

## The Importance of Youth Engagement in Enhancing Canada-China Relations

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### BACKGROUND

Language immersion in the educational system can be a successful method to introduce young people to new cultures and worldviews. In Canada, which is home to over 7 million residents with French as a mother tongue, English and French are the official languages. Every Canadian province currently offers French immersion programs in its English-language school systems. Despite the growing ethnic Chinese population in Canada and the importance of China as a trading partner to Canada, there is a conspicuous absence of national impetus and priority given to building our literacy in Chinese language and culture (*see also the chapter by Ruan and Yan*). In the 2011 census, 1,324,700 Canadian residents — 4 % of the country's population — identified themselves as Chinese. After English and French, Chinese languages are now the third most commonly spoken in Canada. Furthermore, China is now Canada's second largest trading partner. However, according to David Mulroney, only "scattered pockets" of Asian language training exist across Canada — mostly in major cities like Vancouver and Toronto.<sup>2</sup> Our lack of understanding about Chinese society and culture is also reflected in the state of China studies research at Canadian universities. For instance, there is no peer-reviewed Canadian journal that systematically covers China-related issues, in contrast to the *China Quarterly* in the United Kingdom and the *China Journal* in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

The general lack of support for Chinese language immersion is reflected in national opinion polls (*for more on Canadian public opinion on China see the chapter by Massot*). Although approximately half of Canadians support teaching about Asia in provincial school systems, 61 % of Canadians oppose greater emphasis on Asian languages, like Mandarin Chinese, in Canadian schools, according to the 2014 Asia-Pacific Foundation Canada's National Opinion Poll.<sup>4</sup> On the social and cultural fronts, support for teaching more about China or Asia and Asian languages in schools, and for student exchanges and university agreements with Asia, is also low and declining. Less favorable views about Asia are particularly salient among the older and less educated poll respondents.

The social context for lack of enthusiasm for acquiring China literacy is a growing public apprehension about China on a panoply of issues including human rights, democracy, cybercrimes, espionage, product safety and its increasingly aggressive foreign policy stance. The controversy regarding the ethnic-Chinese Miss Canada being denied entry into China by the Chinese authorities in late 2015 due to her vocal criticism of the Communist regime's human rights records is a prime example. Notwithstanding that fact, given the population size and political clout of Canada, it would be naïve to hold the view that Canada can pressurize China into improving its human rights records by "acting tough" alone. While Canada needs to make clear its position on these basic issues on human integrity, it is also by equipping our future generations with China literacy that we can better engage it in order to exert positive influence and bring about potential changes.

Since education falls under provincial jurisdictions in Canada, residents of certain provinces are more interested in enhanced Asian language education than others. For example, 38 % of British Columbia residents support greater emphasis on teaching Asian languages in their province's schools compared to just 26 % of Atlantic Canada residents.<sup>5</sup> Given varying levels of interest across Canada's provinces, it would be challenging to uniformly reorient Canada's school system towards greater emphasis on Mandarin Chinese. That aside, the focus on our international education at both secondary and university levels has been more about attracting inbound Chinese students than sending Canadian students abroad. This perception and treatment of Chinese students as a cash cow, though understandable from a commercial perspective, is a shortsighted approach. It is only by investing in our China literacy that we can reap the rewards of a growing economic juggernaut in the long run. The public-good nature of this investment calls for government recognition and effort that transcends the short-term commercial orientation of private education providers.

Nevertheless, we recognize that a national drive for Chinese language education in Canadian schools may not be possible. Instead, we propose informal youth engagements based purely on entrepreneurial initiatives of our youths with the help of the government and private sector, as a second-best solution to increase the exposure of our youths to the culture, language and opportunities in China. At present, some existing non-governmental organizations work to improve relations between Canada and China. For example, the Canada-China Youth Association (CCYA), a nascent organization founded in 2014 with over 150 members, helps Canadian and Chinese students transition to life in the other country.<sup>6</sup> However, as a relatively new organization, the CCYA is not as developed as comparable organizations around the world (For example, a LinkedIn group for the CCYA has just 31 members,<sup>7</sup> compared to 861 members in a LinkedIn group for the Australia-China Youth Association).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Global China Connection (GCC), a nongovernmental organization with campus chapters in more than 60 universities around the world, including the University of Toronto, builds ties with China through summits, a mentorship program, and other initiatives.<sup>9</sup> Although promising, the GCC is not solely focused on Canada; the bulk of its campus chapters are located in the United States.

In turn, we preview successful cases of youth engagements from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States as possible models for Canada to emulate.

### **THE AUSTRALIA-CHINA YOUTH ASSOCIATION AND RELATED INITIATIVES**

The Australia-China Youth Association (ACYA), founded in 2008 by undergraduate students Henry Makeham, Huw Pohlner, and Dom Delany, is a youth-administered nonprofit, non-governmental organization that works to “inspire Australians and Chinese to work together in realising their vision of a more prosperous, sustainable and interconnected world.”<sup>10</sup> The ACYA offers the most comprehensive model for youth engagement of the organizations surveyed herein. According to Makeham, at the time of the organization’s founding no platform existed that could bring together young Australians with an interest in China, and young Chinese with an interest in Australia.

The ACYA operates through 22 chapter committees — 17 of which are at Australian universities and 5 of which are in Chinese cities. Students at Australian universities set up chapters in their respective schools, and each university gives funding to the individual chapters. The chapters host approximately 30 to 40 local events throughout the year, including language classes and lectures. These local efforts are coordinated by a national secretariat that raises corporate, government, and university funding that is distributed nationally.<sup>11</sup> The involvement of postsecondary students through campus chapters is a crucial aspect of the ACYA’s work.

Today, the ACYA’s founders are not directly involved in the association, and members of ACYA’s executive team are current postsecondary students or recent graduates.<sup>12</sup> Jimmy Zeng, a recent engineering graduate of The University of Queensland, currently runs the organization. The ACYA’s emphasis on youth leadership ensures that the organization fully understands the needs of young people, and delivers programs tailored to these needs. The ACYA executive team has also realized the importance of running the organization professionally in order to preserve its integrity. It has a board of directors, it reports its accounts, and it has legal counsel. It also has high-level institutional support from policymakers like Geoff Raby, Australia’s Ambassador to China from 2007 to 2011.

Through its strong relationships with past and present government officials, the ACYA maintains a blend of government, private sector, and university funding, but its cornerstone of financial support is government. Makeham estimated that, at present, Australia’s state and federal governments provide between 25 and 30 % of the organization’s funding. The organization has not had any funding from the Chinese government. Makeham, who recommends tapping into Canadian provinces that have a stronger vested interest in China, like British Columbia, also emphasized the importance of arms-length government involvement through the provision of various in-kind supports, networks, and resources.<sup>13</sup>

Various related dialogue and initiatives target different segments of the youth population. The Australia-China Youth Dialogue (ACYD), a weeklong conference that was first held in Beijing and Shanghai in 2010, works to “promote frequent and meaningful engagement between young adults

in China and Australia who are interested in furthering Australia-China relations.”<sup>14</sup> The dialogue brings together 15 Australian and 15 Chinese delegates under the age of 35 with established leaders from Australia and China and exposes them to new issues and ideas.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the dialogue, which has brought together 150 young people since 2010, offers an informal mentoring component that could be replicated in Canada.

Similarly, the Australia-China Young Professionals Initiative (ACYPI), which holds events in major cities in Australia and China, allows young professionals between 22- and 35-years-old to develop a better understanding of the Australia-China bilateral relationship through cross-cultural dialogue. The ACYPI runs regular events like film screenings and trivia nights.

The Engaging China Project delivers China-literacy programs, like workshops, to Australian high school students between 15- and 18-years-old. The programs are delivered through volunteer Project Ambassadors — most of whom are young people — that travel across the country. Members or alumni of ACYA, ACYD, and ACYPI form the core of those behind the Engaging China Project in high school outreach activities. This model allows the organization to build Asia literacy among youth without the need for specific curriculum changes from the government.

Although the ACYA, the ACYD, the ACYPI, and the Engaging China Project often cooperate, all four are run independently with no formalized coordination.

#### **PRESIDENT OBAMA'S 100,000 STRONG FOUNDATION**

The 100,000 Strong Foundation, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization launched in 2012, works to “strengthen US-China relations through educational exchange and the study of Mandarin language.”<sup>16</sup> The foundation stems from a pledge by United States President Barack Obama in 2009 to increase the number of American students studying in China by 100,000 over a four-year period. According to the Institute of International Education, just 14,413 American study abroad students went to China in the 2012–2013 academic year.<sup>17</sup> By 2014, the 100,000 Strong Foundation had surpassed their goal.<sup>18</sup> This is an initiative that Canada would do well to emulate. Academics, corporate officials, and government policymakers at the highest levels support the 100,000 Strong Foundation.

The foundation enjoys government endorsement at the highest level through President Obama. This ensures consistent funding and legitimacy for the organization. The organization is governed by an experienced 11-person Board of Directors, chaired by George Lee, a businessman who also chairs Panton Incorporated, a technology-consulting firm.<sup>19</sup> This leadership structure helps the organization cultivate support from the private sector. The foundation also has an Academic Advisory Council consisting of executives from the educational sector.

Unlike the other organizations surveyed, the 100,000 Strong Foundation is funded through private-sector donors, like Caterpillar, Citi, Coca-Cola and Deloitte.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, although the foundation maintains no formal relationship with the Chinese government, China has pledged 20,000 “Bridge Scholarships” for American students to study in China.<sup>21</sup> This is partly

aimed to close the gap between the number of Chinese studying English and Americans studying Mandarin. At present, 600 times more Chinese study English than Americans study Mandarin. Although the foundation itself does not directly fund students, it steers America's campaign to encourage study abroad in China, and works with existing United States-China educational exchange programs that wish to expand their programs. This partnership model should be considered in Canada.

The foundation also works with *Project Pengyou*, a community of people and groups with experience working and living in China, that “works to empower and mobilize a new generation of US-China bridge-builders to serve, inspire and transform lives.”<sup>22</sup> *Project Pengyou's* flagship program is an online social network with a database of 5,341 people and 359 groups that facilitates mentorship and networking opportunities. The community is currently working to establish campus chapters across the United States.

#### **ASIA-NEW ZEALAND FOUNDATION — LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

The Asia-New Zealand Foundation, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization launched in 1994, works to “build New Zealanders’ knowledge and understanding of Asia.”<sup>23</sup> The organization was originally established as a charitable trust and Crown Entity, known as the Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand.<sup>24</sup> The foundation is the flagship NGO in the country that aims to foster New Zealand-Asia relations. It operates through a blend of public, philanthropic and corporate funding.

Young professional networks are part of the five main areas in which the Asia-New Zealand Foundation works, among which are arts and culture, business, education, media, and research. The Leadership Network unites young professionals between 20- and 40-years-old with an interest in New Zealand-Asia relations. The network, which began in 2007 and has 349 members, allows members to connect with each other, as well as with entrepreneurs, industry leaders, and policymakers at formal and informal events.<sup>25</sup> Recent Leadership Network initiatives include a forum on social entrepreneurship and the opportunity to participate in a Leadership Network delegation at the recent ASEAN Young Leaders Summit, a form of Track II diplomacy, which refers to interactions and activities among private citizens or non-state actors from different countries.

Executive Director Simon J. Draper, a former diplomat, currently leads the foundation. A Board of Trustees, comprising individuals drawn from academia, business and government, oversees the foundation's efforts. John Luxton, a New Zealand politician who held federal cabinet positions for nine years, chairs the board.<sup>26</sup> Through its Board of Trustees, the foundation maintains high-level endorsement from the New Zealand government — a key similarity between successful organizations surveyed herein.

#### **NEW ZEALAND-CHINA FRIENDSHIP SOCIETY**

The New Zealand-China Friendship Society (NZCFS), a not-for-profit organization founded in 1952, works to “[foster] people-to-people links” between China and New Zealand through visits, exchanges, and support for aid projects in China.<sup>27</sup> Rewi Alley, a prominent New Zealand-born

writer and activist, served as the “founder and inspiration” for the NZCFS.<sup>28</sup> His memory continues to inform the society’s work. Dave Bromwich, who was elected National President in May 2013, currently leads the society.

