

# Canada-Asia Relations and the Young Generation

By Hanna Cho and Jean Michel Montsion

Sunday marked the first day of the Lunar New Year. Many of us here in Olympics-obsessed Vancouver forgot this, and had Olympic organizers had their way, the 36th Vancouver Lunar New Year festivities and parade would have been cancelled, due to "security and other concerns." Fortunately, a compromise was reached, and Vancouverites of non-Asian and Asian heritage alike had the opportunity to come together in celebration of an important Canadian holiday. And, perhaps, reflect on how Canada's future connects with Asia and whether this relationship is one that impacts them in a way that goes beyond lanterns, dumpling soup, and the politics of revitalization in Chinatown.

Amid the Olympic frenzy, it's not hard to understand why organizers wanted to do away with any additional road closures and crowd management activities. However, this near-cancellation is symptomatic of, and clearly exemplifies, a grave underestimation of the importance of Canada's connection with Asia.

That is, for most Canadians, the Canada-Asia relationship is an afterthought, and mainstream notions of what and how it is configured often remain rooted in outmoded culturalist perspectives that see little beyond parades and ethnic enclaves. This was demonstrated to the world with the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, with a glaring omission of any mention of the role of Asian heritage in Canada's history and future.

Granted, there was one easy-to-miss mention in Shane Koyczan's spoken word performance of Canada's Chinatowns, but even this simply reproduced and demonstrated an obsolete understanding of how Canada perceives its relationship with its growing Asian communities. Happily, this is starting to change, and a generational shift is evident, led by globally minded young Canadians who have grown up with the world at their doorstep, with deep and diverse connections to Asia.

Broadly speaking, Canadians are increasingly cognizant of the importance of Asia in their lives. We see this reflected in responses collected in the Asia Pacific Foundation's National Opinion Polls on Canadian Views on Asia. For example, in 2004, 33 per cent of Canadians did not know if Canada was part of the Asia Pacific region, whereas in 2008, 54 per cent of Canadians agreed that our country was part of that geographical region.

At the vanguard of this shift is an emerging new generation of Asia practitioners, whose unmistakable energy and passion came through loud and clear in the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada's recent youth-oriented video contest, 25@25: Canada's Future with Asia. Emphasizing the need for more cross-cultural opportunities, and to build on the immense human capital linking Asia to Canada through newcomers, expats, Canadians of Asian origin, these young Canadians expressed a clear desire to build a stronger, forward-looking, and more dynamic relationship between Canada and Asia.

And as we welcome the Year of the Tiger, perhaps their aspirations will come true sooner than they expected. Last week, the premier of B.C. announced plans for the creation of a National Centre on Contemporary Asia, to build on the growing role of British Columbia as Canada's Asia Pacific Gateway.

Over the course of these Olympics, and as Vancouver and Canada both continue to work overtime in order to present their best face for a global audience; we should take this opportunity to meaningfully consider the kinds of global relationships and connections that will shape our collective future.

And instead of seeing the historic confluence of the Winter Olympics and Lunar New Year falling on the same dates as each other, perhaps we might take it as a unique opportunity to start anew, and celebrate Canada's Asian heritage, its contemporary relationship, and look excitedly to what may emerge as one of our most important future relationships.

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