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People to People Relations Between Canada and China **Gary Levy**

A few months ago the Chinese Ambassador to Canada spoke at a dinner to mark the 35th anniversary of the Canada-China Friendship Society of Ottawa. The first question, following his speech, asked him to compare Canada where he had just spent his first winter and Australia where he had served previously for several years.

Canada, he noted, was a very cold country. Australia was very warm. In terms of official links with China he observed that relations with Australia were also very warm. Official relations with Canada, he said diplomatically, were getting warmer.

He was not asked and he did not address the state of unofficial relations but if he had he would have surely remarked on some remarkable examples of person to person diplomacy between the two countries..

The most famous, by far, is Dr. Norman Bethune. A prominent doctor and surgeon in Canada he travelled to China in 1938 where he offered his services to the Eighth Army. For over a year Dr. Bethune performed battlefield surgery under the most difficult conditions. He helped to train doctors and nurses in emergency techniques he had developed. Injured while operating on a soldier in 1939 he developed blood poisoning and died. Mao Zedong published a long essay in memory of Dr. Bethune documenting the final months of his life. The story was memorized by Chinese schoolchildren for decades. Mao wrote:

"We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from him. A man's ability may be great or small, but if he has this spirit he is already noble-minded and pure, a man of moral integrity, a man who is of value to the people."¹

Dr. Bethune is honoured in the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery Shijiazhuang in Hubei Province, along with Dr. Kotnis of India and Eric Liddel a Scottish Missionary. He is also honoured in Canada where a recent biography of his life was written by Adrienne Clarkson, a native of Hong Kong who served as Governor General, Canada's highest political office, from 1999 to 2005.

Another Canadian who believed in person to person diplomacy long before he went into public life was former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He visited China in 1949 and again in 1960 when he chronicled his travels with a friend in a book entitled *Two Innocents in Red China*. In 2007 the book was reprinted with a new forward by his son, Alexandre Trudeau. The younger Trudeau, a journalist and documentary photographer, captured the essence of his father's philosophy when he wrote:

¹ Adrienne Clarkson, *Norman Bethune*, Penguin Canada, Toronto, 2009, p. 9

“Our societies will be better served if we reach out to China, happily and innocently, if we explore its depths, marvel at its opacities and yes occasionally tremble with awe at its rumblings and missteps. Instead of fearing China, we should share as much as possible in the great adventure of its people.”²

It was no coincidence that in 1970 Canada became only the second country in the western hemisphere (after Cuba) to recognize the People’s Republic of China when Pierre Trudeau became Prime Minister.

Another example of the interplay between official diplomacy and people to people relations is the case of Mark Roswell. Known as Dashan he is perhaps the most famous foreigner in all of China. Born and raised in Canada, he began studying Chinese in the mid 1980s, first at the University of Toronto and later at Beijing University. He became interested in traditional Chinese performing arts, particularly xiangsheng, a popular form of comic dialogue. He was given a small part on a television show and when the program was broadcast nationally to an audience of 800 million he became a household name literally overnight. In 2010 he was named Commissioner of the Canadian Pavillon at Expo 2010 and many thousands of visitors were delighted to meet him in person.

We can all dream of pursuing a life like that of Dr. Bethune, Pierre Trudeau, or Dashan but in fact the daily work of people to people relations is less glamorous but nevertheless very important.

In 1976 a Canada China Friendship Society was established in Ottawa to promote exchange and knowledge among individuals in the two countries. The Federation of Canada-China Friendship Associations, was founded a few years later and currently it has branches in six Canadian cities.

In the early years the Ottawa Branch organized meetings with expert speakers or films. After a few years it started to organize trips to China. Later it focused more on social activities—assisting visiting Chinese students to settle and organizing social events for Society members. There was also a period when the Society spent a lot of time receiving foreign delegations from China. Recently it has come full circle as the current focus is on promoting knowledge and better understanding of China through meetings with speakers on various topics about China.

Among the topics explored over the last few years include:

- Women, Gender and Politics in China
- Urban, Regional and Rural Planning in China
- Inequality and Economic Development in China
- China-African Relations
- China’s Path to Economic Development
- China’s Energy Policy
- Partners in Development: Canada, China and the World Bank

² Alexandre Trudeau, Introduction to *Two Innocents in Red China* by Pierre Trudeau and Jacques Hébert, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver/Toronto, 2007, p. 33.