The organization receives a blend of funding, including about 200,000 RMB per year from a Chinese businessman resident in New Zealand and funding from the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Until 2013, the organization also tapped into a New Zealand International Aid & Development Agency fund that has now become unavailable to the society.

The organization has since evolved with the launch of NZCFS Youth — the youth branch of the NZCFS — approximately three years ago. Today, NZCFS Youth is active in four of the society’s centres, providing the society with an informal link to youth activities. Before that, the society’s only explicit commitment to youth was an objective that called for 50 % of the society’s members to be under 45. Working largely through New Zealand universities, the youth wing holds pub nights, food-making nights, lectures, and other regular events.

Bromwich says that the decision to create a youth wing came from the National Executive, but that the work to establish and operate the wing was driven by young people. Although NZCFS Youth is relatively underdeveloped compared to other youth organizations surveyed herein, this model of youth-led organizational development offers an important lesson for Canada. “Providing the opportunity to engage and understand is an investment in the future, whether it’s for the society or the New Zealand-China relationship,” Bromwich explained.<sup>29</sup> He believes that youth carry this understanding of China forward into their careers.

#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Combining elements from each organization, we propose the creation of a nonprofit, non-governmental organization led by Canadian youth for Canadian youth that works to improve the bilateral relationship between Canada and China. Given the similarities between Canada and Australia, including in population size, geographical densities, and levels of global influence, the ACYA offers a compelling model of youth engagement for emulation in Canada.

1. Such an organization should pursue a multi-pronged approach to the development of the Canada–China bilateral relationship. The organization’s programs should ideally consist of three interrelated components: **annual weeklong dialogues** between dedicated Canadian and Chinese youth at locations that alternate between Canada and China; a **mentorship program** that brings together Canadian youth with experienced policymakers and professionals who have firsthand experience in China; and **regular events**, like cultural movie nights and dinners, held throughout campus chapters across Canada to encourage an interest in China.

2. Such an organization should be led by young people, and its programs should be aimed at young people. This will ensure that young people, who are Canada's future businesspeople, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers, feel as if they have a vested interest in Canada-China relations. In particular, the involvement of postsecondary students through campus chapters is key; universities often provide a certain level of funding for student groups, and universities are fertile meeting places for young people with similar interests.
3. Such an organization should leverage the influence of prominent Canadians, like Norman Bethune, a Canadian physician who worked in China, and Mark Rowswell, a media personality who works in China, to cultivate support and trust with the Chinese government.
4. Such an organization should leverage existing interpersonal relationships between influencers on the Canadian and Chinese sides. This will allow the organization to broker support from the Chinese government and lend legitimacy to the organization's work.
5. Such an organization should garner in-kind funding and institutional support from provinces with a vested interest in China, like British Columbia and Ontario, and the highest levels of Canada's Department of Global Affairs, including the Canadian embassy and consulates-general in China. Just as Bromwich recommends: "Get support from them — if not financial support, then at least let them become aware of the activity that you're doing."<sup>30</sup>
6. Such an organization should form connections with existing Canadian organizations that work to enhance Canada-China bilateral relations, including the Canada China Business Council and the Chinese Canadian National Council.
7. Such an organization should have a blend of government and private-sector funding to ensure buy-in from a broad range of sectors.
8. Such an organization should form connections with similar organizations around the world, including the ACYA and NZCFS Youth.

#### NOTES

- 1 The authors are extremely grateful to Henry Makeham of Australia-China Youth Association and David Bromwich of New Zealand-China Friendship Society for sharing valuable information about their organizations. All remaining errors are those of the authors.
- 2 "2014 National Opinion Poll, Canadian Views on Asia," by *The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, p. 34; also see the op-ed by David Mulroney, "Canada's an Asia-Pacific country. When our schools forget this, it costs us," *The Globe and Mail* (6 November 2013) <http://www.asiapacific.ca/op-eds/canadas-asia-pacific-country-when-our-schools-forget-it>
- 3 K. Manning, *Pacific imaginaries: Rebuilding Chinese studies in Canada* (Vancouver, BC: Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2012), p. 5.
- 4 See Mulroney, "Canada's an Asia-Pacific Country," and 2014 National Opinion Poll, Canadian Views on Asia, p. 34.
- 5 2014 National Opinion Poll, Canadian Views on Asia, p.25.
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