

A Chinese voice in Canada

By Michelle Huang

RAYMOND Chan has a new job that will bring him back to his Hongkong roots more often than the six times he returned since making Canada his home 24 years ago.

An engineer by training and profession, Chan was appointed junior cabinet minister for the Asia-Pacific region shortly after Canada's October federal election, in which he claimed the Richmond, British Columbia, seat of the country's parliament.

He is the only Chinese-Canadian member of parliament in the current government, and the highest-ranking ethnic Chinese politician in Canada's history.

Chan arrived in Vancouver at the age of 17, leaving behind a poverty-stricken childhood in the public housing estates of the area now known as Lok Fu.

The squalid conditions there made him appreciate Canada all the more, he said.

"When I first came back in 1977 I cried to see my family was still in that area," he said. "You see rats all over the place at night ... common toilets that stank like crazy.

"So Canada was a paradise for me."

Most of his immediate family have also settled in Canada now, but a number of Chan's cousins still remain in Hongkong.

His first foray into Canadian politics is of great interest to Chinese in Hongkong and worldwide, even though Chan considers himself a "real Canadian".

A defender of human rights spurred into activism by the 1989 Beijing crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, Chan said he was even congratulated by Chinese government representatives in Vancouver on his election victory.

"On the basis of nationalism they feel proud," he said. "My appointment is honoured by all Chinese around the world."

The focus on Chan has worked to his advantage in that Canada's interests and

needs reach an international audience.

"I enjoy the attention," he said. "As part of the Canadian government, my mission is to promote our concern and our message, and the attention facilitated that mission."

Chan said he did feel a special responsibility toward Chinese-Canadians, particularly toward merging the community with the general population and increasing understanding among cultures.

"The strongest barrier that I have to break down is to let them know that there's no conflict between Canadian and Chinese-Canadian interests," he said.

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