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Racism 2012 - Melting Pot

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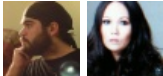
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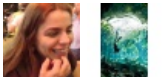
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WELCOME TO OUR MELTING POT

In 2012, what is the true state of racism in Hong Kong?
Shirley Zhao investigates

We live in the most incredible city in the world, a vertical metropolis built on the back of a dragon, with a rich melting pot of global cultures that reflects the blissful marriage between Occident and Orient. This is, at least, how the cliché goes – the one so often held out to the global community and the one which touts Hong Kong as Asia's World City.

But on the street, the reality is not so simple. Hong Kong is a complex web of races and cultures: we are overwhelmingly Chinese – from Hong Kong, the Mainland or overseas – but the city is enriched by people from across the globe. From ever-growing African communities to our considerable South Asian population (both long-resident and newly immigrant), 300,000 domestic helpers from across Southeast Asia, plenty of expats, a sizeable locally born Caucasian population, vibrant Middle Eastern and Latin populations, and inhabitants from everywhere in between, Hong Kong is becoming increasingly diverse. According to last year's Population Census, ethnic minorities took up about five percent of the city's population and about the same number of new immigrants had also entered Hong Kong from 2004 to 2011.

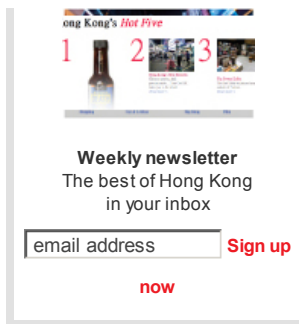
With such diversity comes cultural richness. But, almost inevitably, with such diversity comes racial prejudice, not just from the majority to the minority, but in a multifaceted tension that spans the city. Research conducted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, albeit in 2004, found that almost 70 percent of the 135 minorities represented in the city thought their races were discriminated against – and the SAR has only become increasingly diverse since then.



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Of course, no country in the world is exempt from problems with racism. But to what extent does it permeate our society? What extent do we allow it to be part of Hong Kong? And when you scratch beneath the surface, what happens to our rich cultural utopia?

'He changed his mind as soon as he saw me'

'Khan' started to look for a job in 2006 after he graduated from Form 5. He had a phone interview with a logistics company and he says the manager really liked him. An interview in person was quickly arranged. "I could tell that he changed his mind as soon as he saw me," says Khan, who refuses to give his full name because of fears that media exposure might harm his current employment. "He only asked me two brief questions before telling me I was not suitable for the job. He said I couldn't write in Chinese. But I already told him that over the phone and he had no problem with it at that time."

Khan says he had many similar experiences around that time, where his job application was turned down as soon as his interviewers found out that he is a Pakistani. Now the 23-year-old has worked as a restaurant waiter, a construction worker, a security guard and a mover. He says: "Almost all my employers are ethnic minorities."

Khan's story, anecdotal as it is, paints the picture of one of the more pervasive racial dilemmas Hong Kong faces. A survey released by Hong Kong Unison – a non-governmental organisation aimed at helping and supporting ethnic minorities in the city – in March found less than half of almost 2,000 police officers and secondary school teachers feel comfortable having people with darker skin in their personal lives. Annie Lin On-nei, community organiser at the Society for Community Organisation, says South Asian people often complained to her that people wouldn't sit next to them on the MTR, that their landlords refused to renew their contracts because there was a 'smell of garlic' emanating from their units or that some doctors refused to treat people from minority backgrounds who used to be in jail.

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, executive director of Unison, has her own take on it. "Hong Kong's racial discrimination is not violent but it operates in a more subtle way," she says. "Few employers are willing to hire dark-skinned people."

It's not just about skin colour, though. According to Wong, racism in Hong Kong isn't just about race – it's about broader stereotypes... which is where it gets complicated.

It's actually a melting pot of stereotypes

"Hong Kong people are sometimes too short-sighted," says Wong. "They only focus on short-term benefits and don't see the contribution minority groups have brought and can bring to society. Some locals let money overpower universal values of human rights, fairness and the rule of law."

Indeed, in Hong Kong, racism isn't often encountered in its purest form. It's more of an amalgamated prejudice of race, class and wealth, and a stereotyped correlation between the three. "A rich Indian man may receive completely different treatment from that of a poor Indian guy," says Wong. This element of wealth is reflected in many of the racial stereotypes that exist in the city, from those that attach to South Asians to expats, Japanese, Africans and Filipinos. And, of course, Mainlanders.

On top of all the usual Mainland stereotypes, new immigrants from the motherland are burdened with the stereotype of being lazy and competing with Hongkongers for resources. Mary Tang, a 61-year-old new immigrant who came to Hong Kong in 2005, tells *Time Out* that in her first few years in the city, her neighbours often gathered in front of her door and shouted at her, blaming her for claiming social security from the government and receiving food from the food banks. "I was the only breadwinner in our family at that time," says Tang. "I bought our food and I worked so hard that I fainted in the street and was taken to hospital. How could those people be so unfair to me?"

Views from the street..



