



Chinese Soft Power and the Canadian Youth

An Engagement Model

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Living with China just got easier. In a recent article appearing in the *Globe and Mail*, Stewart Beck, president and CEO of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, thanks Donald Trump for a recent favorable shift in Canadian attitudes towards China¹. According to him, this is reflected in this year's Asia Pacific Foundation National Opinion Poll which concludes that 68 % of Canadians feel confident that China will be a global leader on economic issues and 70 % that a closer relationship will bring opportunities for Canadian youth². This last statistic is of particular importance. A review of the literature stresses the need of engaging the leaders of tomorrow to tap into Chinese potential³. As we are starting to understand that Canada's multilateral and global governance role requires recognition of the economic and political shift promoted by the rise of China⁴, the pursuit of a new ambitious China agenda is necessary. Moreover, Canadian youth already perceive traditional trading partners, such as the US and EU, to be less important⁵.

However, despite an alignment between recent national opinion and government action, partnering with China remains a daunting challenge for Canadians. Given ideological differences and distinctive value orientation⁶, Canada lags behind Australia, New Zealand, and the United States both in China Literacy and in youth engagement⁷. In their analysis of youth-China engagement models, Lynette H. Ong and James Flynn propose that Canada emulate the Australian model and adopt a series of policy recommendations. Without a doubt, policy does play a key role in facilitating interchange. That being said, we find that this top-down approach brings about a major oversight: a bold assumption that the

¹ Beck, Stewart. "The Trump effect is changing Canadian views on China." *The Globe and Mail* (Vancouver). May 3, 2017.

² The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. 2017. *2017 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Engagement with China*, p. 5.

³ Ong et al., p. 99.

⁴ Paltiel, Jeremy. 2016. "Restoring Strategy to the Strategic Partnership: Canada and China Reimagined." In *Moving Forward: Issues in Canada-China Relations*, ed. Asif B. Farooq. Toronto: China Open Research Network, p. 13.

⁵ Alwani, Kiran. "Does Age Affect Opinion?" *The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada* (web log), March 22, 2017.

⁶ Paltiel, p. 14

⁷ Ong et al., p. 93.

interests and methods of learning and engagement pertinent to generations passed are applicable to millennials. This generation is argued to represent an enormous societal shift. Hence, a concise platform tailored to Canadian youth realities is what is missing in Canada-China relations.

In view of this purpose, this report will be divided into two parts. Firstly, there will be a short review of the current state of affairs in Canadian youth engagement programs. Secondly, based on the successes of Australia and the United States, we will propose a model built upon generational lines. This platform will promote youth awareness in Canada-China bilateral relations.

Canadian youth seem uninterested in gaining more knowledge about China. In 2015, out of 400,000 foreign students studying in China, only 3,585 were Canadians (compared to 24,203 Americans, 10,658 French, and 5,000 Australians) according to China's Ministry of Education⁸. Moreover, when Canadian university administrators were asked to assess "relative interest among students", China ranked 17th, behind less strategic partners such as South Korea and Brazil⁹. This begs the question on whether the deficiency in China literacy lies in a simple lack of interest, or whether the problem lies in the formal Canadian institutional framework. Illustrating this, is the low participation in the "Canada Learning Initiative in China" (CLIC). This 2016 federal initiative counted only 168 participants in a fully-paid language program in China¹⁰. Such a lack of enthusiasm for Asian languages is grounded in national opinion, "Although approximately half of Canadians support teaching about Asia in provincial school systems, 61 % oppose greater emphasis on Asian languages, like Mandarin Chinese"¹¹.

Formal engagement programs are relics of the past. Education on culture and language, student exchanges, and international youth delegations seem to offer limited success in feeding the youth's eagerness in viewing China as an exciting partner. Today's youth are highly digitally literate, able multitaskers, avid consumers of digital information,

⁸ Dehaas, Josh. 2016. "Canadian students need to go to China, but they need some help." *Macleans.ca*. <http://www.macleans.ca/education/canadian-students-need-to-go-to-china-but-they-need-help-getting-there/> (May 19, 2017)

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ "CLIC Program." *Canadian Learning Initiative in China*. <http://clicstudyinchina.com/> (May 20, 2017).

¹¹ Ong et al., p. 93.

and have blurred the lines between learning, work, and fun¹². Canada's strategy for greater youth participation can only benefit from taking into account these factors.

A quick comparison between the amount of members of the LinkedIn group for the Canada-China Youth Association and its counterpart the Australia-China Youth Association leaves no doubt that Canada is not up to snuff (31 Canadians versus 861 Australians)¹³. This is directly at odds with the increased mobile data usage and avid social media adhesion found in millennials — defined as people born between the early 1980d and mid-1990d. They search for “personalized careers, believing that they can achieve anything, seeking recognition from others, and demanding instant and frequent feedback”¹⁴. This particular ecosystem is argued by some to be incompatible with traditional institutional educational methods¹⁵. New advances in technology and economic realities have created an ever-more competitive job market, and more mobile generation¹⁶. In fact, organizations like the CLIC are sensitive to this trend and support millennials in diversifying their experiences encouraging the creation of global citizens:

“Canadian students who forge links with China are investing in their future: Employability and diverse career opportunities, stemming from connections with the world's second largest economy and Canada's second largest trading partner”¹⁷.

