

ASSIGNMENT TO BEIJING

Jennie Chen heads out on a rotation in Canada's foreign service with some impressive credentials.

For a junior diplomat on her first foreign posting, Jennie Chen has a remarkably robust portfolio.

Chen, 29, takes up a position this fall as Third Secretary in the Canadian Embassy in Beijing speaking fluent Mandarin, with two degrees in Asian studies as well as family ties to the country and lengthy experience working in the region.

She's among the gifted Canadians who enter the country's foreign service, high achievers who sign on to promote Canadian interests abroad while carrying a strong sense of how much Canada can contribute internationally.

"There's pride for me in being part of something that's doing so much good," says Chen. "It's not just Foreign

Affairs Canada but our NGOs, our participation in the World Health Organization, the Red Cross and in Médecins Sans Frontières. It's a testament to our country."

Undergraduate studies in international relations and Asian history at the University of British Columbia inspired the Vancouver-born Chen to work abroad. Her father was a Chinese diplomat from Hunan province who was posted to Ottawa in the 1960s, where he met her mother, an immigrant from Shanghai. A shift in China's rule ended her father's term, at which point the family stayed in Canada and moved to the West Coast.

Chen's first foreign job came through a one-year internship in 1999 as a trade development officer at the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok. "Seeing how a society has adapted to so much change over such a short period of time, finding it such a colourful, amazing place to be, I learned to appreciate the beauty and complexities of a culture without my pre-existing biases getting in the way."

Following her stint in Bangkok, Chen was engaged by the Canadian consulate in Shanghai to work on the logistics for a Team Canada trade mission to the region. She returned to Canada to complete a master's degree in Asian Studies at McGill University in Montreal.

She applied to become a foreign service officer in 2001 and successfully navigated the tough, year-long recruitment process. Competition for the service is legendary: each year more than 5,000 Canadians apply and complete a battery of tests, while just 300 to 400 are interviewed and perhaps 75 to 100—less than two percent of original applicants—are

hired in the trade, political and immigration streams.

Chen's apprenticeship has included French training, a year as a departmental spokesperson in Ottawa and a four-month assignment at Canada's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York.

There have been challenges. Despite growing up in a home where Mandarin was spoken, Chen required training to bring her language skills up to a working level. She has also found that her Asian appearance can create "identity confusion" abroad. "Visually, I'm 100 percent Chinese and that negates the fact that I'm Canadian for many people."

She views her posting as a chance to reach out to China in mutually constructive ways, especially in social areas. "In recent years we have witnessed the borderlessness of the environmental and health issues that touch our two countries," she observes. "Canada has much to offer in these fields, and if I can somehow be a part of building active relationships toward the resolution of these issues, that's something I would like to do."

Chen recognizes both in herself and her peers joining Canada's foreign service that youthfulness has a connection to such idealism. "There are so many young people in this country who want to do good," she remarks. "The challenge is to channel and focus that energy. I consider myself fortunate to have this chance." 🍁

Find out about applying for a position in Canada's foreign service at www.international.gc.ca/department/service.



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