

THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN MONTREAL
A speech delivered on Friday, August 29, 2008
by
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Honoured guests, Dear Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very for giving me the honour to speak to you on this grand occasion.

Before talking about the Chinese community, I like to relate to you an old story from the Qianque Encyclopedia (潛確書類).

Related to the story is a Chinese idiom: “Mo Chu cheng zhen (磨杵成針), translated as “Grinding an iron pestle into a needle,” The meaning as you already know is: “there is nothing that cannot be accomplished by perseverance.”

When Li Bai, the famous Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty was a child, he often played truant. Once having slipped out of the classroom he loitered by the roadside and saw an old woman diligently grinding an iron pestle on a stone. Li Bai was curious; he asked her, “Granny, what are you doing?” The old woman said, “I’m going to grind this iron pestle into a needle for sewing cloth.” Li Bai said: “How can you hope to grind this pestle down to a needle?” The granny said: “Although the pestle is big, it will become a needle if I grind it day by day.” Li Bai thought, “She is right. There is nothing that cannot be accomplished by perseverance. The same is true with learning.” Since then he never played truant again and studied diligently. In the end, he became one of the most learned poets in Chinese history.

Now, I will attempt to trace the history of the arrival of the Chinese in Canada. Later I will talk about the Chinese Community in Montreal

According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, in 1788 some 50 artisans and carpenters from Macao, the first Portuguese colony in China, were brought to Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island by Captain John Meares. These men helped John Meares build a trading post and a ship. These Chinese crew members settled in the area, some married local women; but the Chinese culture of this group of immigrants vanished in 70 years.

In the early 19th century, mainly due to the concentration of wealth on a small group of elites, China was weak economically and technologically. The defeat in the 1839-42 Opium War with Britain, and the subsequent invasions of the Japanese, Russian and the united army of 8 Nations, China’s economy was in ruin. Many residents in the south-eastern coastal provinces of China tried to leave the country for a better life.

Many went to the San Francisco area or the Gold Mountain, to look for gold. Ten years later, the gold veins in California were drying up as fast as anti-Oriental feeling was growing. In 1858, Chinese immigrants began arriving from the San Francisco area to work as gold prospectors in River Valley, Barkerville, in British Columbia. They became the first Chinese community. As the Chinese were only allowed to work in the river beds after the Westerners left, they soon found the gold deposits left were limited.

Between 1880 and 1885, 16,000 immigrants and local Chinese workers were recruited to build the most difficult and dangerous British Columbia section of the Canadian Pacific Railway. These Chinese workers were paid half as much as the white workers, a practice continued until the 1930s.

When the railway was finished and cheap labour in large numbers was no longer needed, there was a backlash from union workers, and some politicians turned against the Chinese. After a Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, the Canadian federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act in 1885, putting a head tax of \$50 on Chinese immigrants. In 1900, the head tax was raised to \$100. In 1903, the head tax went up to \$500, which was about two years pay.

With the breakout of World War I (1914-1918), Chinese labour was needed in Canada again. In the last two years of the war, the number of Chinese immigrants increased to 4000 a year. When the war ended, soldiers returned to Canada looking for work, creating another backlash against the Chinese. In 1923, Canada passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which in effect stopped Chinese immigration to Canada until the law was rescinded in 1947. The Chinese population in Canada went from 46,500 in 1931 to about 32,500 in 1951.

In the 1880s, some Chinese came to Montreal. They could not find jobs with decent salaries; some of them could not get any job at all! Most of them worked as cooks and launderers or house-boys in the white families. Eventually, some of the lucky ones saved enough money to open their own laundry, restaurant or grocery store.

The first Chinese-owned laundry, the California Laundry was opened in 1879 on St. Antoine Street. By 1887, others had sprouted up. Lam Lee, Kee Sing and Wah Sing were opened in this short period of time. Chinese laundry peaked around 1930 and died here around 1995.

There were several notable families who were in laundry business or in partnership in this business. An example is the Lee family of Wing's Noodle. The grandfather of Arthur Lee, the founder of Wing's Noodle, came from Tai Shan in 1880, and he opened a laundry store in St. John, Quebec. His son, H.C. Lee joined him and worked at the laundry. As young Chinese in Canada would do in those days, H.C. Lee returned to China to get married and built a home in the ancestral village. In 1911, H.C. Lee returned to Montreal with his wife and a daughter. Six more sons were born to the couple. Three of them had university education.

