

Commentary

Vancouver has long been recognized as Canada's "Gateway to the Pacific." For many, this tag is simply a statement of the city's position on the western edge of the North American continent and its role as a natural portal to the Pacific Ocean and the continent that lies beyond. The historic links between Vancouver and Asia are well known: Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century coming to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway; the arrival of East Indian immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century; the establishment of a Japanese fishing community in Steveston, just south of Vancouver, in the early years of last century; large numbers of migrants from Hong Kong in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and the emergence of Vancouver

as a major destination for tourists and English language students from Asia in the past decade. There should be no disputing Vancouver's credentials as a gateway, but this notion of the city's Asian ties is increasingly outdated, as the economic, human, and cultural linkages that were built on the city's strategic location transform the city itself. The time has come for Vancouver to be seen not just as a North American gateway to the Pacific and to Asia beyond, but as part of the Asia Pacific community itself. However, emphasizing Vancouver's Asian credentials is not to deny the city's Canadian and North American reality. The promotion of "Vancouver as an Asian City" is not about identifying Vancouver with Tokyo, Beijing or Singapore, but rather a statement of Vancouver's unique character within North America.

Vancouver as an Asian City

Attaching the label "Asian City," or indeed any other tag to a city as diverse as Vancouver, is problematic. There is no such thing as a typical Asian city, and even less a collective "Asian" identity. The population of Greater Vancouver and the Lower Mainland is not predominantly from Asia, even if ethnic Asians make up a very large share of communities in the city proper and in some surrounding municipalities. Nonetheless, to say that Vancouver is an

Asian City is to recognize that very fundamental changes in Vancouver's demographic and cultural make-up over the past 20 years came about primarily through influences from Asia. Even so, these influences — in art, architecture, cuisine, traditions and socio-cultural norms — were not simply grafted onto Vancouver society but are continually mediated through existing local practices. Of course, the "Asianization" process has not been without conflict (as with the so-called Monster Houses of the early 1990s that offended neighbourhood sensibilities or in the problem of Asian gangs), but the main story of Vancouver's transformation is one in which the integration of large numbers of visible minorities and their cultures has been achieved with relatively little social conflict. The cliché about Vancouver becoming another Hong Kong is, in this sense, misplaced, not only because the flow of new Hong Kong immigrants to Canada is now insignificant, but also because the areas where such immigrants predominantly settle display as much of modern North America in their character as they do of Hong Kong. To this extent, ascribing an Asian character to Vancouver is not simply a



Asia Pacific
Foundation
of Canada

Fondation
Asie Pacifique
du Canada

Canada Asia Commentary
is published up to 12
times a year and is
available by e-mail and
on the APF Canada
Website:
www.asiapacific.ca

reference to the number of Vancouver residents of Asian descent but about how Vancouver itself, and many of its non-Asian inhabitants, have been influenced by Asia.

City unique in North America because of . . .

To view Vancouver as an Asian city therefore is not to deny its essentially Canadian or North American character, but rather to celebrate the uniqueness of Vancouver within North America. A 1997 *Time* magazine headline breathlessly described Vancouver as “Asia’s New Capital,” but a more apt description might be “North America’s Asian Capital.” In the context of seemingly inexorable North American integration and the perennial Canadian quest to distinguish itself from the United States, Vancouver stands apart.

Vancouver’s strategic role as Canada’s gateway to the Asia-Pacific region is seen in numerous economic and commercial indicators:

. . . trade profile

- British Columbia does more of its trade with Asia, particularly Japan, than any other province, and most of this trade flows through Vancouver. In 2000, BC imports from Asia on a per capita basis were more than twice the Canadian average, and by far the highest in the country. In 2000, Japan accounted for 17.5% of BC trade compared with 2.2% of all Canadian trade. Not surprisingly, several major Japanese trading companies, including Sumitomo, Marubeni, and Mitsubishi, locate their Canadian headquarters in Vancouver.

