

## **EO Files (November 2016)**

### **“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”**

#### **Exploring our kaleidoscope of cultures**

If we have to count the favorite pastimes of Hong Kong people, traveling will no doubt rank high. While a lot of people go abroad with their mind set on good food and shopping sprees, more and more are motivated by curiosity about other cultures.

The truth is we can easily experience cultures other than our own in Hong Kong without having to set foot elsewhere.

In September, I was invited to the celebration of the Raksha Bandhan Festival held by a Hindu organization here in Hong Kong. I am used to celebrating Mother's Day and Father's Day, but it was really the first time I took part in a festival dedicated to brother-sister relationships.

The event was a colorful one, with Indian performances and delicacies. Participants also made *rakhi*, a bracelet which sisters put on the wrists of their brothers to wish them peace and longevity.

Two weeks ago, a colleague from our Ethnic Minorities Unit shared some exquisite Indian confectionery in celebration of Diwali. To have an idea of Diwali, you only have to think about the Lunar New Year – home cleaning and decorating, family gatherings, lavish meals, and fireworks, which are exactly what Indians do during this holiday.

The main feature, however, is the lighting of clay lamps, which symbolizes the victory of light and good over darkness and evil. The festival is the most important holiday for Indians, enjoyed as a national festival by most regardless of their religious faith.

Interestingly, at around the same time, the Nepalese community celebrates the festival of Tihar, parts of which are very similar to the Indian Diwali.

In fact, autumn sees a flourishing of celebrations among Hong Kong's non-Chinese ethnic communities. In addition to the two Indian festivals, the Muslim community observed the Eid al-Adha, or Festival of the Sacrifice, in September. The festival pays tribute to the prophet Ibrahim, who showed unwavering faith

when Allah commanded him to sacrifice his only son. In the end, Allah sent his angel to replace the boy with a lamb.

In honor of the occasion, Muslims put on their finest clothes and slaughter their best domestic animals, the meat of which they share with one another and the poor.

Then, last month, the Nepalese community celebrated Dashain, which marks the defeat of the demon by the Goddess, whereas the Jewish community observed Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, a day for atonement, repentance and forgiveness.

Notwithstanding such colorful festivities around us, it is rather unfortunate that most of us have done little to try to understand the ethnic minorities who are living among us as our neighbors, colleagues and classmates. I find it particularly disheartening that our society talks often about racial integration, and yet little has been done.

There remains an invisible wall between the local Chinese community and the ethnic minorities, who make up roughly 6 percent of the city's population.

Many from these minority communities have lived here for generations and consider Hong Kong their home. They include the descendents of Indian merchants who promoted trade in Hong Kong in the early days, including the founder of the iconic Star Ferry; of the Gurkha (Nepalese) soldiers who safeguarded Hong Kong during the colonial era; and of the Pakistanis, many of whom have served the community in the civil service decades ago. And of course, there are the foreign domestic helpers from South and Southeast Asia who relieve the household burden of many a family.

All of them play a role in shaping the history and development of Hong Kong. They are part of our city and their cultures and needs deserve our understanding. I personally feel very lucky to have the chance to know about their unique, vibrant customs and traditions through my role as chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission.

Their cultures and ways of life are like windows that allow me glimpses of the world. It is no exaggeration to say they have opened my eyes and enriched my mind.

Next time the travel bug bites you, consider a staycation where you can explore a myriad of cultures without leaving the territory. I promise you, it will be an eye-opening and rewarding experience.

**Professor Alfred C.M. Chan**  
**Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission**

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