



What does a seat at the table mean to Chinese-Canadians and to Canada?

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In the context of growing anti-Chinese hate in Canada and the widespread desire to do something about it, here is the key question: “What does a Canada in which anti-Chinese racism does not exist look like?”

One answer is that Chinese Canadians have a “seat at the table”. The organizers of this year’s ACCT conference have asked me to reflect on precisely this topic. As a senator in Canada’s Upper House, it can certainly be said that I have a seat at the table. But my appointment as a legislator in the Parliament of Canada does not mean that I do not encounter acts of racism, much less that anti-Chinese racism in Canada has been eradicated.

It is an enormous privilege to have a seat at the Senate table and I would like to think that I got there on merit rather than because of my ethnicity. It turns out though that there is a connection between merit and ethnicity, since most of my career has been in the area of public policy on Canada-Asia relations. That I happened to work in this field is not unrelated to the fact that I am of Chinese ancestry, was born in Malaysia, and grew up in Singapore.

The question is whether I would have been as eligible for a senate appointment if I had excelled in a different field that is unrelated to Asian affairs -- say law, the arts, community service, or medicine. That for me is a hypothetical question that cannot be answered, but for tens of thousands of other Chinese Canadians who are in fact highly qualified in those fields, the question is both germane and urgent.

The reality is that meritorious Chinese Canadians are underrepresented in positions of leadership across the country – at universities, on corporate boards, in the courts, with arts and community organizations, and not least, in parliament.

Even before the spike in overt racist acts since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a longstanding problem of systemic discrimination against Canadians of Chinese descent.

For those of us who are fortunate enough to have a “seat at the table”, the first task is to recognize that many worthy Chinese Canadians do not. We have a responsibility to help others find their seats at the table. There are at least three avenues for such:

The first is governance reform. This has to do with changing the way our institutions select their leaders, such that there is a diversity of backgrounds and voices in the organization. It is not about quotas as much as it is about actively looking outside the “old boy” networks that tend to populate board tables and leadership circles. It means setting up selection criteria that do not invariably default to old boy networks. It starts with valuing backgrounds, credentials, and experience that are non-traditional or which may simply be unfamiliar to the network of old boys. A degree from Fudan University, the Nanyang Technological University, or the Chinese University of Hong Kong should not count for less than qualifications from McGill, Dalhousie, or Carleton. The fact that headhunters may have not heard of those Asian schools reflects their limited world view rather than the quality of the institutions and their graduates. And I would suggest that working experience in the hyper-competitive business environments of Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong is at least as good preparation for leadership positions on Canadian corporate boards as comparable stints in the more sedate commercial environments of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.

I am acutely aware, however, that paper qualifications and street smarts are not enough. The reality of getting a seat at the table is that one must understand how to dress for the occasion, where to sit, which fork to use for what dish, and when to speak – so to speak. It is not just the trappings and cues of establishment society

that newcomers must learn in order to be accepted, but also the idiosyncrasies of Canadian law, politics, history, and iconography that are full of minefields for the uninitiated, including Chinese Canadians who were born in this county. Hence there is a role for those who already have a seat at the table to provide training and mentorship to those who also aspire to leadership positions. This is not about obeisance and mimicry. The learning needed is as much about how to circumvent the conventions of establishment society as it is about adapting to them.

The third is to challenge false narratives that prevent qualified Chinese Canadians from attaining a seat at the table. Racists will latch onto any convenient distortion of truth as an excuse for hate and exclusion. In our time, the narrative of anti-Chinese racism was fed by exaggerated accounts of foreigners (code for “Chinese”) buying up real estate in such numbers that they single-handedly made Vancouver unaffordable for the locals. Layered on top of this tale was the idea that most of this foreign (again, “Chinese”) money was dirty to start with, and that Vancouver had become the (Chinese) money laundering capital of the world. Throw in the insinuation that the dirty money came from trafficking of fentanyl from China and the slander was complete. What is especially sad about this chain of hate-mongering is that it was started by politicians, academics, and journalists who may have been well-meaning in their attempt to understand what was happening to property prices in Vancouver, but which instead nurtured a demon that was unleashed when COVID struck. If we don’t repel the falsehoods, the falsehoods will repel us.

A final note about seats at tables and who wants to fill those seats.

Notwithstanding the problem of Chinese underrepresentation in the corridors of Canadian leadership and power, it is important to stress that our success as a community should not be based on the number of Chinese faces around board tables, on judges benches, or in the House of Commons. We should strive for the day when any Chinese Canadian who has what it takes to be in any of those

positions is given every opportunity to get there. But for the many others who have no desire to be in conventional leadership positions, success can also be defined by what they accomplish in the tables that they choose to sit at. In this respect, Chinese Canadians should be proud of what they have already achieved in this country – in scholarship, business, the professions, community service, sports, philanthropy, the arts, and more. The most important lesson about having a seat at the table is to recognize that there are many other tables worth sitting at.