In short, the China presented to youth must be aligned with these values and forgo strictly focusing on language instruction and folkloric representation of culture. As millennials ourselves, modernized megacities are what inspire us. Having both worked and studied China, our Canadian model wishes to represent China under a new light: a fertile field ripe with opportunity.

Millennials see the world from a different perspective, which makes them well-equipped to launch the next wave of game-changing bilateral relations. What can be put in

¹² Karakas et al., p. 238.

¹³ Ong et al., p. 94.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁶ Karakas et al., p. 239.

¹⁷CLIC “Why China”

place to make millennials choose China? The answer: creating millennial-compatible spaces.

Concentration, engagement, and socialization are seldom described as a millennial fortes¹⁸. In response to those challenges, spaces for millennials must be creative and collaborative to create environments where Canadian youth participation can flourish engaging with China¹⁹. As many researchers have focused their attention on policy, we choose to put forth transferable guidelines key to the bottom-up creation of relationships across international boundaries. Below, the facets of our model will be explored.

Collaborative

Interests are the new geography. A successful Canada-China youth engagement program would adopt a community of interest approach. Connecting international counterparts should go above and beyond the historical cooperation in matters of education and trade. For the purpose of engagement, people to people connections are part of the answer. Take for instance the Project Pengyou, the network brought to light as part of the President Obama's 100,000 Strong Initiative which fully embodies this idea. It "creates a network to connect Americans with experience of working or living in China and those who would like to do so". For millennials who are on a constant quest to personalize their careers and acquire internationally-valuable experience, such programs ensure a diversity of participants and in areas of engagement. Project Pengyou is structured around "various programs such as mentoring, summer internships and leadership dialogues. [It] aims to empower and mobilize a generation of U.S.-China bridge builders"²⁰. In Canada, state-to-state youth initiatives have been demonstrated to be inefficient. To bridge this gap, a Canadian program should take advantage of millennials' aptitudes for new technologies. Like Pengyou, a space permitting millennials to create deep and globalized connections should be at the forefront of the strategy. As Lynette Ong and James Flynn noted, "Youth

¹⁸ Karakas et al., p. 238.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 238.

²⁰ "Harnessing youth power in the quest for better Canada-China relations." *OpenCanada*.
<https://www.opencanada.org/features/harnessing-youth-power-quest-better-canada-china-relations/> (May 22, 2017).

engagement is a prime example of how non-government private initiatives can bring together like-minded young people from both sides to engage in regular dialogues²¹”.

Creative

Institution-led models of youth engagement favour a prescriptive model limiting the types of interactions one can have with China. Spaces where Millennial creativity can be expressed through their entrepreneurship (self-direction, flexibility, mobility) creates a model that is ever-evolving and pertinent. This aspect may in part explain Australia’s success in recruiting young people. When referring to Australia, the 2016 Moving Forward Report of the University of Toronto concludes that, “emphasis on youth leadership ensures that organizations fully understand the needs of the young people and deliver programs tailored to their needs”²². Informal youth engagement programs, based on entrepreneurial initiatives have the potential to ignite millennials eagerness to see China as an extraordinary setting to develop new skills.

Lastly, we will like many others dive into the world of policy recommendations. However, we choose to limit ourselves to the lack of youth mobility between Canada and China. Once again, Australia, a country of a similar size and political system, is at the forefront of these types of exchanges. Australia and China have entered into a bilateral Working Holiday Visa offered to young people between the ages of 18 to 30²³ . The Canadian equivalent, International Experience Canada, is not open to nationals of China²⁴. As Australia and Canada are both members of APEC, an important difference must be noted because of Canada’s transitional member status. The APEC Business Travel Card Program allows members of participating countries reciprocal 90-day visa-free entry for the purpose of trade and investment activities. Presently, Canadian card holders can benefit

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ong et al., p. 95.

²³ “Visit and work.” *Department of Immigration and Border Protection*. <http://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visi/Visi-1> (May 19, 2017).

²⁴ Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Communications Branch. 2016. “International Experience Canada – travel and work in Canada.” *Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Communications Branch*. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/iec/> (May 20, 2017).

from expedited visa processing and arrival terminals, but are still required to obtain the appropriate business visas²⁵.

With the shadow of an unpredictable and erratic trading partner to the South, Canadians are opening to the idea of partnering with China. President Trump's election might just be what ignites a greater public understanding and support towards a new China agenda. In order to take advantage of this favorable public opinion, "a constructive way forward is to see China as a potential collaborator in the pursuit of many goals Canada is seeking to achieve at the international level"²⁶. We believe that young people are best placed to move in the right direction. By having more exposure and more education on Asia and China, the youth has distinctly more power to create a new narrative that will lead to a more effective relationship. Inspired by the American and Australians initiatives, a Canadian youth engagement program should promote values that are closer to Canadian youth realities, such as interconnectivity and creativity. Spaces should be created around communities of interest where global connections can be made. Without a doubt, these initiatives should be led by the youth for the youth. It is essential to promote dialogue with China as an asset. A motivated and well-funded youth organization could play a major role in running public awareness campaigns, promoting China's dynamism to millennials who are unafraid of going global.

²⁵ Canadian Border Services Agency. 2017. "APEC Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Business Travel Card (ABTC)." *CBSA*. <http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/abtc-cvaa/menu-eng.html> (May 21, 2017).

²⁶ Massot, Pascale. 2016. "The Political Economy of Canadian Public Opinion in China." In *Moving Forward: Issues in Canada-China Relations*, ed. Asif B. Farooq. Toronto: China Open Research Network, p. 33.

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