. . . shipping ties

- The Port of Vancouver is Canada’s largest and most diversified port by far, as well as the largest on the Pacific coast in terms of cargo volume handled, total trade value and by outward shipments (which considerably exceed incoming volume). Overall, 62% of the port’s export shipments, by value, are headed for Asia, with Japan the leading destination. Four of the Port of Vancouver’s top 10 shipping destinations in 2000 were in Asia. Vancouver specializes in the shipment of bulk cargo, like grains, coal and forest products, with container traffic accounting for a substantially smaller throughput. Vancouver’s container traffic ranks it as only sixth busiest on the North American Pacific coast, although this reflects more the nature of Canada’s exports to Asia than the port’s lack of competitiveness. Even so, all of Vancouver’s top 10 trading partners in terms of container tonnage in 2000 were Asian countries. All told, Vancouver is closely integrated in a network of Asian ports such as Tokyo-Yokohama, Hong Kong, Pusan and Singapore.

. . . air connections

- Vancouver International Airport (YVR) is a vital gateway to Asia Pacific. YVR is second only to Los Angeles on the West Coast in terms of handling international passenger traffic and with its location on the “Great Circle Route” to Asia has arguably the best location in all of North America to service Asia-Pacific flights. For example, a flight from Beijing to Dallas would save 2½ hours in flying time using Vancouver as a gateway rather than San Francisco. Last year about one third of YVR’s international passengers came from or were headed to Asia. The airport handled 110 non-stop weekly flights to the region last summer (before September 11), up from 100 the year before. These included 28 non-stop flights a week to Hong Kong, 19 to Tokyo, and 17 to Taipei. To the south, Seattle’s SeaTac Airport handles less than half as much international traffic overall, even though it is a substantially larger facility.

. . . tourist traffic

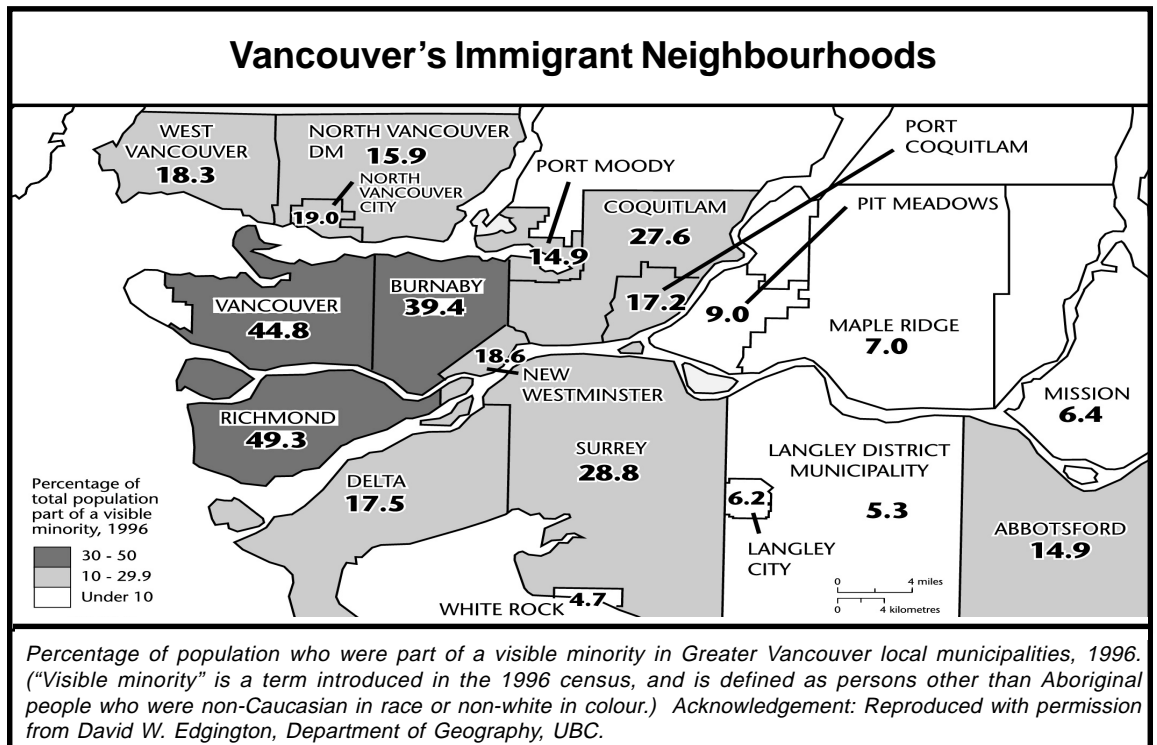
- The 758,500 overnight visitors Vancouver attracted from Asia last year represented 22% of all international visitors, almost double the number of visitors from Europe (not surprisingly, most foreign visitors came from the US). In 2000, Asian visitors generated nearly C\$1 billion in tourism revenue for the city. As the impact of September 11 on international travel fades, and economic recovery in Asia (hopefully including Japan) picks up, the number of Asian tourists – particularly from China – will likely increase.