- The Prime Minister's Recent Visit to China
- The Reforms of Den Xiaoping
- China's Security Policy Today

Since 1998, China has been the leading source country of newcomers to Canada. Between 1998 and 2008, an estimated 363,760 Chinese nationals immigrated to Canada, accounting for 14 percent of all new immigrants. More and more Canadians (both of Chinese and non-Chinese origin) are going to China to visit, work, study and live.

Partnerships between the two countries have grown enormously in all domains in recent years. The Canada-China Business Council is a private sector non profit organization to facilitate and promote trade and investment. As China increasingly becomes a global economic powerhouse, Canadians are being lured by the economic opportunities in the country. There are increasing numbers of native-born and naturalized Canadian executives, engineers and other professionals and specialists working in China.

China is currently the ninth major source country of overnight travelers to Canada. Trips to Canada from the PRC each year grew at an average rate of 11 percent per year between 2000 and 2009, rising from a total of 74,000 to over 160,000. With the implementation of the Approved Destination Status (ADS) agreement, more visitors from China are expected.

The number of Chinese students in Canada has grown significantly from just a few hundred a year in the mid-1990s to close to 10,000 annually in the last eight years. Currently, Chinese students represent 15 percent of Canada's annual intake of international students, making China the second top source country of international students in Canada. The population of more than 42, 000, Chinese students has become the largest group of foreign students in Canada, representing one in four foreign students in the country. Several universities have established Centres for the study of China.³

My personal interest in China is very recent. It was piqued by a 2006 seminar I attended given by Daniel Franklin of the *Economist* magazine on "The Emerging Economic Challenges from India and China"

He described some recent developments and suggested the only way Canadians could ever really grasp what was happening, particularly in China, was to go and see for themselves. When a person of his experience and knowledge makes such a statement one should listen so I took his advice and went to China for the first time in September 2006. I travelled independently and visited several cities. Since then I have returned four times and with much help from many

³ The preceding paragraphs are based on an article by Kenny Zhang, People to People relations between Canada and China: 40 Years and beyond, *China Magazine*, vol 22, October 2010, pp. 46-47

strangers I managed to make my way to several provinces. Despite a language barrier I am always struck by so many similarities between the two countries.

The first, of course, is geography. Both Canada and China are huge with rugged and varied geography. Population is concentrated in a narrow band, along the coast in the case of China and hugging the US border in the case of Canada. Both have large stretches of thinly populated hinterland

Transportation is key to economic development and the accomplishments of China in this area ought to be a model for Canadians. Some attribute the marvellous inter city transportation system to the demands of a large population but it is also a reflection of political will and political leadership.

Both countries have wonderful national parks and my visits to Putoshan and Songshan and to the national forest of Zhangjiajie helped me to understand that Chinese citizens attach the same importance to the environment as does the average Canadian. A week spent in the backpackers paradise of Yangshuo reminded me, in spirit if not in climate, of my favourite place in Canada, Jasper National Park in the Rocky Mountains.

I was struck by the attachment of people to multiculturalism. So many, in both countries, are proud to tell you of their national origins. There is also a sense of regionalism that was very familiar to me as well. Chinese move around for work or family reasons and yet they continue to identify with their home province just like Canadians.

Perhaps the most striking similarity came when speaking with young Chinese, and because of language limitations, they were usually the ones with whom I could communicate. I heard of optimism and pride in country that reminded me of a similar time in Canada. People of my generation remember a decade from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s when Canada hosted a World's Fair and an Olympic Games in Montreal. We felt the country was coming of age and everything seemed possible. How wonderful and refreshing to find this same attitude now among young Chinese.

By way of conclusion I would point out that no two countries in the world have as robust people to people relations as Canada and the United States. Yet two hundred years ago we were fighting and 150 years ago we were eyeing each other suspiciously across a fortified border. Today the two countries are close because of the breadth and depth of inter personal connections. I hope and believe in much less than 150 years Canada and China will have an equally close relationship and, if so, it will be based on every increasing instances of people to people relations.