Reminiscences

Reflections on the Role of Canadian Scholars in Canada-China Relations

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When I first became a “China scholar” back in the late 1960s, Canada was in the midst of negotiations to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). We were on the cusp of recognition, a goal that had eluded Canada for almost two decades. Canadian China scholars would play an active and significant role in this process. Most of us favored ending China’s diplomatic isolation and saw the Canadian initiative as an act of emancipation from questionable U.S. Cold War policies. Not only did we support the actions of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and the Department of External Affairs (DEA), we also welcomed Ottawa consulting us as it proceeded to engage the PRC and construct a brand new bilateral relationship. Our government, apart from a few “mish kids,” had limited knowledge of the closed system that was China, and Canadian decision makers valued our expertise as they sought to navigate a path through Chinese culture and Maoist ideology.

I recall that at the time, many of our American counterparts were envious, not just of Canada’s successful engagement of the PRC, but also that scholars such as myself were involved. Unlike the Americans who only could gaze longingly at China from across the border in Hong Kong, Canadians had been travelling to the PRC in the sixties and early seventies,

1 “Mish Kids” were the sons and daughters of Canadian missionaries who served in China until 1949. Several entered the Canadian Foreign Service and played an important role in developing our relations with the PRC. The first three Canadian Ambassadors were “Mish Kids,” born in China.
long before U.S. President Richard M. Nixon’s 1972 visit. In my case, I had been to China in 1965 and 1971, and over a dozen other Canadian scholars had similar experiences.

After Canada established diplomatic relations in 1970, the government, realizing it had limited China expertise among its own officials, decided on an innovative policy—the creation of the Sinologist position at the Canadian Embassy in Beijing. Beginning in 1973 with the appointment of William Saywell, then at the University of Toronto, as the first Sinologist, fourteen China scholars served as full-fledged diplomats for one to three year terms. Duties included cultural activities, media relations and public diplomacy, political reporting, educational relations, human rights, interpreting, science and technology, health, sports, and almost any activity in the Embassy, except economic reporting, trade, administration, and military affairs. Sinologists were selected in a competitive process that included interviews by DEA officials, briefings in the bowels of the DEA’s Pearson Building, and rigorous security clearances.

We were part of an experiment in which Canadian officials put aside their reservations about working with untrained diplomats to gain the benefit of our knowledge of circumstances in China. On the whole, the experiment worked well. It was the only position of its type anywhere in the Canadian Foreign Service. The first Sinologist, Saywell, played a key role in the visit of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1973. Peter Mitchell, Jan Walls, and Mary Sun helped in the creation of our educational exchanges and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) program. Diana Lary was there when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney visited in 1986. Claude Yves Charron provided essential support around the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. Ruth Hayhoe directed the expansion of the Canadian Studies Centres, while Charles Burton developed Canadian capacity in governance and human rights programs in the 1990s. The contributions of others (Brian Evans, Bernie Frolic, Graham MacDonald, Charles LeBlanc, Richard King, and Linda Hershkovitz) were also significant.

In 1974, during the Cultural Revolution, I was posted to Beijing as the third Sinologist. In my diary in the first few weeks, I recorded the following thoughts:

They want me to be a diplomat but I hardly even know how to organize the seating at diplomatic dinners.

Most of the time I’m too busy representing Canada to learn more about China.

I’m marooned in a golden ghetto for foreigners.

Do I want to be a diplomat or stay a scholar?