. . . banking link

- HSBC Bank Canada, the Canadian arm of the largest bank in Asia outside Japan, has established Vancouver as the headquarters of its Canadian operations. It is Canada’s largest foreign financial institution. HSBC Bank Canada president, Martin Glynn, is also chief operating officer of HSBC North America Inc., the holding company for all HSBC’s North American activities.

Many Asian countries have consular offices

Vancouver also serves as a diplomatic gateway for consular representation by Asian countries and as the host of Asia Pacific intergovernmental meetings. There are currently 52 consulates in Vancouver, including representative from 14 Asian countries (not far behind the 18 represented in Ottawa by embassies). Singapore's only diplomatic presence in Canada is in Vancouver, represented by a Consul-General (the High Commissioner, cross-appointed to the United Nations, is based in New York). When Canada chaired the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1997, the Leaders' Meeting was held in Vancouver, reflecting the city's special position in the Pacific Rim. Likewise the APEC Business Advisory Council – representing top business leaders from the 21 member economies – met in Vancouver in February 2002, as have several APEC ministerial groups. The only institution created by the Federal Government with a head office mandated to be in Vancouver is the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, established by an Act of Parliament in 1984.



Universities house Asian institutes

Vancouver's educational linkages with Asia are particularly strong. The University of British Columbia (UBC) in particular, and Simon Fraser University (SFU) to a lesser extent, have committed to the study of Asia through stand-alone departments, institutes and research programs, as well as in traditional disciplines. The Institute of Asian Research at UBC and the David Lam Centre at SFU are important centres of scholarship and teaching on Asia, but an Asian focus can be found in many other research and training programs at the two universities, including international relations, immigration, commerce and law. In addition, Capilano College runs the award-winning Asia Pacific Management Cooperative Program and, nearby, the University of Victoria has a well-established program in Pacific and Asian Studies as well as a centre dedicated to Asia Pacific initiatives.

ESL schools a magnet for young students

The most visible manifestation of Vancouver's educational linkages with Asia are the thousands of young Asians who can be seen in the street or riding public transport any day of the week – the clients of the "English as a Second Language" (ESL) industry. Tens of thousands of students come to Canada each year to learn English, many of them landing in Vancouver, and most of them coming from Asia (though the numbers from Latin America have grown rapidly in recent years). Japan has traditionally been the primary market for this industry, but the number of

students from South Korea has been growing very fast, with strong demand as well from China. The Canadian Education Centre Network has estimated that the contribution of foreign students to the Canadian economy is in the order of \$2-2.5 billion annually and a large portion of this is generated in Vancouver.

Immigration only one part of city's "Asianness"

