

# The art of cultivating cultural harmony

by Sabine Eiche

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In Richmond, we hear and read the word agriculture almost every day. Its meaning is no mystery. And anyone who has studied Latin will also know the roots of this word - “ager” (field) and “cultura” (past participle of “colere” meaning to tend, guard, till). About 600 years ago, the word agriculture, along with culture, entered the English language via Middle French. Both words then signified tilling the land, cultivating crops.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term culture started to stray from crops to humans and assumed the figurative meaning of cultivation of the intellect. Culture has kept that figurative sense over time – a person characterized as cultured or cultivated is someone knowledgeable about the liberal and fine arts.

Another, related, usage of the word culture began to circulate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It refers to the civilization, arts, or traditions and rituals, of a society or a historic period. To cite a few examples – we speak about the culture of the Renaissance, Chinese culture, tea or coffee culture.

We could say that just as the collective traditions of a society are their culture, so a tradition such as tea or coffee culture collects, or binds, people through a common interest. Thus linked, these people form a community of sorts. Interestingly, the term for another kind of community – colony – derives from the same Latin word “colere” that is at the root of our word culture.

Community, communication, culture, immigration, these and similar terms have been trumpeted by our local newspapers recently, and rather more loudly after the

March 12 workshop on Chinese-only signs in Richmond. Thanks to Kerry Starchuk, this matter is finally getting the attention it needs. Actually, the signage issue hints at a much bigger problem – namely, one culture reacting to the changes ushered in by another culture, a situation exacerbated not only by the language barrier but also by the scale of the changes, the speed at which they've occurred and the tendency of "new" priorities to displace "old" values.

In speaking of the widespread discontent at the state of affairs existing between "old" residents and new immigrants, I think I can legitimately return to the metaphor of agriculture. Mega corporations such as Monsanto support a type of agriculture known as mono-culture, which means growing a single crop on an industrial scale. Its dangers and detriments are well known. Instead, traditional agriculture means raising a diversity of crops to ensure ecological balance. An increasing number of people are recognizing the wisdom of such methods.

Similarly, if we, with our different cultures, are to thrive we should aim for a diversity that is balanced (as well as compatible and integrative). Essential to achieving a balance is the ability to communicate. A first step towards cultivating harmonious integration would be for the government to require a basic command of one of our official languages as a pre-requisite for new immigrants. A second step is for us all to realize that integration, balance and harmony are not accomplished instantaneously – like anything cultivated, they need to be nurtured and allowed the necessary time to mature.