

From Criticism to Mutual Support: Richmond Public Library's Relationship with the Cantonese Speaking Community

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Who would have anticipated the connection between public library services in Canada and the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997? Certainly not Richmond Public Library, who was caught off guard by the negative publicity it received in 1994 for not providing equitable library services in Chinese, for the Cantonese speaking taxpayers who recently immigrated to Richmond to escape the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong. Instead of being defensive, the Library took the criticisms as a challenge and an opportunity to improve its Chinese language services. It hired staff with appropriate language skills, cultural sensitivity and vision to develop Chinese language programs and engage in outreach to the community. It also allocated budget funding to expand and process the Chinese language collections; it created a point-and-click catalogue for Chinese language materials that also could be searched by traditional Chinese characters and Pinyin Romanization; and it implemented communication strategies that either focused on or included the Chinese community. In short, the effort has paid off. Richmond Public Library has become one of the busiest libraries in Canada, in part due to its Chinese collections and services. People from all over the Lower Mainland come to borrow Chinese materials and attend programs. The library has received many local and international awards for its Chinese programs and services and gained a reputation as the place to go for Chinese books and movies. Most importantly, it has won the trust and support of the Cantonese speaking community. Not only have they embraced the services provided by Richmond Public Library, but they have also become strong supporters and regular donors (both books and cash). This paper will provide a brief history of Richmond Public Library's work in the Chinese community as well as the challenges it has encountered. It will also examine the factors that contributed to its success, including approaches and strategies that have worked well in the Cantonese speaking community in particular.