According to the Labour and Welfare Bureau, only about 5.6 percent of new immigrants were on social security by last February. And yet, according to Yeung Mei, executive director of the New Arrival Women League, many locals have held the view that most new immigrants took social security and were unwilling to look for jobs. "It's not true," she says. "Newly arrived women are expected to work their asses off to earn money and look after the family as well. When they manage to do both, society never shows them any respect. When they fail to do so, society sees them as a burden."

The 'burden argument' is something the city's domestic helpers have been hearing for the past two years, as well. Ever since Filipino maid Evangeline Banao Vallejos, who had been in Hong Kong for 25 years, began her battle in court for the right to apply for permanent residency in the SAR (one she lost earlier this year), a significant sector of the population has been vocally opposed to her application. These have included Legislative Councillor Paul Tse Wai-chun who, last year, started a Facebook campaign against the right of permanent residency for foreign domestic helpers.

"It's unacceptable that so many foreign domestic helpers could become Hong Kong permanent residents overnight," he says, on the basis of the calculation that granting foreign domestic helpers permanent residency could lead to an extra influx of 125,000 people. "I don't think people's protests are discrimination. It's just that

our society is not able to afford so many of them coming. We don't have enough resources."

Many others, however, see this opposition as laced with racism. "It's just not fair that any other foreigner can become a permanent resident after seven years while foreign domestic helpers cannot," says Fish Ip Pui-yu, organising secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Asian Domestic Workers Unions. "It's discrimination against migrant workers."

'It's racial segregation'

Since 9/11, there have been extensive discussions worldwide about the success of multiculturalism. And one of the key points in the debate has centred around the concept of 'integration'. However, many ethnic minorities find significant, often prohibitive hurdles to integrating with wider Hong Kong society. According to the Society for Community Organisation's Annie Lin, there's a gap between mainstream Hong Kong culture and many minorities which both have found difficult to cross. "The language barrier is certainly one difficulty to overcome," says Lin. "Another difficulty is Hong Kong people's fear of the unknown. They seldom communicate with minority groups and know very little about them."

A recently released report by the Equal Opportunity Commission found the main problems facing South Asians were learning the Chinese language, employment issues and on-the-job treatment. And another EOC report released last year showed that only 0.6 percent of all students receiving higher education were ethnic minorities. According to the report, in 2006 about 3.2 percent of pupils entering primary schools were ethnic minorities, while last year only one percent of high school students were minorities, indicating fewer students entering more senior schools.

Views from the street...



Wong also thinks the local education system is unfair toward ethnic minorities. At present, about 60 percent of minority students are studying in 'designated schools', where there are few Chinese students and where, according to Wong, minority students are unable to receive sufficient Chinese language education. "It's racial segregation," she says. "Students of designated schools are in a weak Chinese learning environment. Not being able to speak Chinese well will affect their secondary and higher education – and subsequently their employment."

"I want to study with more Chinese classmates," says Sherry Anne Cayabyab Adec, a Primary 5 pupil at one of the designated schools. The 12-year-old Filipino says she has few Chinese-speaking friends. "My Chinese is not very good," she says. "But I'm studying very hard." If

Sherry wants to enter a local college, she will need to pass Chinese language tests set for both Chinese and non-Chinese speaking students.

According to Wong, some government policies are in fact encouraging racial discrimination. She tells *Time Out* that once the father of a minority student asked her if the government had a hidden agenda to keep minority groups at the lowest social level. "I believe there is no such thing," she says. "But the fact that the father came up with the idea really scared me. What has the government done to make people think like that?"

We need the government to lead

"There is racial discrimination in every country," says Wong. "But countries like the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada are willing to face the problem and have policies to overcome it. But, here in Hong Kong, the government wouldn't even admit there is a problem."

Of course, the government has recognised some race-related dilemmas – sufficient, at least, to have enacted the Race Discrimination Ordinance in 2008. But there are shortcomings to that legislation (see p18) and, to many, it seems a token gesture, particularly given the overtly discriminatory policies many governmental agencies still apply and, moreover, the lack of affirmative support for minorities at an administrative level (consider that, over the past 15 years, the government has only hired one ethnic minority as a civil servant).

Wong says the government's lack of support for ethnic minorities has historical reasons. "Before the handover, the government was dominated by white people," she says. "Now it's Chinese people who are the policy makers. Their opportunities are no longer suppressed and their big ego makes their policies focus mainly on Chinese people."

The government lacks an 'international horizon', according to Wong, and only 'fixes things' where there is public pressure. But, ultimately, with such a reactive government, this lack of public pressure is key. In the interests of appeasement, Mainland mothers are at the top of CY Leung's policy platform. As are property prices, elderly care and, now, National Education. But is there a collective will for a less racially discriminatory Hong Kong?

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Racial segregation, in my opinion, is not so much a problem as racial discrimination. As much as we hope to see true integration from a humanitarian point of view, it is always difficult, almost inevitable that eventually a social hierarchy arises within a society which minority groups are suppressed from enjoying certain privileges that their counterparts enjoy. In Hong Kong, however, the problem