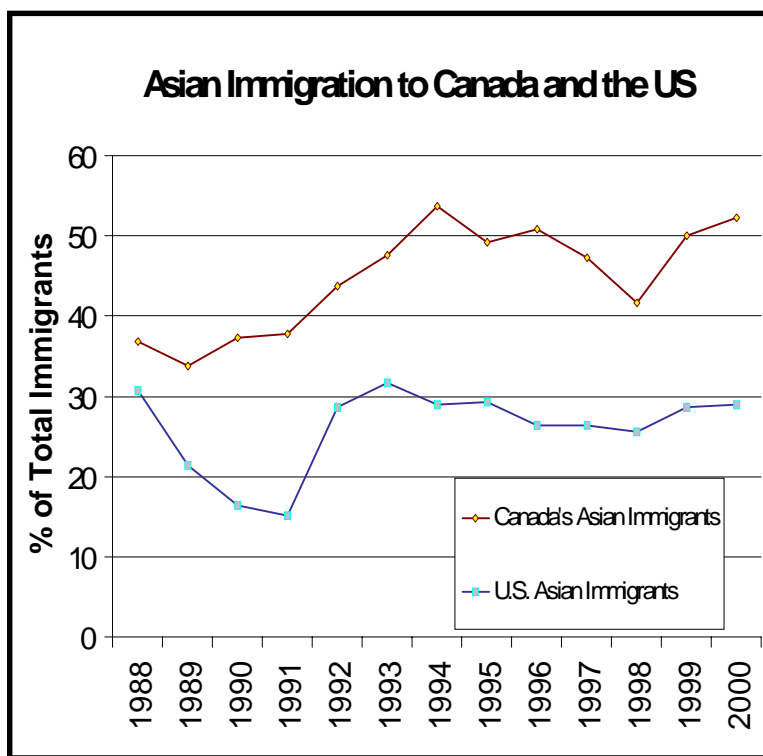
The case for Vancouver as an Asian City does not rest on the breadth or density of these transpacific links, important and impressive as these may be. Rather, Vancouver's Asian character – distinct in North America – derives from a transformation of the city itself – its schools, neighbourhoods, arts and entertainment, cuisine, media and civic engagement. At the heart of this transformation is the remarkable demographic change that Vancouver has seen in the past two decades, driven in large part by immigration from Asia.

According to the 1996 census, 35% of Vancouver's population is foreign-born with about 56% of this immigrant population from Asia. Between 1994-96, the proportion of immigrants from Asia landing in Vancouver was 80%, compared to 58% for Toronto and 33% for Montreal. The share of residents claiming an Asian language as their mother tongue is higher in Vancouver than in any other Canadian city. Indeed, the 1996 census (the most recent figures on ethnicity and language available) shows that Asian languages constitute eight of the top 10 languages spoken at home. These statistics are a little dated but present a snapshot of the dramatic impact that immigration has had on Vancouver. As the pace of Asian immigration to Canada since 1996 has not let up, the demographic transformation of Vancouver is likely to be even more dramatic today. An updated snapshot, based on the 2001 census, will be available in early 2003.

US immigrant flow from Asia is lower

The importance of Asian source countries in Canadian immigration is in marked contrast with immigration to the United States. Over the past 10 years, the share of Asian immigrants in total new arrivals to the US is only 24%, or just under half the equivalent percentage for Canada. Even though Americans of Asian descent far outnumber Canadians of Asian descent, the concentration of Canadian Asians in a few cities, especially Vancouver, will, over time, stand out as a distinguishing feature of Canada.

The broadening of Vancouver's diversity shows no sign of decelerating. Between 1991 and 1996, Asian countries took the top eight spots in source countries of immigrants



Sources: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. *Citizenship and Immigration Statistics, 1990 - 2002*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Services, 1992 - 2002; 1997 figures were prepared by Citizenship and Immigration for the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, *Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2000 Statistical Yearbook*. 1 May 2002. <http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics>

arriving in Vancouver. Despite a marked decline in arrivals from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the past few years, Vancouver's immigration continues to be Asia-Pacific based, with China becoming the major source country. In 2000, 74% of arriving immigrants in the city came from Asia, a similar proportion to the previous decade.

As the table below shows, the composition of Asian immigration has been changing.

| Top Asian Immigrant Sources to Vancouver, 1998-2001 | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Country | 1998 | | 1999 | | 2000 | | 2001 | | Total |
| | # | % | # | % | # | % | # | % | |
| China | 5,602 | 32.89 | 7,699 | 44.17 | 9,076 | 50.52 | 9,002 | 48.88 | 31,555 |
| Hong Kong | 1,808 | 10.62 | 718 | 4.12 | 457 | 2.54 | 309 | 1.68 | 3,311 |
| India | 1,010 | 5.93 | 1,400 | 8.03 | 1,526 | 8.49 | 1,403 | 7.62 | 5,369 |
| Philippines | 1,387 | 8.14 | 1,575 | 9.04 | 1,606 | 8.94 | 1,995 | 10.83 | 6,600 |
| South Korea | 1,511 | 8.87 | 1,456 | 8.35 | 1,484 | 8.26 | 2,010 | 10.91 | 6,497 |
| Taiwan | 4,046 | 23.76 | 2,768 | 15.88 | 1,557 | 8.67 | 1,347 | 7.31 | 9,774 |
| Totals | 15,364 | 90.22 | 15,616 | 89.59 | 15,706 | 87.43 | 16,066 | 87.23 | 63,106 |

