

FEATURE

A Speech by the Hon. Senator Vivienne Poy

Given at the Chinese-Canadian Heritage Fund inaugural Gaia Dinner, February 19, 2000, Vancouver, British Columbia

Honored Guests, Friends:

It is a great pleasure to be here in Vancouver this evening. Having an opportunity to escape from the freezing Ottawa winter to visit Vancouver is one that I always welcome with enthusiasm, especially when I get to see so many friends and family members every time. It is significant that we are here to inaugurate the Chinese-Canadian Heritage Fund (CCHF) because it was here that the Chinese first arrived to work, and it was here that the Chinese-Canadian community was first established. A little over two weeks ago, we celebrated the Chinese New Year. Years of the Dragon are for those who dream of vast success and brilliant victory over adversity. It is therefore fitting that we celebrate the inauguration of the Chinese-Canadian Heritage Fund at this time.

Ever since the arrival of the first Chinese in Canada, our community has faced incredible challenges, struggled through inhumane adversity, and overcome tremendous obstacles to be recognized as full and equal members of Canadian society. The legacy that has been passed to us is one of strength, dignity, and success. It is a legacy that we should take pride in and build upon. We owe it to those who came before us, and to those who follow us. The CCHF is dedicated to the promotion of the Chinese-Canadian experience, and acknowledges the contribution of our ancestors. We now need to set a good example for those who follow us by contributing to the building of a more open and tolerant Canada. A Canada that learns from the mistakes of the past, welcomes humanity in all its splendid diversity, and draws strength from its multicultural fabric {CCHF, 1998}. The CCHF strives for this objective in many ways. It works for the preservation, recording, and sharing of



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Chinese-Canadian heritage. It provides valuable educational materials to institutions throughout our country. And it works to promote the virtues and advantages of multiculturalism {CCHF, 1998}.

In 1998, we were treated to the premiere of "Canadian Steel. Chinese Grit," a movie that chronicled the story of Chinese laborers who were instrumental in linking British Columbia to the rest of Canada by the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CCHF, 1998). By the beginning of next year, we will be able to enjoy the Chinese-

Canadian opera "Iron Road," excerpts of which you will be hearing this evening. Most recently, the CCHF has spearheaded the production of the Chinese-Canadian Chronological Chart. I would like to publicly acknowledge those who worked so hard for this project, particularly Mr. David Choi, Professor David Lai, Dr. Jan Walls, Mr. Edward Woo, and Mr. Joseph Yap. The Chronological Chart is an invaluable educational tool, and is a stirring testament to the Chinese-Canadian heritage. I am particularly pleased that the federal government, through the Millennium Fund, is a partner in this very worthy cause.

We all know that the history of the Chinese-Canadians is the history of Canada itself, for the Chinese presence in British North America predates confederation. Canada is a country we helped to build. Like any history, however, that of the Chinese in Canada has been filled with both high and low points. It is a history replete with hardship and setbacks (CCHF, 1998). Chinese-Canadians have been subjected to more racist laws than any other group in Canadian society (Taylor, 1991). It is easy, all too easy, to view Chinese-Canadians as perennial victims of their fellow countrymen. It is tempting to dwell only on the negative, the indignities of the past, and the intolerance that has been suffered. But to do so is to allow those who preached hatred to win. Worse still, it is to do a great disservice to our forebears who fought for acceptance and equal rights. For ultimately, the story is one of triumph over adversity, providing a valuable lesson in the strength and vitality of the human spirit. Ours is a story of determination, of a people—whether we were born here, or chose to call Canada home—seeking to be recognized and accepted as full and equal partners for our contribution to nation-building.

