

The Racism Fighter

Despite its glossy image as an international city, Hong Kong can be quite a prejudiced place for minorities. Now they have a champion: Fermi Wong

BY ISHAAN THAROOR

FERMI WONG HAD HER MOMENT OF revelation one day in 1998. The social worker was roving the streets of a working-class neighborhood in Hong Kong's Kowloon district, looking out for truant youth, when she came across a gaggle of Pakistani kids playing soccer. They ran and tackled each other along the edge of a pavement, in view of an unoccupied public field equipped with proper goals. Bemused, Wong asked them why they weren't using the actual soccer pitch, which was open to all. "People told us we're not allowed there," came the response. "It's for Chinese only."

That encounter sent Wong, now 39, down a difficult and lonesome path as the leading advocate for those among Hong Kong's minorities who are poor

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and marginalized. Racism in the prosperous former British colony doesn't simmer into violence as it has in towns in northern England. Nor has it been institutionalized, as with laws that favor the ethnic majority in Malaysia. But while Hong Kong, a city whose 7 million population is more than 90% Chinese, garbs itself with a sleek cosmopolitanism, casual bigotry still shapes the daily experience of many of its nonwhite, non-Chinese residents. Local Chinese, Wong says, have a lack of understanding of minorities in their city, especially South Asians and Africans, and cling to shallow and negative stereotypes. (This even though many South Asians speak fluent Cantonese and have ties to the city that predate the

Chinese majority.) It's an apathy that has led to hiring practices in the city that discriminate against minorities as well as a public school system that has neglected a generation of poor non-Chinese. Even many of Wong's social-worker colleagues are bewildered by her interest in defending the rights of South Asians over improving the lot of fellow Chinese. "There is no empathy here," she says.

Wong sits in a converted warehouse in Tai Kok Tsui, a remote western corner of Kowloon. It's the office of Hong Kong Unison, the organization she founded in 2001 geared to defend the rights of minorities. Initially, Wong had precious little funding and had to scavenge for furniture to outfit the place. She now has backing from a few private donors as well as the international NGO Oxfam, but times are still lean. An array of colorful drapes liven up the space, while a staff of local Chinese and South Asian volunteers busy about. Wong is a blur of energy and enthusiasm, rattling off anecdotes from her years of activism. Like when she led dozens of South Asian youth to a school that had refused them admittance because of their poor Chinese and got them enrolled. Or when, in order to win the trust of a group of Nepalese boys loitering in a park, she scooped up a waddling toddler in their midst and showered him with kisses.

As a financial hub, Hong Kong draws in tens of thousands of well-heeled Western expats as well as a modicum of Asian professionals who indulge in the fine dining and luxury malls ubiquitous in Asia's self-professed "world city." But affluent people run up against prejudice too, if they are dark-skinned. Stories of everyday discrimination are legion and often banal in their predictability: from being denied service in a bar or being unable to lease an apartment of one's choice and means. Hong Kong police practice racial profiling, routinely checking IDs of South Asians and sometimes frisking them, even when they are simply

walking in the street. (This writer, an Indian, has been subject to such searches on numerous occasions.)

Countering both widespread cultural biases and an indifferent government has been an uphill battle. After nearly a decade of campaigning by activists, with Wong in the forefront, Hong Kong's government in July 2008 put into effect its first anti-racial-discrimination legislation, which in theory allows individual residents to take action against businesses and employers that have discriminated against them because of their skin color. But the law is difficult to enforce and, unlike other ordinances covering gender and disability, exempts many government bodies. A U.N. committee on eliminating racial discrimination, based in Geneva, voiced concerns over the law's scope in August last year.

Wong admits that she herself has had to learn much over the years—in the beginning she could only tell Nepalis apart from other South Asians because they were "Tibetan-looking." Now, she relishes South Asian cooking, swathes herself in flashy Indian scarves and is sought after by the elders of a host of ethnic-minority associations. Wong runs clinics with poor South Asian households, instructing them on everything from how to fill out official forms to how to stand up to bullying police officers ("Speak in a British accent," she advises). She has lectured at police academies "that not every South Asian is a potential criminal." Hong Kong Unison is also targeting the next generation of Hong Kongers, reaching out to schools with workshops that teach both local Chinese and ethnic minorities values of diversity and tolerance. "No one is born racist," says Wong. "Discrimination is learned."

She hopes that, bit by bit, attitudes will change and Hong Kong's minorities get the fair shake they deserve. "All I want," Wong says, "is for this city to be the truly international place it claims to be." ■