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002

China replaced Hong Kong as Canada's largest source of immigrants in 1998 and, short of changes in immigration policy, there is no reason to expect a near-term decline in these numbers. The same is true for Canada's recent second-largest source country – the Philippines. Looking ahead, South Korea is also likely to grow in importance as a source of immigrants, with the rate of increase in the last few years around 35% a year.

Labour force mix a potential advantage

The diversity of Vancouver's labour force is a competitive advantage for the city, and one that is actively marketed by the Vancouver Economic Development Commission. In recent years, the city has attracted proportionally more economic class immigrants (which includes skilled workers and business immigrants) than either Toronto or Montreal. Many of these immigrants, however, are not working to their potential because of poor labour market conditions, lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and language difficulties. The challenge of effectively integrating new immigrants remains a major problem but it is unlikely that integration problems will persist beyond the first generation arrivals. Whether this pool of immigrant talent translates into more and deeper Canadian business ties with Asia is still unclear. It is reasonable to expect that the Asian knowledge and contacts that immigrants bring to Canada will be deployed in new transpacific business, but it may only be in the medium term that this "hidden advantage" will show up in Canada-Asia trade and investment figures. When it does, Vancouver will be the greatest beneficiary because of its high concentration of skilled Asian immigrants.

Cityscape changed by Asian investment

Asian immigration has also transformed the physical appearance of Vancouver. The municipality of Richmond, just south of Vancouver, has one of the highest average annual farm receipts of B.C. municipalities, sustained in large part by a majority of South Asian agricultural workers. The most dramatic example of Vancouver's urban transformation is False Creek, formerly the site of Expo 86, Vancouver's very successful World's Fair. This \$3 billion re-development project – offering residential, recreation and shopping facilities adjacent to the downtown core – is a popular choice for wealthy Asian immigrants looking to settle in Vancouver. Backed largely by Asian money (until recently, the largest

shareholder of Concord Pacific, the developer, was Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing), the development is also significant as a symbol of overseas Chinese capitalism's extended reach into North America. Another example is the Fairchild Group of companies, controlled by Thomas Fung, which has not only transformed the physical landscape with its "Hong Kong style" shopping malls but has also shaped the way Chinese-speaking residents see themselves through its network of Fairchild radio and television stations.

Cultural influences make their mark

Cultural, social and religious linkages are no less important in shaping Vancouver's identity as an Asian city. The physical manifestation of these linkages can be seen in Sikh and Buddhist temples across the city, the Japanese National Nikkei Heritage Centre in Burnaby, or the Sun Yat Sen Chinese Garden in Chinatown, to name a few examples. In the same way, an elaborate social infrastructure has developed around various Asian immigrant communities, including the Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC) and the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services (SUCCESS). SUCCESS holds a yearly fundraising gala billed as the largest Asian community event in North America. This year's sold-out concert on March 9, featuring top entertainers from Asia, was the 29th in a series, and was broadcast to audiences in Toronto, Hong Kong, China and Southeast Asia. In January, four Chinese-American brothers with strong links to Asia bought a silenced Vancouver cultural landmark, the Ford Theatre, for C\$7.7 million. They have re-opened the theatre as The Centre in Vancouver for the Performing Arts and intend to feature many theatre productions that have an Asian flavour. The Centre will open with the North American debut of *Of Heaven and Earth*, an "East-West fusion dance show" that made its world debut in Beijing last year. By bringing Asian performances to the city's mainstream cultural scene, the new owners are in effect building on the idea of Vancouver as an Asian city. Yet another example of Vancouver's evolving and unique Asian identity is The Vancouver Centre for Contemporary Asian Art — or Centre A — established in 1999 and serving as an aesthetic and cultural bridge with Asia.

