

Montreal conference Sat. Sept 18, 2010

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this important discussion. This Skype thing is new to me so I hope you can see and hear me okay. Just wish I could be with all of you in Montreal in person. Next time!

The issue of Asian Canadian culture has been close to my heart for many years. When I was a trustee on the former Toronto Board of Education, the teaching of heritage (later renamed international) languages was one of my major focus of work. I also acted as a resource person for a couple of years on a 2nd-year university course (in the Humanities Division, not EAS dept) called "Asian Canadian Experiences" which focused on the history and literature of Chinese, Japanese and other Asian Canadian communities.

Generally all Canadian cultural institutions these days, especially in cities like Toronto, do try to find ways to show that they understand what diversity means in their work. For example, universities have employment equity programs where they're supposed to have hiring and promotion policies so that their workforce reflects the diversity of the community. But each university has its own way of implementing the federal Employment Equity policy so the results vary greatly.

When it comes to teaching Asian culture at the university level, from my experience of being a graduate of the East

Asian Studies from U of Toronto, it's the official Chinese, Japanese and Korean language and culture that's being taught and the Canadian context is completely ignored.

One of the things we tried to do at that university course is to introduce Chinese and Japanese and other Asian Canadian (in some cases Asian American) writers and their works to the class. Joy Kogawa's "OBASAN", Wayson Choy's "Jade Peony", Maxine Hong-Kingston's "Warrior Women" were all on the syllabus. And since both Joy and Wayson live in Toronto, we invited them to come and talk with the class. It was a great experience.

In fact these 3 authors have all achieved a literary status to the point their works are listed in both high school and university English literature syllabuses and are read by a wide audience. I think this is partly due to the fact that they are good writers by any standard but their subject matter also fit 'the immigrant story' genre of an earlier time just enough to gain broad recognition in a very anglo-centric literary cultural world.

As for the public school system, I know that the Toronto District School Board has taken the issue seriously enough to produce a comprehensive curriculum document on Asian Canadians. They also hold events during Asian Heritage month involving community groups but I've noticed that the attendance has declined over the years.

Another difficulty with the public schools is that teachers who want to teach more about Asian Canadian issues don't

have the proper support in place to help them due to a lack of staff development funds, knowledge of the subject matter and linkages to the communities around them. Not to mention all the other pressures faced by students and schools alike these days.

But I think the more difficult issue is the question of :what is Asian Canadian culture in the Canadian multicultural context?

Can we teach our students Chinese Canadian diaphora history without touching on contemporary Chinese society and politics?

In this age of budget cuts for all public institutions can we resist free offers of language textbooks (in some cases even language teachers) produced by home countries without any regard to the Canadian context?

Or does any of this matter since ‘multiculturalism’ can now be understood in a global context, and that Asian Canadians can think outside of the Canadian multicultural box and make linkages with other Asian diasporas across national boundaries?

Indeed, the question may well be : what does it mean to be Asian Canadian in the 21st century?

I look forward to our discussion.