

## **Historical overview of the Canada-China Friendship Society**

### **By Lolan Merklinger**

Early indications of a growing interest in a Canada China friendship movement were evident in the city of Ottawa in 1974 when a small group of individuals met informally. The Canada-China Friendship Society of Ottawa was established under that name at its first public meeting on January 6, 1976 at which Peter Larson was elected as its provisional president. He had earlier returned from France where he had joined the China-France Friendship Society whose constitution formed a basis for CCFS-Ottawa's first constitution. The purpose of this non-profit organization was stated as one to create friendship between the two peoples through better understanding, and while non-political, it was interested in all aspects of China from arts to economics to politics. It was open to anyone who subscribed to these and other principles.

The early years' activities for members (77 at the beginning) ranged from lectures to the showing of films from China. CCFS also attracted the interest and involvement of well-known Canadians: Celia Franca from the world of dance, Patrick Watson from broadcasting, and Messrs. Mitchell Sharp, Paul Martin Sr. and Tommy Douglas who endorsed CCFS activities in the early years. The CCFS was a Canadian activity, though the Chinese Embassy would invite CCFS members to interesting embassy events.

CCFS-Ottawa's activities in the latter part of the 1970s focused on cultural events such as organized calligraphic and photographic exhibits, members' tours to China, and working with other chapters toward the establishment of the national-level Federation of Canada-China Friendship Associations (FCCFA) in 1980. The FCCFA became the formal liaison with China National Youxie or the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) headquartered in Beijing. In addition to receiving both central and provincial Youxie delegations visiting Ottawa, as well as Chinese artistic troupes, the CCFS Ottawa membership was very active in working with visiting Chinese scholars and students at the two Ottawa universities. Founding members such as Mr. Tsin Van and the late Mr. Tin Yap were instrumental in arranging organized tours of Ottawa-area farms and factories for Chinese scholars and students. Bus tours for CCFS members and visiting Chinese delegations to Dr. Norman Bethune's birthplace in Gravenhurst were

undertaken regularly, and CCFS helped to host eminent Chinese writer Ding Ling's 1981 visit to Carleton University.

Through the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, the Society's presidents included Messrs. Tsin Van, Glenn Barker, and Mme. Annette Moisan. CCFS membership came from many different walks of life, from government, retired civil servants, academics and professionals from the National Capital Region. The sustained support of former Canadian ambassadors to China enhanced CCFS activities. The late ambassadors Arthur Menzies and Ambassador John Small and their respective spouses over the years enriched the Society with talks of their experiences in China.

During the 1990's to the present, rapid changes in China together with the growth in Canadians' knowledge of China and increased travel in both directions led to a refocusing of CCFS' activities. The need for a Society role in acclimatizing Chinese scholars and students to Canadian life greatly diminished and new activities took their place. The 1992 Exhibition of Chinese Children's Paintings, initiated by CCFS Ottawa chapter organizers (Tsin Van, Jacqueline Major, Violet Carter), enjoyed a successful cross-Canada tour that year with support from the Asian Pacific Foundation. Among the regular activities of CCFS since 1992, were many visiting friendship delegations from Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, Guangzhou, Chongqing, and Jiangsu (Hangzhou, Wuxi, Liuzhou, Nantong) and many other localities. For these visits, CCFS's executives and member volunteers often helped to arrange visits to agencies or hospitals. Dinners for visiting Chinese delegations became open to CCFS members to meet informally with the Chinese delegations.

The CCFS's work has been supported by official levels from both sides of the Ottawa River. The mayors of Ottawa and Hull, later Gatineau have attended the Chinese New Year banquets throughout the years along with MPs and respective city councillors.

Highlights in CCFS activities since 2000 have included its representation at the unveiling ceremony for the Dr. Norman Bethune statue in Gravenhurst (Aug 2000), presided over by former Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson and then Chinese Ambassador Mei Ping. Annual highlights include the highly successful Chinese New Year's Banquet which has been graced by the regular participation of the Chinese ambassador (Ambassador Lu and Ambassador Lan) with senior members of the Embassy. Cultural events hosted by the Chinese Embassy in the form of film evenings have been very well received by CCFS members. Chinese Embassy staff of minister-

counselor rank have addressed the Society on topics ranging from Canada China relations to China's development.

Changes since 2005: Former president Chan-Kin Ng resigned as president and member of the Society in March 2005 and a new executive committee was elected with Lolan Merklinger as president (2005-2009). Since 2006 former CCFS presidents such as the late Mr. Tsin Van and Peter Larson lent valuable advice and assistance to the Society, together with veteran members such as Mr. Robert Bennett and Dr. Connie Nozzolillo.

During the last 12 years the Society has sent delegates to Federation-sponsored visits to China at the invitation of the CPAFFC, or Chinese provincial friendship associations (in 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010). Canadian delegates' expenses are on a self-pay basis for international airfares. Former CCFS president Lolan Merklinger led a delegation to attend the 50th anniversary celebrations of Jiangsu People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in Nanjing (JPAFFC) In September 2006 Ottawa representatives took part in a Federation delegation visit to attend the Second Friendship Forum in Wuhan, Hubei; a paper was presented by FCCFA president Lolan Merklinger. This group later joined 30 other foreign delegations in the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Shanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (SPAFFC) in Shanghai on September 12. The Society has since reciprocated their Chinese hosts' in-China hospitality with welcoming delegations from Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Wuhan and other municipalities.

During 2009-2010 the chapter functioned with an 11-member executive committee headed by Lorraine Farkas, elected president at the November 2009 AGM after Lolan Merklinger stepped down as president in accordance with the chapter's constitutional provision. Gilliane Lapointe became vice-president.

In September 2010, the chapter sent representatives on a Federation delegation visit to China to attend the 4th Friendship Forum in Nanchang, Jiangxi at the invitation of CPAFFC. A second delegation simultaneously visited China at the invitation of Shanghai PAFFC and Jiangsu PAFFC.

The Ottawa chapter is actively involved in helping to organize 40th anniversary celebrations on the occasion of the launching of diplomatic relations between Canada and the P.R. of China. Its representatives will also be participating in the DFAIT-

sponsored National Conference on Canada China relations, in Ottawa, and the 2nd Canada-China Cultural Dialogue Conference, both taking place Oct. 13-14, 2010 in Ottawa on the occasion to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the start of the two countries' diplomatic relations.

Current membership of CCFS-Ottawa numbers close to 200 with members from both sides of the River. The Society obtained its trademark from the Canadian Intellectual Property Office in July 2006. The Society's newsletter appears several times a year excepting the summer break, with feature articles on subjects of interest to CCFS members with announcements about upcoming activities.

LWM