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**HKFP VOICES**

# Cantonese is the key to success for Hong Kong's ethnic minorities



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***By Mandy Cheuk, project manager***

The challenge faced by Hong Kong's ethnic minorities in acquiring Chinese-language skills is a longstanding issue. The author of the HKFP op-ed "[Should we expect non-Chinese Hongkongers to learn Cantonese?](#)" appears to believe that knowing Cantonese in itself does not necessarily help with integration. But in reality, without Chinese linguistic ability, hopes of upward mobility in this officially bilingual territory are only flimsy.

The waiver of the Chinese-language requirements for ethnic minority applicants suggested by the author in effect condones yet another avenue for the ongoing indirect discrimination against them within Hong Kong's education system. Moreover, the author's comparison between Indians and Pakistanis as to their Chinese proficiency relative to their educational and income levels is inaccurate. As such, his arguments to lower the expectations of non-Chinese Hongkongers to learn Chinese are flawed. This is why:

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Photo: Dan Garrett/HKFP.

Both Chinese and English are official languages in Hong Kong, yet Chinese proficiency is still critical when looking for a job.

According to a 2016 survey by Hong Kong Unison of 1,500 job advertisements, only one explicitly mentioned that the position did not require Chinese-language proficiency.

While most of the adverts did not state Chinese-language proficiency as a requirement, on further enquiry by phone, the study found that employers still expected job seekers to have a command of Chinese. This also underscores the reality that even if ethnic minorities were as proficient in English as native speakers, they would not be able to land a job in the Hong Kong market. Unlike an expatriate with an equivalent English competency and lack of proficiency in Chinese who enters Hong Kong with a designated job, local ethnic minorities usually apply for an entry-level position immediately upon graduation.

File photo: Tom Grundy/HKFP.

The author cites the 2016 census to say that despite their higher level of Chinese proficiency compared with Hong Kong Indians, Hong Kong Pakistanis had lower educational qualifications and income levels — thereby suggesting that Cantonese proficiency does not dictate prospects of social integration.

Here, the author overlooks the critical role that historical roots in the city play in social integration. Many Indians arrived much earlier and formed some of the first immigrant communities in Hong Kong. Their historical roots and cross-generational heritage and contributions have put them in a stronger position compared with the more recent arrivals from various ethnic backgrounds, including the Pakistani community. As such, the author's superficial comparison based purely along ethnic lines lacks nuance and erases the complexities which underscore the diversities within and across ethnic groups in Hong Kong.

Instead of abolishing Chinese-language requirements for entry into tertiary education, as the author suggests, the government has lowered the requirement for ethnic minority students seeking a place at university. They are allowed to submit alternative Chinese-language qualifications in place of the DSE Chinese examination results when applying.

A photo of HKDSE candidates in an examination hall. File photo: GovHK.

These alternative exams include the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) Chinese and the IGCSE, for which the Chinese-language competencies are equivalent to Primary 1 to 2 of the mainstream schools' curriculum. Unison has overseen ethnic minorities who arrive in Hong Kong and enter Form 3 and within two years of studying Chinese are able to score an A in the GCSE Chinese exam. Despite this, ethnic minorities born and raised in Hong Kong, who spend 15 years in mainstream schools, are taught Chinese at a level which only prepares them to sit the GCSE Chinese examination.

This raises the following fundamental question: are these lower Chinese-language targets an appropriate or effective way for Hong Kong's ethnic minority students to achieve their full potential? The answer lies between the lines of the author's dismissal as a "cliche" of various research reports and news stories about ethnic minorities not being able to land their preferred jobs due to Chinese-language barriers.

The argument that learning Chinese is unnecessary for ethnic minorities seeking success and a stable future only avoids the problems they are almost certain to encounter further down the road. It sets ethnic minorities up for failure — and worse still, gives them false hopes that do not reflect reality.

File photo: Etan Liam, via Flickr.

After all, learning a language is not a preference but a right which every student in Hong Kong should be able to enjoy. The language education policy of Hong Kong post-1997 aims to enable students to be bilingual in both Chinese and English. Local ethnic minority students, just like other citizens, should be supported to achieve the same educational goal. It is discriminatory to assume that students do not need to learn the mainstream language just because they are of different skin colour, or speak a different mother tongue.

In order to achieve the potential of every student and smooth their path in life regardless of ethnicity, it is time for our education bureau to create a comprehensive Chinese-language policy. This means not only developing a proper Chinese curriculum for students whose mother tongue is not Chinese, but also providing guidance on how schools should support students in learning other subjects in a language with which they are not familiar, as well as incorporating a multicultural perspective in all subjects to recognize the contributions of ethnic minority Hongkongers in our community.

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## HONG KONG UNISON



Hong Kong Unison is a charity and NGO which advocates for policy reforms for Hong Kong's ethnic minority residents. It receives no government funding and aims to promote racial equality in the city.

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