



IN-DEPTH

CHINA STRATEGY PROJECT

# Multiculturalism & Canada-China Relations

XIAOBEI CHEN



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY



*This paper is published as part of a series under IPD's [China Strategy Project](#).*

Connections between domestic politics and foreign policy—more specifically between ethnic organizing and foreign policy—have for decades attracted the attention of scholars and commentators. But the nexus between foreign policy, growing ethnic diversity in populations, and the policy of multiculturalism has become an increasingly pressing topic for debate since September 11, 2001, the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and China's concurrent rapid rise. There are two distinguishable but interlinked themes in such discussions: one concerns assessing and debating the impact of ethnic minority groups on foreign policy making; the other is about how governments' strategies for dealing with other countries affect domestic politics with respect to particular ethnic minorities.

The thrust of this article is more concerned with the second theme—the impact of foreign policy on ethnic minorities at home—informed by my research and community engagement as a public sociologist to intervene against the surge of anti-Asian racism and Sinophobia in particular. My aim is to show how, despite state multiculturalism, foreign policy making can function as an institutional conduit for reproducing systemic racism, which not only exacerbates social divisions but also prevents a form of intercultural understanding in which individuals truly see one another. There are two parts in what follows.

First, I discuss a few new factors relevant to debates about ethnic diversity and foreign policy in our present time, with particular emphasis on some Chinese Canadians' experiences with the rise of Sinophobia and their perspectives on multiculturalism and foreign policy. Then I discuss a number of fundamental deficiencies in

multiculturalism and, more generally, Canada's approach to diversity which have a heightened significance both for ethnic minority groups' experiences and for foreign policy making in times of international contestation, such as today's period of deepening great power rivalry.

## **Ethnic Diversity and Foreign Policy in Our Present Time**

While we bear in mind that there has been and always will be intense debate over ethnic minority groups and foreign policy, it is important to specify how the context of this debate has evolved in recent years. First, there has been the fact of increasing cultural diversity in Western countries as a result of their post-World War II economic need for cheap labour, skills and capital, and corresponding immigration from ex-colonies as well as other countries.

Second, in the 1970s and 1980s multiculturalism had emerged as a possible policy model in these countries, partly in response to the fact of demographic diversity and as a result of political compromise.

Despite significant variations across nation-states, [multiculturalism as a mode of governance](#) generally signals the valuing of the presence of diverse ethnocultural groups, recognition of non-dominant [ethnocultural and religious groups' rights](#) in certain areas such as language and education, and state support to and accommodation of these groups. Third, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a paradigm of securitization has foregrounded concerns about foreign interference and internal security threats. Some European political leaders such as [Angela Merkel](#), [David Cameron](#), and [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) have declared multiculturalism as a failure.

While such views have not become mainstream



in Canada, Canadian multiculturalism policy has nonetheless been [criticized](#) by scholars such as Jack L. Granatstein for fostering unhealthy transnational ties that are harmful to the national interests of Canada. Others such as Vic Satzewich have [rebutted](#) that view by suggesting that Canada's multiculturalism policy may have little to do with transnational identities and connections and thus cannot be blamed for harming Canada's national interests. Furthermore, heightened security concerns have subjected Muslims and members of Arab communities to widespread discrimination, ostracization and brutal violence because they are stigmatized as an object of suspicion.

Parallel to the treatment of Arab and Muslim communities, since the financial crisis of 2008 the Chinese diaspora has been subjected to suspicion and accusations of posing threats. While blatant attacks on multiculturalism are not often heard in Canada, Vancouver, despite being known as the most Asian city outside Asia and supposedly "the bastion of progressive multiculturalism", registered more anti-Asian hate crimes reported to the police than in the top ten most populous US cities combined; it experienced a [717 percent increase](#) in anti-Asian crimes from 2019 to 2020, despite underreporting, and was dubbed [the world's capital of anti-Asian hate crimes](#). In a similar vein, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, hate messages directed at [Ottawa's Moscow Tea Room](#), vandalism targeting [the Russian community](#), and boycotts against [Russian culture](#) show how even in liberal multicultural societies an ethnic minority group can just as easily and quickly be demonized in times of international conflict, even though they have nothing to do with the actions of their country of origin.

