

Lasting bonds

When the University of British Columbia found that it had more than 3,000 former students as well as research and development ties in one community, it decided to open an office there.

The location? Hong Kong—just one of many cities throughout Asia Pacific where UBC is deeply networked through academic partnerships, research initiatives and active alumni.

"We hold a very vital link for Canada in this region," says Kenneth McGillivray, Director of UBC International, which develops global alliances for the university. "We have six decades of work there."

While governments forge the broad context in which trade, political and cultural exchange takes place between nations, it is ultimately a myriad of people-to-people links that carry the current between societies.

Cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver are home to substantial populations from China, India, South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan and elsewhere, new Canadians with trade, professional and cultural ties to their countries of origin.

With some 4,000 international students, many from Asia, UBC has institutionalized such connections. On campus is Korea House, a residence for 200 Korean students created through an alliance with the South Korean government. UBC is trying to build a quadrant of such facilities, explains McGillivray, noting that "very strong and lasting relationships" with Asia Pacific have strengthened the university.

Students from Asia make up some 40 percent of the 53,000 international post-secondary students in Canada, according to Statistics Canada. They bring considerable wealth to this country and carry Canadian knowledge and personal associations home with them.

UBC's Pacific coast location has been a benefit in this regard. Yet while there are 353,000 residents of east and southeastern Asian origin in Vancouver, Toronto's population of 488,000 from the same region can reach out to Asia Pacific just as readily.

"Some of our people here export back overseas," comments Ken Ng, an immigrant from Hong Kong and a family physician who is chair of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Markham, the booming north Toronto suburb peppered



photo: CP (Steve White)

▲ Signs of change: Asian Canadians have brought a unique mix of culture and commerce to Canada, such as this stretch of Toronto's Chinatown.

with new Asian malls and housing. Links with mainland China are deepening, notes Ng, with the ease in immigration from there.

Conversely, it was with tremendous difficulty that many of Canada's 210,000 people of Vietnamese origin came, largely in the seventies and eighties. But Phung Van Hanh looks at his community of some 40,000 Vietnamese Canadians in Montreal with great pride today.

"We have many engineers, we have about 10,000 technicians in computer work," says Phung, former president of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation. "The situation is better day after day," he says, adding that the province of Quebec, home to 60,000 Vietnamese in all, was an immediate fit for many who arrived in this country with fluency in French.

The diversity within Canada's Asian communities creates a breadth of important bonds with societies that Canadians need to better understand. Immigrants from Bangladesh and Malaysia, for example, bring links to the Muslim world, while those from places such as Japan facilitate cultural exchange with their home countries.

Connections with the region have especially proliferated in the last decade,

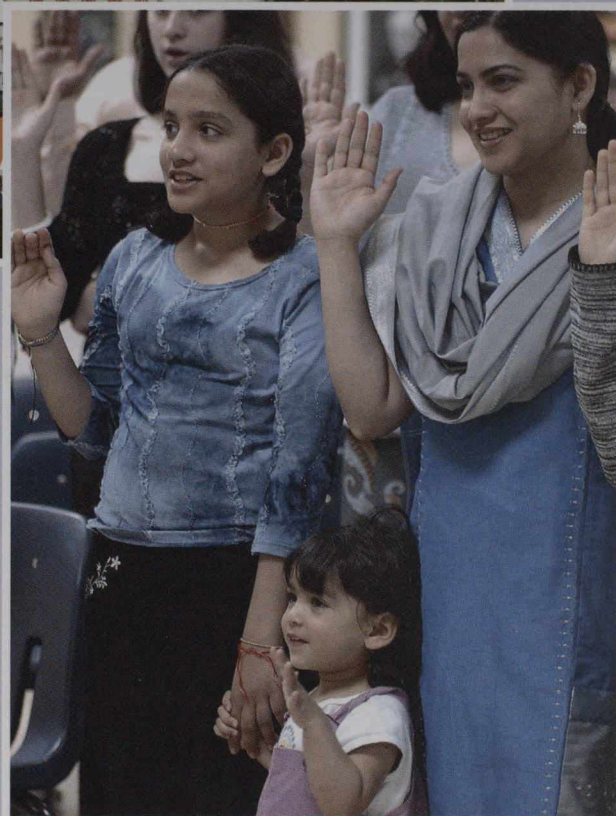


photo: CP (Keith Grosse)

▲ Family links: Although she was born a Canadian, two-year-old Ushmi Kabir raises her hand to take the citizenship oath along with her mother Nasima (right) and big sister Lamia at a ceremony in St. John's, Newfoundland, in 2004. The family is originally from Bangladesh.

says Willy Lumbanraja, President of the Indonesian Canadian Community Association in Mississauga, Ontario. "Before that, Indonesians didn't know a lot about Canada."

They are learning quickly. And while the some 4,500 Indonesians in the Toronto area carry much knowledge of their culture, it is in Canada that they seek to use it, Lumbanraja remarks. "Most of us say we want to stay here, especially the children."