

Immigration, Ethnicity and Diaspora Communities: The Study of Three Chinese Cultural Centres in Canada

Shibao Guo

Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary

Abstract

Canada is an immigrant society. Immigration has played an important role in transforming Canada into an ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nation. The 2006 Census of Canada reveals that between 2001 and 2006, 1.1 million new immigrants arrived; 19.8% of the total population were born outside the country, and that 16.2% identified themselves as visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2007). Also according to the 2006 census, the Chinese have become the second largest visible minority group in Canada after South Asians, approaching a total of 1.3 million up from 1,029,400 in 2001. Despite our rich history in immigration and the strategic role it plays in our future, the tension between immigration and ethnicity is still prominent. Some of the debates focus on the existence of ethno-cultural organizations. Despite the rhetoric that Canada relies on immigrants to help ameliorate its labour shortages and aging population, the very ethnicity that many immigrants are associated with is often treated with suspicion. In particular, ethnic organizations are often criticized for threatening national unity, diluting Canadian identity, and promoting ghettoization and separatism. Drawing from personal interviews and document analysis, this paper examines the tension between ethnicity and immigration by investigating the history and development of three Chinese cultural centres in Calgary, Winnipeg and Toronto. It highlights the role of diaspora communities in helping Canadians of Chinese heritage maintain their ethnic culture as well as promote mutual cultural understanding between Chinese Canadians and Canadians of other heritage. The study has important implications for researchers, policy-makers, and community workers regarding minority cultural rights and inclusive citizenship.