In this article, I enter the debate surrounding multiculturalism and foreign policy by sharing some preliminary research findings about

Chinese Canadians' experiences on this subject. Despite Canadian multiculturalism's status as a pioneer of state-sanctioned diversity policy in the West, the image of it as a progressive beacon is now increasingly questioned by some ethnic minorities.

For example, in early 2020, Chinese Canadians were confronted with two impossible choices: to wear a face mask in public spaces and thus risk racist abuse, or to not wear a face mask and risk contracting the novel coronavirus. Wearing face masks is a common practice in East Asian countries for warding off viruses, mitigating allergies, or merely for privacy. Furthermore, since the outbreak in Wuhan, Chinese Canadians who had immigrated from mainland China were acutely aware of how infectious and deadly the virus was from their families and friends in China, and how important preventive measures were in controlling the spread of the virus. They tried to persuade their neighbours and colleagues to use masks, almost all of whom declined, sometimes rudely; when they wore masks in public, many were harassed. Some harassers misunderstood wearing face masks as being sick and felt the wearers should not have left home; some equated the practice to ignorance, to being culturally un-Canadian, or to a Chinese Communist conspiracy, in many ways resembling xenophobic stigmatizing of Muslim women wearing hijabs.

Equally seriously, [racial profiling](#) of the Chinese diaspora as communist spies sabotaging national interests is happening with increasing frequency in the media, governments, and other institutions. This is especially the case for those with obvious connections with China because of their immigration status, or because their political views may not be ideologically anti-China. These characteristics mark them for questioning, scrutinizing, filtering and quiet silencing.



When Canadian [Senator Yuen Pau Woo](#) spoke on a resolution in the Upper Chamber which aimed to label human rights abuses in Xinjiang as a genocide, prominent commentators and news reports distorted his speech, singled out his immigrant background and attacked him for “living in the wrong country”. Many Chinese Canadians are frustrated that they are routinely censored when they write comments online to oppose the media’s demonization of China. Chinese Canadians who protest against anti-Chinese hostility have been slandered as being masterminded by the Chinese government and thus dismissed. When some Chinese Canadians point out that the sharp rise in anti-Chinese hate crime in Canada was because of the US’s anti-China rhetoric and policy, they are often ignored even by veteran anti-racist activists and organizations, likely because they are suspected of working for China and using anti-racism to advance China’s agenda. At a recent online talk about anti-Asian racism, which was organized by the Asian Diasporas Research and Education project at Carleton University, one Chinese Canadian in the audience asked: “Aren’t my life experience and my views informed by that experience part of what makes me ‘diverse’? Isn’t that what multiculturalism is supposed to be about?”

## **Deficiencies in Canada’s Approach to Ethnic Diversity**

The problem of rising anti-Asian racism should not be understood as a transient phenomenon. Rather, the issue concerns deficiencies present within the government’s approach to racialized minorities, including the policy of multiculturalism.

First, historically and even at present, racialized minority groups are often conditionally incorporated in objectifying ways that maximize what Canada needs from them but minimize

what Canada can do to protect them. Canadian immigration policies since the 1960s have shifted their priority from hard labour to skilled labour and later to investment. Similarly, Canada’s discourse of multiculturalism and diversity emphasizes the business value of racial and ethnic minorities in the global marketplace. As Abu-Laban and Gabriel [contend](#), the dominant conceptualization of diversity since the 1990s considers diversity, and people to whom this label is applied, as little more than “trade-enhancing commodities”.