Many of us here know the history of the Chinese in Canada well, from the British Columbia Gold Rush in the 1850s to the building of the CPR, to the Head Tax first imposed in 1885 at \$50, later increased to \$500. and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923. The human spirit never ceases to amaze me. As in Chinese immigrant

communities all over the world, associations were set up for mutual support, and through resourcefulness, communities prospered, but only within the context of what was allowed in white Canada, that is, as long as no competition was given to the white population. The Chinese filled a niche that was not desired by the rest of the population, so the Chinese were tolerated when they were needed. Those who came before us fought for Canada during two world wars, and they fought for their rights as Canadian citizens. Many of them are here with us this evening, and we have them to thank that we now have equal rights as Canadians—a right to equal opportunities both professionally and politically. The face of Chinese immigration from different parts of the world has changed tremendously in recent years. The description has changed from "boat people" to "yacht people," and all of a sudden, there's a perception that all Chinese from Hong Kong are rich, and therefore, much sought after by Canadian businesses.

Quite a difference from what Sir John A. Macdonald said in 1882, that Chinese immigration would be "a permanent degradation of the country by a mongrel race" (Con et al. 1982, p. 50). Why were the Chinese historically singled out for discrimination in Canada, especially when they contributed so much to this country? Despite the fact that the Canadian government wanted to keep Canada white, other Asian races were never subjected to the same humiliating policies, and all Chinese, whether Canadian born, naturalized, or new immigrants, were subjected to the same policies. Professor Peter S. Li believes that the term "'Chinese race' was socially constructed in Canadian society in the context of unequal power relations between the dominant majority and a subordinate minority, and is used as a tool and justification for social segregation" (Bolaria and Li 1988, pp. 13-40). This means that in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, our forebears, who came to this country to seek economic stability like most other immigrants, were subordinated as a group in order to be used and controlled.

Canada needed Chinese laborers, not only for building the CPR but also in other industries, such as fishing, lumber, and mining. White Canada needed the Chinese but at the same time did not want competition from them. Educated Chinese were barred from entering the professions.

As many of us here know, by the middle of the nineteenth century. Western as well as Japanese imperialists had invaded China, and the Qing government was at a low point in its history. Its weakness had a major impact on those who had emigrated from the mother country. Even after the revolution of 1911 and the establishment of the Nationalist government, as well as the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China was in such internal turmoil that it was in no position to take care of its emigrants to other countries as Japan was able to do. The Chinese-Canadians were left to their own resources to establish their identity on Canadian soil.

As the Canadian population became more diverse in the second half of the twentieth century, the Canadian government adopted an increasingly more progressive immigration policy. However, it was not until 1967 that Canada adopted a non-racial policy, and Chinese immigrants were put on the same footing as those from Europe and South America (Liu and Norcliffe, 1996). The selection criteria of the immigration policy effectively contributed to the growth of a significant Chinese-Canadian middle class. And that, ladies and gentlemen, was only thirty-three years ago. These changes were promoted by Douglas Jung, who in 1962 became the first Chinese-Canadian elected to the House of Commons. His achievement helped pave the way for many others and was a symbol of the great strides that Chinese-Canadians were making in all facets of Canadian society (Yee, 1996). In 1971, the federal government adopted a policy of multiculturalism, and Vancouver's Chinatown was designated a historic site. What had once been a testament to discrimination was transformed into one of strength and determination.

With the influx of immigrants in the 1980s, the majority of them from Hong Kong, the Chinese-Canadian community has truly come into its own as a full and equal member of the Canadian family. In recognition of the contribution of Chinese-Canadians to the building of British Columbia, as well as Canada, Dr. David Lam was appointed lieutenant governor of British Columbia in 1988. Chinese-Canadians now sit in both houses of the federal parliament. And if you will forgive some family praise, Madame Adrienne Clarkson, a Chinese-Canadian who arrived in Canada as a refugee in 1942, and whose family was almost not allowed to get off the boat in Montreal because they were Chinese, is now Her Majesty's representative.

So when I look at the crowd this evening, I am struck immediately by how far we have come. We have expanded and prospered, producing internationally acclaimed doctors, scientists, academics, artists, architects, entrepreneurs, and politicians at all levels of government. We have indeed come a long way. Canada has come a long way. As the history of the Chinese in Canada shows so clearly, the test of a people's character doesn't occur when times are good, it occurs when times are bad. Chinese-Canadians have demonstrated their strength of purpose, their resolve to be accepted as full and valuable members of Canadian society. But our test isn't over—we must demonstrate that we have gained wisdom from past struggles by sharing our good fortune and by showing compassion to the less advantaged in our society, regardless of whether they are Canadians who trace their roots back to the earliest settlers or whether they have just arrived on our shores. Just because we are well settled in Canada and are prosperous does not mean we should not help those who have just arrived. We must never forget the suffering of our forebears. Being poor is not a crime, and the desire to escape from unbearable conditions is only human. Those of us who are able must help those who are not. Let this be our lasting contribution to a more compassionate Canada.

Despite the fact that racism is no longer institutionalized, the fight against ignorance and discrimination is a battle that is never finished. Even though the social-economic and political position of Chinese-Canadians has improved over the last century, we cannot afford to forget the past or become complacent about the present and the future (CCNC). Canadian society remains susceptible to negative ethnic stereotypes (Avery, 1995). Chinese-Canadians are often seen as "foreigners," whether they are third, second, first generation Canadians, or new immigrants. The airing of a blatantly racist television documentary in 1979, "Campus Giveaway," spurred the creation of the Chinese-Canadian National Council. Public debate brought about by residents in Scarborough against the building of the Dragon Mall in 1984; the controversy of the growing number of Chinese residents and businesses in Markham, brought about by statements made by deputy mayor Carole Bell in 1995; and the negative racial image of "monster homes" are but a few of the many examples.

More recent allegations about criminal activity and traffic in illegal migrants reveals we must remain ever vigilant against intolerance (Avery, 1995). There is a perception in the media that it's a "Chinese problem." It isn't. The criminal activities of human smuggling are global problems. The Chinese migrants who arrived in leaking boats are victims. We don't persecute victims—we help them. We must keep in mind that they are but a minute percentage of those who arrive in Canada from all over the world without documentation. Intolerance is a human trait. It is all too easy to find scapegoats when the majority cannot compete with a minority group, and the notion of the Chinese as a foreign race with incompatible values and tastes can be very appealing to many white Canadians, because it provides simple and convenient explanations for many complex urban, educational, or financial problems.

For more than a century, Chinese-Canadians have contributed to their country and

struggled to become an integral part of Canadian society. The journey has been long and treacherous but one that has been marked by great courage. From humble beginnings, in the face of racism, Chinese-Canadians have overcome both violent and subtle forms of discrimination and racism. Ladies and gentlemen, the struggle continues today, even though it may be a more subtle form. The Chinese-Canadian community thrives now like no other time in its history (CCNC). It will continue to grow stronger in both population and presence. However, racial tensions are likely to continue unless all of us work to obliterate the existing stereotyping of the Chinese-Canadians as being "foreign."

As Canadians, we make our lives in every part of this magnificent country, in all walks of life and in all professions. As Canada enters the twenty-first century, the linguistically diverse Chinese-Canadian community with its social ties to Asia is invaluable to Canada in an increasingly global economy. Canada has a great deal to gain from this valuable resource. The Canadian heritage is our heritage and Canadian history is our history. I commend the founders and contributors to the Chinese-Canadian Heritage Fund for disseminating the information to all Canadians, because education is the best means to improving the receptiveness of Canadian society to racial and cultural diversity, and in so doing, will help to make Canada a truly multicultural country in the twenty-first century.

An author, entrepreneur, fashion designer, and historian, Vivienne Poy is the first Canadian of Asian descent to be appointed to the Senate of Canada. She was appointed to the Senate in 1998, and elected as Chancellor of the University of Toronto in 2003. She founded Vivienne Poy Mode in 1981 and over the following fourteen years enjoyed great success in fashion design, manufacturing and retail. She is currently president of Vivienne Poy Enterprises, Chairwoman of Lee Tak Wai Holdings Ltd., and a member of the board of the Bank of East Asia (Canada). Senator Poy is married to Dr. Neville Poy, a retired plastic surgeon and avid photographer. They have three sons.