City slow to build on Asian influence

There is a stereotype of Vancouverites and British Columbians in general as self-satisfied people who tend to take for granted the physical and climactic assets that they enjoy. This might well extend to the evolving demographic and socio-cultural assets that increasingly define Vancouver as an Asian City. Yet, its very Asian character requires active encouragement from policy-makers at the municipal, provincial and federal level. At the municipal level, complacency in Vancouver's Asian ties is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of new initiatives in its sister city relationships with Yokohama, Japan (since 1965) and Guangzhou, China (since 1985). Though multiculturalism is pervasive in the city's outreach programs, communication efforts, not to mention its complex social planning mandate, tend to concentrate on links with local Asian ethnic groups rather than looking beyond our borders for new connections. This detracts from the promotion of Vancouver's Asian credentials. In this context, the 2010 Vancouver Olympic bid presents a sterling opportunity for the city to showcase its multicultural character, including its unique status as "North America's Asian Capital." However, there appears to be a reluctance on the part of municipal leaders to embrace and to promote a vision of Vancouver with its Asian characteristics which strikes even the shortest-term visitor as obvious.

Government can do more to grow ties

The provincial government is on a course to improve the business climate, which is expected to reignite the waning interest of Asian entrepreneurs and investors in the province. In addition, the government has identified Asian countries, particularly China and India, as key new markets for the troubled forest products industry, which is being squeezed out of its traditional US market. In the area of tourism, the potential for growth in visitors from

China could be massive, but transpacific business will not result from wishful thinking. An investment in long-term market development (and lobbying, in the case of tourism) will be required both in Asia and within the province. Even though immigration is a federal responsibility, the province has the ability to offer investment programs and to select immigrants with particular skills. British Columbia should continue to embrace immigration as a source of long-term strength for the economy and to leverage its position as a destination of choice for skilled Asian immigrants.

**Vancouver is
“Asian” but
not “of Asia”**

It is worth restating the point that placing emphasis on Vancouver’s Asian credentials does not amount to repudiating the city’s Canadian and North American reality. Likewise, it is not a statement of Asian Canadian assertiveness – there is far too much diversity within this community for Asian Canadians to speak with a common voice on any given issue. On the contrary, the promotion of “Vancouver as an Asian City” is a statement of the uniqueness of Vancouver within North America. This uniqueness is one important way in which Canada is different from the United States and is an example of Canada’s orientation to the Pacific despite the overwhelming force of continentalist thinking since the launch of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Indeed, it can be argued that Canada’s credentials as a member of the Asia Pacific community, for example through the APEC forum, derive in no small measure from the reality of Vancouver as an Asian city. The full implications for foreign policy are not clear – on one level it means certain domestic issues in source countries of Asian immigrants have intruded into Canadian life. The struggles within the Sikh community over the issue of Punjabi independence, is one example. But to the extent that Ottawa continues to place importance on Asia (whether as a counterweight to increasing North American integration or for its own sake), Vancouver should be seen as part of that strategy. This would include investing in Vancouver a nucleus of policy development activities that have a natural orientation toward Asia, such as investment promotion, transport, immigration and tourism. The intention is not to create an Asia-policy ghetto on the West Coast but rather to position the instruments of policy development closest to the sources of information and activity. By doing so, Vancouver would not be turning its back on North America, but would be establishing itself as North America’s Asia Capital.



Canada-Asia News Service **Subscribe online at www.asiapacific.ca**

A free email service bringing news of Canada-Asia developments, plus major stories from Asia, to your computer every business day.

don't be left in the dark...

The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada
Canada’s leading resource on Asia.



For general information on
APF Canada publications
Tel: (604) 684-5986
Fax : (604) 681-1370
e-mail: info@asiapacific.ca
or visit our website:
www.asiapacific.ca

While every effort has been taken to verify the accuracy of this information, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada cannot accept responsibility or liability for reliance by any person or organization on the use of this information. This Commentary may be copied whole or in part and/or re-distributed with acknowledgement to “the Asia Pacific Foundation, Canada’s leading independent resource on Asia and Canada-Asia issues”. Archive issues of Canada Asia Commentary may be found at <http://www.asiapacific.ca/analysis/pubs/commentary.cfm>. APF Canada is funded in part by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and the Canadian International Development Agency.