The dehumanizing approach of valuing what is wanted from ethnic minority people over their lives is especially pronounced in times of intensified xenophobia. For example, the recruitment of [international students](#) has grown to be an important policy program for Canada. Universities rely on Asian international students’ tuition fees to mitigate cuts to public funding, but universities and governments have done little to acknowledge and support them during the surge of anti-Asian racism, even in times of growing investment in equity and inclusion initiatives. Another example is approaches to immigration that have been driven by increasingly contentious politicization of intellectual property issues and international competition.

However, as great power competition intensifies, immigrant STEM researchers, especially those from China, have suddenly found themselves suspected, blamed and punished for doing their work under the US’s [China Initiative](#) and Canada’s [security risk assessment](#) for research partnership. A professor recently commented to me: “When the relationship [between Canada and China] is good, [our work] is described as research collaboration, scholarly exchange; when the relationship is bad, it is described as spying and theft. The same work gets defined differently depending on the political context.” Governments and universities have been



largely silent about the impact of this shift on researchers with Chinese connections as a group.

Second, multiculturalism policy and foreign policy share the problem of prejudices with regard to ethnic minority groups. David Carment and Yiagadeesen Samy have [warned](#) about the dangerous game of “seductive and populist” diaspora politics in foreign policy making. Part of the danger stems from ignorance about the extensive differences even within an apparently singular ethnic group. At this point, at least most politicians, commentators and policy researchers know that there are different groups of Chinese Canadians who (themselves or their ancestors) came from pre-Communist China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, or Southeast Asian countries. However, intersecting with this understanding is a racist and ideologically anti-communist perspective which labels Chinese Canadians as either Good Chinese (i.e., victims of the Chinese Communist Party) or Bad Chinese (i.e., Communist Party accomplices).

This binary conception of Chinese Canadians is a key component of the structural, ideological framework through which the Chinese diaspora is made sense of, evaluated, and reacted to accordingly. If such Canadians do not behave in ways that fit the image of victims of communism by taking an anti-China position – or better, renounce any connection with China – they are suspected of being its puppets and even accused of being communist agents who collude with the Chinese government and sabotage Western interests from within their adopted country. Mainland Chinese immigrants are the primary target of the negative profiling as communist, anti-democratic, and thus suspicious until proven innocent. This prejudice is even shared by some Chinese Canadians who were immigrants from pre-Communist China, Hong Kong and Taiwan,

partly because their cultural identities have been constructed in opposition to the Communist regime and partly because of the prejudice in those places against mainlanders, who are traditionally thought of as poor, stupid country bumpkins and/or warped by the Communist government.

The gross injustice is that most mainland Chinese immigrants would not see themselves either as victims or as helpers of the Communist government, because they have nuanced and evolving views about China and in many instances are apolitical. Nonetheless, this racist prejudice is pervasive and structures how Chinese Canadians are seen and assessed in Canada and even in foreign policy making processes, which likely results in the disproportionate influence of those who are considered as “Good Chinese” and the marginalization of “Bad Chinese”.

Third, most would argue that inter-ethnic understanding is helpful for making rational foreign policy. Common sense would dictate that state multiculturalism should result in better foreign policy, given that a diversity of cultures stands to enrich the country’s national discourse and international connections. Yet in reality, that is not necessarily the case. One insight from critical multiculturalism studies is that the presence of cultural diversity does not guarantee inter-ethnic understanding.

To put it in starker terms, the presence of diverse cultural practices does not mean that social divisions will not become hardened. This is because of the often stereotypical conception of culture, as well as the positioning of the [white majority](#) as the generous granter of tolerance and respect. When it comes to cultural heritage celebration encouraged in diverse communities, I have [previously written](#) about how everyday practices of acknowledging and celebrating cultural heritage tend to take the



form of consuming “cultural bites”, collecting and displaying Chinese objects, and performing “Chineseness” on specific occasions, while missing the stories that Chinese Canadians could tell about locality, migrancy, creativity, hybridity and survival.

