreds of years, all overseas Chinese have similar problems worldwide. Earlier, I mentioned that ethnic Chinese communities vary a great deal as far as socialization, and so we only have in common our ethnicity and cultural heritage. Some of you who are born in Canada or whose families have been in Canada for a few generations still have it instilled in you that you are ethnic Chinese. Many of you are sent to Chinese school, not only to learn the language, but the culture as well. You are told to work hard and respect your elders because of your “Chineseness.” I was told by the younger generation that an early curfew set by their parents is a characteristic of being “Chinese.”

Some of you who don't understand Chinese culture may feel ashamed of your heritage. I have been asked by a number of people, whether they should completely forget about their heritage and try to be part of “mainstream” Canadian society. But what is “mainstream?” What they don't understand is that to be Canadian is to be multicultural. To deny your heritage is to deny who you are. If you don't know your past, how can you have a present or a future?

Like other cultures, ours has many good points on which we can build our communities. Being proud of who we are does not mean we think we are better. We have our strong points, such as the tradition of hard work, respect for our elders, and placing scholarship at the top of our priorities in our lives, and those of our children. I think it is important that we combine our heritage with what we can learn from other cultures in Canada, not only because we have a lot to gain personally, but also because this will enrich Canadian society.

As a young person growing up in Hong Kong, I never felt I had a country. Despite my youth, I was very aware that Hong Kong was a colony, and the indigenous population was dictated to by London. Even though I had a British passport, I knew I would never be welcomed as a citizen in Britain. After I became a Canadian in 1962, being able to vote in elections gave me a special sense of pride in citizenship. I knew then that I finally had a country.

Those of you here today whose families came to Canada before 1947 would have a different feeling than I, because you would have experienced discrimination in many aspects of Canadian life. However, we must remember that that is the past. That is not the Canada of today. Today, we live in an inclusive society, and we are all citizens of this country.

Those of you who have recently come from China also know that this country welcomes you. You have the right of citizenship, the right to vote, and it is here that you have a fair chance of success with your lives.

Over the last few years, I have repeatedly been asked by the media what advice I can give to new immigrants. The most important advice is: to be a citizen of a country does not only mean what you can get out of that country, it is how you can contribute to the country of your choice.

Bringing the best of Chinese culture will be one of the most important contributions we can make to the building of our nation. Yes, it is true, there are still those in Canadian society who discriminate, who don't welcome anybody who does not look like them, or anybody who comes from a part of the world they don't understand. It is the lack of understanding that gives people prejudices. Therefore, we must teach them about our culture as well as learn from them.

We have a system built into our government to fight prejudice and discrimination. It does not just apply to ethnic Chinese, it applies to everyone from every part of the world who lives in Canada. We must all work together to build a better country.

If we don't wish to be discriminated against, we on the other hand, must not discriminate against others. I mention this because ethnic Chinese can be some of the worst people when it comes to discrimination. Many of you would have heard that in Hong Kong, Chinese from mainland China are charging the local Hong Kong Chinese with discrimination. They are made to feel like second-class citizens because they are newcomers from the mainland. So you see, discrimination is everywhere, and we must work hard to eliminate it.

We have recently entered the new millennium. Advances in technology and globalization are occurring faster than ever before. In my view, technology should be used to build a better future for humanity.

From my limited understanding, nationalism has more often than not, brought wars and suffering to humanity. We just have to look around us today in areas of conflict where people suffer in the name of nationalism. I believe we should move beyond national borders and learn to live together harmoniously in a global family.

How does that apply to us today as Chinese-Canadians? At the ethnic Chinese conference held in Manila in 1998, Professor Wang Gungwu, the eminent historian, spoke about four different choices for the ethnic Chinese overseas, linking our past to our future.

In his speech, he said we can weave our personal lives and inclusive past to enlighten and liberate ourselves without threatening our prior loyalties to our community or to China, and that “ethnic Chinese globally can reach out beyond national borders to embrace a common human history.” In this era of globalization, we must all learn to live together peacefully.

In reference to ethnic Chinese in Canada, accepting our heritage is necessary for the health of the community, as well as for ourselves personally. However, having a strong identity with China can be problematic to say the least. Those in our community who insist on stressing our “Chineseness,” as separate from the rest of Canadian society, will bring about discrimination and civil strife. Once we have become citizens of a country, we must learn to be part of that country, which is multicultural Canada.

It is well known that ethnic Chinese have the capacity to contribute significantly to their adopted countries, scientifically, intellectually, as well as economically. We should channel these valuable resources to advance the interests of Canada and of mankind.

Because of our access to the opposite side of the world, and with our cultural understanding, language skills, as well as our global network of ethnic Chinese worldwide, we can help to bring prosperity to Canada.

It is a fact of life that future generations of Canadians will be ethnically mixed. Many of them will have more than two ethnic

backgrounds. It is therefore important for future generations to learn about their cultural past in order to combine the best to build their future.

I recently saw an article in the *Toronto Star* about the multicultural mix of future generations of Canadians. I don't even need to read it in the newspaper because that applies to our family. We now have three grandchildren and they are all of half-Chinese heritage. When our last grandchild was born, our daughter-in-law, who is Japanese, said that our grandson was half-Chinese and half-Japanese. I say he is a Canadian, first and foremost. I actually think he has the best of all worlds!

So, what does it mean to be a Chinese-Canadian? Our allegiance must be to our adopted country. Moreover, I strongly believe that we must use our strength and resources go beyond national borders to embrace the human family.

Thank you.