Recently, Robert, Arthur Lee's brother told me that, when they were in primary school, they were often teased by the local white boys. When they were walking home after school, they had to walk as a group to avoid trouble.

When Robert graduated with a Metallurgy Science degree in 1947 from McGill University, at his first job interview, he was told by the personal department staff, that they do not hire black, Jews and Chinese. With persistence, eventually, Robert got a job as a research engineer with what is now Liquid Air Canada. Together with Mr. Guy Savard, they developed a new technology for the Bath Smelting of Steel using pure gases injectors; a technology for steel refining that has become the standard throughout the world. For this achievement, Robert Lee received the Order of Canada in 2004, and an honorary degree from McGill University.

Another prominent family, the family of Wong Wing started a small factory to produce Chinese egg rolls in 1948. Initially, the modest factory was built by Lucille Wong and her brother Marcel Wong in partnership with Mr. Wing. After the passing of Mr. Wing, the Wong family purchased the shares of the Wing family. Eventually, all the brothers and sisters became strong supporters for the development of the Wong Wing company. This company became an international establishment with over 400 workers. The company was sold to McCain Foods a couple of years ago.

At the academic level, the Chinese in Montreal produced many outstanding achievements. I only have time to mention a few of these remarkable individuals.

In the 40s and 50s, there were many outstanding Chinese McGill graduates, notably: Mr. Norman Lee, who became the Chief Engineer of Alcan Aluminum. Dr. Wah Leung, an Order of Canada laureate, who became the Founding Dean of Dentistry at University of British Columbia. Dr. David Lin, the first Chinese surgeon in Montreal and a member of the Order of Canada. Prof. Paul Lin, also an Order of Canada recipient and brother of Dr. D. Lin, was the first director of the Centre for East Asian Studies at McGill University. Mr. Lewis Chow was a Division Chief Engineer of Pratt and Whitney.

In late 50s and early 60s, there was a wave of Chinese students from Hong Kong. Many of these students became world renowned professionals and academics. The following are just a few of these outstanding individuals.

At McGill University alone: - Prof. Jonathan Lee, Director of Atomic Energy Lab. Prof. Tommy Mark and Prof. Harry Lam, both well known physicists and Directors of the Department of Physics. Prof. Christina Chan Hui, Director of Physiology. Dr. Tomas Chang, Officer of the Order of Canada, and a Director of the Artificial Organ Centre. Dr. Chang is considered as the father of artificial blood research. He is also the Honorary Chair of the

American Artificial Organ Institute. He has been nominated for the Noble Prize twice. Prof. Bill Chan, who has been a Director of the Department of Chemistry, Dean of Science and finally a Vice-Principal-Academic of McGill University, retired from McGill recently, but he is still doing research in Green Chemistry. Prof. Cheong Shun Kong, a former department head at McGill, became the Principal of the Science and Technology University in Hong Kong. The list can go on, but I do not have the time to continue.

Most of these professors have been named Emeriti Professors, the highest honour for a professor at McGill.

In the early sixties Senator Vivienne Lee Poy graduated in History and Political Science at McGill University. She served as a Governor there for four years only because she was elected as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto. Vivienne Poy's husband Neville Poy, graduated from McGill's Faculty of Medicine and is a plastic surgeon, now retired. He has been awarded the honour of Officer of the Order of Canada.

Currently, there is some 80 Chinese academic staff at McGill, many of them holding important positions in various departments. A notable individual is Prof. Grace Fong, former Director of Women's Studies, and past Director of the East Asian Studies. Her husband, Prof. Robin Yates, is a world renowned historian on China. These two professors alone put the Department of East Asian Studies of McGill in the forefront of their studies.

Without exception all the academics mentioned above have all reached their achievements with great perseverance, reminding us of the Chinese Idiom.

The Chinese population increased dramatically in the 70s. Most of these new immigrants are from Vietnam, or other parts of South East Asia. From the late 80s onwards there have been many new immigrants from Taiwan and China.

The current Chinese community is a vibrant community. There are business people, shop keepers, restaurant owners, chefs, and waiters. They all work hard and contribute to society. Mr. Jack Lee, holder of the Order of Canada, owned a successful Chinese restaurant business. Currently, there are many successful restaurant operators: Mr. Kwan of Kam Fung restaurant, Mr. Tran of Furama, etc.

Others in the community are educators, administrators, office workers, financial advisors, engineers, architects, accountants, lawyers, doctors, medical specialists and other health providers, dentists, etc. Many of these professionals are principals of their own practice. We are mostly hard-working people, contributing to the Canadian economy and well being, and we are proud of that.

Fifteen years ago, The Federation of the Canadian Chinese Professionals (Quebec) or FCCP, was established to increase the communication among professionals and to promote the professions. The founding directors were Dr. Stanley Seah, Mr. Nim Jup Fan, Dr. Andrew Mok, Mr. John Chen, Ms. Margaret Lam, Ms Helen Law, Mr. Patrick So, Dr. Rosalinda Go and Mr. Arthur Lau. The current president is Mr. Howard Tan, who is also a director of the Association for Business and Community Development (ABCD), the organization responsible for the Celebration dinner tonight. The president of ABCD is Alice Choy.

Now I will speak on volunteer work in the Chinese community. Volunteer work always played a vital role in the Chinese Community. In Montreal there are over 70 organizations carrying out various types of volunteer work.

An important organization in the community is the United Centre, which provided housing for low income families and other services. Its president is Dr. Shao Li Ping. The United Centre is responsible for the formation and construction of this Cultural Centre. The building we are in now is result of the hard work of many contributors. The president of this cultural centre is Mrs. Pierrette Wong.

There are over 10 Chinese schools in Montreal. Most of these schools are non-profit organizations. One of the larger non-profit schools is the Montreal Chinese (Mandarin) School. Currently there are about 1,250 students in this school. The Chairman of this school is Mr. Frank Chan. To promote Chinese Culture, in Montreal, we have the Montreal Chinese Cultural Society and several other cultural groups. There is also, the Chinese Poet's Association, which produces high standard traditional poems every week.

Providing social service, we have the Family Service Centre, which was established over 30 years ago. Today the centre has two branches. Ms. Pauline Wong is the current president of the Service Centre.

The oldest and the most important institute serving the Chinese community is the Montreal Chinese Hospital. The Montreal Chinese Hospital was founded during the influenza epidemic in 1918 by the First Canadian Missionary Institute. After treating 55 men, the epidemic subsided, and the temporary clinic was closed. In 1920, 50 members of the Benevolent Chinese Association together with the support of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception established a modest hospital at 112 de la Gauchetiere Street West. In 1962, the City of Montreal Public Health authorities declared the building unfit for healthcare.

On July 12, 1963, a new Corporation was formed. A public campaign of 1 million dollars was launched in early 1964. In 1965, a new hospital, with 65 beds, located on 7500 St. Denis Street was officially opened. The few patients in Chinatown were transferred to the new hospital.

In 1971, as required by Bill 65, the Hospital became public and three separate organizations were formed:- The Montreal Chinese Hospital Corporation, which owns the building and has the final say regarding the real asset of the Hospital, the current President is Nim Jup Fan; the Montreal Chinese Hospital, which operates the Hospital, the President is Dr. Andrew Mok, and the Montreal Chinese Hospital Foundation, which takes care of the fund-raising to support the special needs of the Hospital, the President is Helen Law. Another independent organization supporting the Hospital and the Foundation is the Women's Auxiliary, which was formed in 1965. The president is Elaine Chan Pratt.

In December 1982, the Sung Pai Reception Centre, a new addition to the Hospital with 44 beds was opened.

In 1987, another fund-raising campaign for \$2.2 million to build a new hospital in Chinatown was approved by the provincial government. This new Hospital with 128 beds, located at 189 Viger Street East, was opened on April 20, 1999. At various stages of the hospital development, a number of the people mentioned earlier were deeply involved. These people worked as volunteers tirelessly and with utmost perseverance.

Besides hard-work and perseverance, the Chinese community values a life of **Mutual Respect, Fairness and Harmony**. Above all we want to work and live in harmony within the community as well as with everyone in the society.

To conclude this presentation, I would like to express an aspiration of the Chinese community by quoting the last two lines of an important poem recently written by Professor Duo-Liang Lin of the University of Buffalo:-

“We want One World, One Dream, and Peace on Earth.
This Big Blue Earth is Big enough for all of Us.”

Thank you.