

Vancouver's Own Not-So-Quiet Revolution

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On the eve of the Winter Olympics, there is a not-so-quiet revolution going on here in Vancouver every bit as important as that which transformed Quebec a half a century ago, even if the Anglophone journalists and commentators of this city and of our nation seem oblivious to its consequences. Inexorably, the tenor of civic debate in this city is no longer being carried out only in the colonial language of English. But rather than in French, it is in a multiplicity of Asian languages—Mandarin, Cantonese, Punjabi, Tagalog—that the voices of people long silenced are talking. What are they discussing? Important issues that bespeak both the deep colonial past of “British” Columbia and the need for a frank and open discussion about our collective future.

Our city will soon be over 50% “visible minority,” with the vast majority of these “non-whites” of Asian heritage. The very term “visible minority” has become an oddity, raising questions about who is the “minority” in a city that has such strong historical and demographic connections across the Pacific. When Captain John Meares arrived in 1788 to be greeted by Chief Maquinna of the Nuu-chah-nulth, there were Chinese aboard his ship. Right from the earliest moments that migrants from around the world came to the land of First Nations peoples in B.C, we have had both trans-Pacific Asian and trans-Atlantic European migrants.

It struck me last weekend when I was shopping in Kitsilano what an aberration that neighborhood is—one of the few areas in Vancouver that has not been transformed in the last three decades by new migration from Asia—Kits for instance does not have a significant ethnic Chinese Canadian presence in a city where almost every other neighborhood has percentages of ethnic Chinese that range from 20% to 55%. What is wrong with Kits? The same thing that is wrong with so many newsrooms and boardrooms in Vancouver, where a quick glance around at who shapes opinion and leadership decisions reveals a blinding uniformity of faces as white as driven snow.

Its odd that the upcoming Winter Olympics, whose participants also used to reflect the dominance of northern European origins, have become quite diverse with Asian faces in skating and skiing events. And yet our city, so proud of our diversity, has still so far to go in understanding just what it means to have a majority of its residents of Asian heritage.

Canadians are wonderful at criticizing other societies for inequity and their inability to overcome racial discrimination and colonialism. Canadians helped lead worldwide opinion against apartheid in South Africa. If the major universities in South Africa after apartheid had a majority of their students non-white and nearly every single one of their administrators blindingly white, Canadians would know that this was a legacy of white supremacy and further change was necessary. Yet here in Vancouver, our major universities have a majority of non-white students, but we retain an overwhelmingly white leadership, and yet no one even notices that this might be the legacy of a long history of apartheid and white supremacy. Why not? Perhaps it is because we had a

relatively peaceful transition from apartheid and so we are able to be deaf and blind to its legacies here. We are so quiet about our colonial past that we so easily forget it existed.

There are many legacies of our colonial past and the white supremacy that undergirded it—residential schools, the reserve system, the Indian Act, Chinese Exclusion, the Continuous Journey Act, housing covenants in Shaughnessy and other neighborhoods that prevented Jews, Asians, and Natives from buying houses. We have overcome much of the racial discrimination of the past, and we continue to deal with many of the continuing problems left unresolved, but the most dangerous are those legacies to which we are deaf and blind.

One of the major unresolved legacies of colonialism and white supremacy in B.C. is our language policy. We are so proud that businesses in Vancouver can advertise for workers who need to speak Chinese or Punjabi or Hindi or French or German, and that it is possible in this multilingual city of diversity that we can fill the applicant pool. But we are misled by the availability of bilingual speakers who can read and write both English and Chinese, or English and Punjabi. We did not educate and create them—many of them came here already functionally bilingual or learned English to supplement their existing fluencies. We will ruin their children.

My parents spoke multiple dialects of Chinese when they arrived in Canada and learned English within five years. We spoke English and Cantonese at home, and I eventually received a full scholarship to Princeton to do my PhD. But I took ten years of French in school and can barely order a sandwich in Quebec. My Cantonese is good enough to order food and in an emergency ask for a bathroom.

You are better off coming to Canada as a 10-year old than being born here. If you come as a 10-year old, you have a chance to learn English even as you retain some fluency in whatever non-English language you learned as a child. If you are born here, you will grow up in an Anglophone society that derides “accented” English (except if you have an alluring British accent). At the end of K-12 education you will only be able to speak and write English and perhaps have enough baby talk in your home language that as an 18-year old you might speak as if you were an overgrown 5 year old.

We are complacent and cruel. We ask our job seekers to have multiple language skills so that our companies can compete in a global economy where Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese, and other Asian languages are a tremendous competitive advantage. We do not have any problem finding such employees. And yet we produce monolingual children who are ill-equipped compared to their immigrant parents. Why?

Over a century of Anglophone dominance in B.C. led to policies designed to erase non-English language use among children. Residential schools set out to eradicate aboriginal language use; hiring policies rewarded native English speakers and reduced those who had the “wrong” accent to subordinate roles even as they were useful as translators. Perversely, speaking only English was considered superior to speaking multiple languages, as long as the English had the right accent and the face was the right colour.

Edmonton, Alberta, a city that Vancouverites almost universally deride as uncivilized and backward—we have sushi they have cattle and oil!—has had bilingual Mandarin-English programs from K-12 for 26 years, with 13 schools and thousands of children learning Mandarin and English on a 50/50 equal basis. There is a healthy mix of children who spoke Chinese and English as toddlers before entering these programs in kindergarten, so that kids in their daily interactions feel that the two languages are equally useful and important and feel motivated to learn both. Every time I mention to a Vancouverite that Edmonton has had these programs for over a quarter of a century, and ask them how many schools in Vancouver have such programs, they assume that we have such a progressive city that we must have dozens. We have none.

Beginning in Fall 2010, after the Olympics, the school boards of Coquitlam, Vancouver, and Burnaby will begin early start Mandarin programs. Only Coquitlam has made their program open to all learners. Vancouver and Burnaby have made the mistake of limiting entrance to English speakers only. These classes need kids who can speak Mandarin. Decades of scholarly research has shown that without Mandarin speakers in the classroom, English speakers will not effectively learn how to speak Chinese. Like my ten years of French from grade 3 to grade 12, not having native French speakers in the classroom led to a stunted language learning experience.

We are undergoing a not-so-quiet revolution in this city. The daily circulation of our Chinese language newspapers dwarf the readership of the Vancouver Sun and Province, and our common future will be determined in a variety of languages both English and non-English. If we cannot cure ourselves of the colonial legacies of making our children monolingual in English, we will stunt the next generation and waste the incredible human capital that we welcome each year to our shores.

Henry Yu is a professor of History at the University of British Columbia. He was born in Vancouver and graduated from UBC, the son of immigrants from China but also the fourth generation greatgrandson of Chinese migrants who came to B.C. in the 19th century.