Last autumn, a polite white old lady stopped by my front garden to talk about my flowers. We introduced ourselves. When I told her that I came from China some twenty-six years ago, she responded by saying that she loved Chinese food and green tea. In fact, she had a flask of green tea in her bag right then. She visited many places in China on a couple of trips. She said how she loved Chinese people and Chinese culture, and then shook her head, “not so much the Chinese government which is awful!” There was a moment of awkwardness because I felt she expected me to echo her sentiment, but I didn’t join in the denunciation of the Chinese government.

I have my criticisms of the Chinese government and have occasionally [written](#) about them. However, in a time of war-mongering anti-China hysteria, it is important for Canadians to have a nuanced understanding of China. What crossed my mind at the time is that the majority of the population in China, a staggering 1.4 billion people, are relatively content with the huge improvement in their lives from a mere three decades ago.

In contrast to the century of humiliation under Western semi-colonization, Japanese invasion, civil wars and crushing poverty, they now have abundant food, an extensive high-speed rail system, and cheap and reliable communication technology. To them, the return of Hong Kong in 1997 to China was a decolonization moment and the hosting of the Olympic Games a symbol of China’s revitalization.

This chance conversation was not an occasion for

a full, complex explanation. So I only said, “But you know, people are generally much happier in comparison to twenty, thirty years ago” and left it there. It was a friendly, even warm social exchange. However, I also feel unsettled, wondering how she would interpret my refusal to echo the simple condemnation. Elsewhere, similar refusals by myself, other Chinese Canadians, and even non-Chinese Canadians have triggered accusations of being communist spies. I relate this friendly exchange because it exemplifies what is nice about Canada, but also the terms of belonging set for ethnic minority Canadians and the challenge of achieving inter-ethnic understanding.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified a number of deficiencies in Canada’s approach to diversity that are especially closely connected to foreign policy and have a bearing on ethnic minority groups’ experiences in times of worsening international tensions. These problems are even more important to address in today’s multipolar world, given that the pressures of great power rivalry are making the task of intercultural understanding more difficult due to pervasive (real and imagined) security concerns over foreign influence.

How can Canada’s multiculturalism policy be transformed so that it promotes genuine appreciation for diversity, understanding, collaboration, interdependence, and crucially, sociopolitical stability in an era where great power rivalry threatens to increase racism and xenophobia? To begin with, for the policy of multiculturalism to truly value cultural minority groups and to inform foreign policy in helpful ways, we need to see that they are more than the labour, research skills and knowledge, social and financial capital, and trade assets that Canada may covet. We should see their humanity and



care about their lives that are vulnerable to racist hostility in times of international confrontations.

Equally importantly, we should develop critical understandings of how current state multiculturalism and foreign policy not only fail to eliminate racism, but can also become conduits for discourses of prejudice to be perpetuated. Thirdly, in order for foreign policy to benefit more completely from our great span of ethnic diversity, we ought to avoid the trap of turning inter-ethnic recognition into yet another occasion for affirming our own virtues. We should practice an [ethics of recognition](#) that does not assume that we already know the Other, but rather which encourages us to understand the Other on their terms.

## About the Author

Xiaobei Chen is a Professor of Sociology at Carleton University in Ottawa.

 @xiaobeic

## About Us

**The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (IPD)** is a non-profit and non-partisan North American international affairs think tank operating in the United States and Canada dedicated to promoting dialogue, diplomacy, prudent realism, and military restraint—principles which we believe are the four cornerstones of sustainable peace in an increasingly complex and dynamic international system.

Visit us at [peacediplomacy.org](https://peacediplomacy.org) to learn more.

© 2022 Institute for Peace & Diplomacy

## Contact Us

For media inquiries and to arrange an interview with one of our experts, contact our communications team.

E: [info@peacediplomacy.org](mailto:info@peacediplomacy.org)

T: (647) 280-4983

W: [peacediplomacy.org](https://peacediplomacy.org)



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY