MOVING BEYOND TOKENISM

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author questions the token appointment of minorities to ceremonial roles when there is a visible lack of Chinese Canadians in most real positions of power. Given the troubled history of Chinese immigration to Canada, she is not surprised by the low voter turnout and under-representation of the Chinese community in public office. She calls for an effective national anti-racism strategy and redress for the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act.

Norman Kwong, the "living legend" of the Canadian Football League, was recently appointed by the Prime Minister as the new Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta. He is the third Canadian of Chinese descent to be selected to represent the Queen at the federal and/or provincial governments. The other two are the Honourable David Lam of British Columbia, and Her Excellency, the Right Honourable Andrienne Clarkson. All three have had a distinguished career which represents some version of the "rags to riches" story that Canadians like to hear. This is true particularly in the case of Mr. Kwong, who has spoken publicly in the past about the racial prejudice that he and his family experienced growing up at a time when Chinese were legally considered second class citizens.

The appointment of Chinese Canadians to the position of "head of state" is a highly symbolic gesture. But the question remains what that symbol represents. Some would argue that these appointments confirm the status Chinese immigrants have achieved in Canada after 150 years or so since their first arrival. After all, theirs are the ultimate "successful" immigrant stories that fit perfectly well with the Canadian mainstream mythology about the triumph of multiculturalism. Yet underneath the facade of a well integrated community lies the disconcerting reality of inequity. To unveil the truth behind the myth, one must begin with a review of the history of Chinese immigration.

The journey of Chinese immigrants to Canada began with the gold rush in British Columbia in the mid-1800s. At the time, many came from the west coast of the United States where they were originally settled. But when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) began its construction in 1881, Chinese were recruited from China as cheap labour to work on CPR. Between 1881 and 1885, over six thousands Chinese immigrants contributed directly to this nation-building endeavour through the construction of the national railway. Many perished along the Fraser Valley as Chinese workers were often assigned the most dangerous tasks while being paid only half of the white men's wages.

In return for their hard work, Chinese immigrants were then slapped with a head tax which began in 1885, as soon as the last spike was driven. Beginning at $50 per person, the head tax was imposed by the Dominion on all and only Chinese immigrants who entered Canada. It was increased to $100 in 1900 and $500 in 1903, a price that was equivalent to two years wages at the time. The head tax was introduced with the sole purpose of discouraging further immigration of Chinese who, after the railroad was completed, were no longer needed and were thus deemed undesirable immigrants. In total, the Government of Canada made a profit of $23 million from the racist head tax, the same amount that the Government had spent on the building of the CPR.

When the head tax failed to curtail Chinese immigration, the Canadian Government enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, which barred all but a few privileged Chinese (such as diplomats and businessmen) from entering Canada. Repealed in 1947 – two years after the Second World War – the Act successfully achieved its stated purpose. Within the 24-year period the Exclusion Act was in effect, fewer than 50 Chinese were allowed into Canada.

The Chinese men who had come earlier to help build the CPR or as general labourers were effectively barred from bringing their families over. The cumulative effect of the head tax and the Exclusion Act was tremendous economic hardship and immeasurable emotional suffering caused by decades of family separation. The 62 years of legislated racism also halted the growth of the Chinese Canadian community which essentially turned into a married bachelor society of lonely men with

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no wives or families.

Rather than airing its dirty laundry, however, the government of today has deliberately hidden these dark pages of our history behind the multiculturalism tag. We must not dwell on the past says the government; instead we should be looking forward by building a better future for all Canadians. But one cannot build a better future without addressing the mistakes one has made in the past. The government's conscious denial of past injustice and its refusal to accept responsibility for redress is impeding our ability to move forward as a just and equitable society. It is also this type of denial that serves to maintain the continuing dichotomy that exists between the myth and the reality about Canada, and about the Chinese Canadian community.

Contemporarily, the myth about Chinese Canadians is characterized by, for instance, success of Chinese Canadian entrepreneurs and scientists and/or the academic achievement of children of Chinese immigrant parents. With the change in immigration patterns, the rich Hong Kong Chinese immigrant stereotype that was prevalent in the 1980s has gradually been replaced by that of the innovative mainland Chinese computer genius. But the central theme of these mainstream narratives remains the same: Chinese Canadians are the "model minorities" who have benefited from Canada's generous immigration policy and its liberal multiculturalism experiment.

On the surface, the "happy immigrant" narratives are compelling and are supported by the anecdotal evidence of individual stories. They are also in line with what one would expect from the largest allophone community in Canada, which now stands at one million strong. But economically, politically and socially, Chinese Canadians have remained a minority group with little influence.

Economically, reports from Statistics Canada continue to show Chinese Canadians and other racialized communities as over-represented among the poor. Like other immigrants of colour, recent immigrants from China are struggling to survive in low wage, non-unionized jobs. While the doctors from South Asia are driving taxis, Chinese foreign trained physicians are washing dishes in restaurants or operating sewing machines in garment factories.

Within the mainland Chinese immigrant population, as well, there are further artificial divisions drawn among the independent immigrants, family class members, refugees and economic migrants – as if each category of immigrants/refugees has its own unique set of reasons and circumstances for coming to Canada, while ignoring the inter-related political and economic factors within China as the driving force behind the migration pattern. Those who are seen purely as "economic migrants," such as the "boat people" who arrived at the B.C. shore in the summer of 1999, are least deserving of our sympathy, whereas those at the top, namely, the highly educated and highly skilled immigrants, are most worthy of our support.

Indeed, the public outcry surrounding the four boatloads of Chinese refugees in Vancouver and Victoria, B.C. in 1999 brought back painful memories of the anti-Chinese campaign at the turn of the last century in that province that motivated the Government of Canada to eventually put in place racist anti-Chinese immigration law. Such a connection was lost, however, in the mainstream media reporting of the stories. This was so even though officials from Immigration Canada printed a golf shirt of "Class of 91" to celebrate the successful deportation of the first 91 Chinese boatpeople back to China in 2000.

For close to a decade, China has been the top source country of Canada's immigration. Yet Chinese Canadians are almost invisible among the senior levels of all governmental and most corporate institutions. The lack of representation of Chinese Canadians in positions of power is in part a legacy of our country's troubling history. Chinese Canadians were not recognized as citizens and hence were deprived of the right to vote until 1947, the same year when the first Chinese Canadian was allowed to practise law.

The fact that foreign trained professionals within the Chinese and other racialized communities remain grossly underemployed is also indicative of the systemic discrimination within the Canadian workforce. The irony of Canada's pursuit of the "best and the brightest" who end up being slotted into the bottom of our totem pole once they land here is only matched by the equally ironic policy of the restriction of the "lesser" immigrants like family class immigrants who have become the backbones of our economy by the provision of their hard and cheap labour.

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The long lasting scar of racism is left on the hearts of many "lo-wah-kew" (the old Chinese immigrants) who have stayed away from politics to avoid the label of "trouble makers." Those who do become actively involved choose only to participate in the dominant political parties such as the Liberals and the

Conservatives, as if it were the only way to prove their unwavering loyalty to Canada.

Recent arrivals from mainland China have yet to flex their political muscle, partly because their path to full integration has been paved with barriers, but also because the regime that they have left behind does not exactly encourage civil participation in any government decision-making process. But more importantly, the Canadian Government has totally failed to address the need to reach out to and incorporate the issues of the newcomers and immigrants into the electoral process.

Whenever the words "immigrants" and "refugees" are used during an election period, they are more often than not uttered by the party with the most rightwing agenda, which feeds on public fear for "floodgates" and for the importation of crimes through immigration into our country. Such political leaders gain easy political mileage by making election promises to close our border to the "abusers" of our generosity. Added to that list of alleged woes, is the post-911 claim that immigrants and refugees are a threat to our national security. No matter that all the available data continue to show immigrants and refugees to be under-represented among those who commit crime, and that all those responsible for the Twin Towers bombing had entered the United States legally as visitors.

The only time that immigrants are even mentioned positively is when politicians are vying for their votes. Even then, political candidates pay lipservice to such issues as equity and funding for immigrant settlement, while at the same time pathetically displaying their ignorance about the real needs facing those who continue to experience marginalization and political disenfrachisement.

And in the face of such reality, the mainstream media and governments alike continue to feign shock and dismay by the low level of political participation by newcomers and immigrant communities, as if for some reasons beyond anyone's control, these communities simply and steadfastly remain unreachable by the long arms of Canadian democracy.

Yet no one should be surprised by the low voter turnout and the under-representation of all racialized communities, but particularly the Chinese Canadian community within our political apparatus. Across the country, there are but a dozen or so city councilors or provincial MLAs who are persons of Chinese descent. There is less than a handful of federally elected Chinese Canadian politicians, and just as few number of judges.

Those whose politics blend well with the mainstream political ideology are more likely to succeed than those who have entered the political arena with a view to bringing about fundamental change in society. At best, the left leaning politicians of colour will get elected to municipal councils. Anything beyond that level is simply out of reach. Indeed the lo-wah-kews are right in believing that the "trouble makers" label is never far off, especially when you are a minority who has a grudge to hold.

Against this backdrop, what then is the message sent by the Canadian Government through the token appointments of minorities to ceremonial roles?

Against this backdrop, what then is the message sent by the Canadian Government through the token appointments of minorities to ceremonial roles? Appointing Chinese Canadians as figure heads is something that some of us might feel proud of, but it cannot be used to mask the continuing need for substantive change.

Sadly, the governments that make these token appointments often like to point to them as a sign of progress, without even attempting to address the underlying systemic discrimination. Worse still, token Chinese Canadians are sometimes paraded by the Canadian Government on trade missions for the purpose of gaining points in trade negotiations with China, as if our contributions could only be measured in dollar term, and that the Chinese Canadian community has only concerns for the economic progress and not human rights violations in China.

For substantive equality to happen, we need more than token minorities playing ceremonial roles. The Canadian government will do well by us if it immediately provides redress for the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act. In the long run, the government must implement a national anti-racism strategy, as it has promised to do at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. Finally, it should strengthen and expand employment equity initiatives, and increase funding for immigrant settlement services. Only when we are all truly equal, distinguished Chinese Canadians and other persons of colour will no longer bear the burden of being the model minority, and will be celebrated simply for who they are, and what they have accomplished.