

Your Excellency, Members of the Canada China Friendship Society, Special Guests.

On behalf of our membership let me first thank you, Your Excellency, for the warm reception tonight. Since your arrival in Canada you have been a great supporter of our Friendship Society.

We collaborated on a successful Calligraphy exhibit in November. You made a generous donation of prizes for our New Year's Banquet to be held next week.

We had discussions about a special project to mark the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations next October.

Since the Embassy reception last year our membership has increased by 30%. I attribute a good part of that to the tremendous feedback we received from that event.

This year more than half our 260 members accepted your invitation and a number of others, including our Co-President Roy Atkinson, send regrets because they are out of the country.

Some of our members like Peter Larson, our first President and Lorraine Farkas our immediate past president have been associated with the CCFS since the 1970s. Lolan Merklinger was instrumental in re-establishing the Society in the 1990s.

We have seen recently a dramatic increase in the number of young people in our membership. Some are serving on the Executive or as volunteers. It is easy for those of us retired or semi-retired to devote time to the Society but it is a real challenge for young people with jobs or classes or young families to help out.

But these people are the future of Canada China relations and I am happy to see so many new and young members here today. It also reflects positively on China that you seems to be attracting the interest of a younger generation.

We have people with difference connections to China. Some are former diplomats or teachers or students. Others have visited China once or many times. Some are planning their first trip this year. We also have a number of native Chinese members who have decided to make their home here and contribute to the diversity that is Canada.

I am also pleased to see officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs here and given their presence I have to note that as a Society we are completely independent of government and wholly financed by our members.

But, of course, we would not be ideologically opposed to obtaining a little financial assistance from the Canadian government from time to time. I believe there has been funding for special projects in the past and I hope it may be considered again at some point in the future.

Finally, I am sure each member has his or her reason for belonging to the Friendship Society. Without presuming to speak for others let me give my reason, which was reinforced by a recent study I read by the Canadian-American Business Council.

It cited a public opinion poll which found that three quarters of all Canadians favoured even closer relations with the United States whereas only about half favoured closer relations with China.

I do not question the accuracy of the study, although we should always be skeptical about public opinion polls. But assuming it is accurate I believe it reflects a problem for Canada.

It is in our national self interest to counter balance our necessarily close ties to the United States. For many reasons China is an ideal counter balance. We need to keep working together until the number of Canadians favouring closer relations with China is as high as for any other country in the world including our longtime friends to the south.

So thank you once again for your kind words and for your hospitality. We wish you and all members of the Embassy a very happy new year.

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