

Native group forging China link

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QUEBEC -- When it comes to foreign investment, Canada's aboriginal leaders like to think of themselves as the hidden wolf behind the crouching Chinese tiger.

Yesterday, they emerged from a historic two-week trade mission in China convinced that the great Chinese tiger was about to be unleashed on the resource-rich native Canadian land mass to generate new wealth for aboriginal communities across the country.

Some of China's most powerful corporate and political leaders were on hand at Beijing's prestigious Government State House yesterday to sign several memorandums of understanding that, according to the head of the Canadian aboriginal business delegation, could open the door to concrete business partnerships.

Canadian aboriginal leaders are seeking to attract a portion of China's cash reserves to help develop native-controlled natural resources. Their effort to attract Chinese partners is part of a broader push by a new generation of leaders to break the age-old ties of dependency on federal and provincial assistance, delegation head Calvin Helin said.

"We were here to tell China that Aboriginal Canada was open for business ... And to be greeted and hosted at the level we were is quite unbelievable and quite historic. It's an enormous first step," Mr. Helin said in a telephone interview from Beijing. "It's been an exchange of incredible proportions."

Potential partnerships aren't limited to natural resources. One initiative included a letter of intent between the Squamish Nation and the province of Shaanxi to examine potential exports by Terrasphere Systems, a Boston-based company that has operations in Vancouver and makes agricultural technology to mass-produce organic fruit and vegetables.

Such deals would lead not only to greater autonomy for aboriginal communities but more wealth for the entire country, Mr. Helin said.

The Chinese, he noted, showed particular interest in the Northwest Territories, where the Tlicho Investment Corp., owned by the Tlicho First Nation, has control over an important resource-rich land mass covering 39,000 square kilometres.

"Canadian aboriginals own or control about a third of the Canadian land mass," Mr. Helin explained. "We have a new generation of leadership now and so the leaders are looking for capital to develop our natural resources ... The Chinese need the natural resources and other assets that we have in Canada and the aboriginal population needs their capital investment and expertise. It makes good sense to co-operate and work together."