

“On Second Thought” column  
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## **Citizenship denials shame Hong Kong**

*Minorities should not face barriers in a place that was built on the diversity of its people*

There have been several media reports recently about ethnic minorities who have lived in Hong Kong for many years seeing their applications to become naturalised Chinese citizens denied.

I recently met one of them, Philip Khan. His family settled in Hong Kong nearly a century ago. Khan speaks fluent Cantonese as well as Putonghua and has never known any other home in the world besides this city.

Like his family for generations before him, Khan is positively contributing to Hong Kong's society and economy. Yet he has allegedly been dissuaded from even filing an application for naturalisation, citing that he would unlikely be considered as he has no near relative or family member who is a Chinese national.

In such situations, it is not difficult to see why Khan should wonder if prejudice was at work. Whatever the reason, Khan felt as though the government was telling him that he was not a part of Hong Kong.

Admittedly, the Equal Opportunities Commission has no legal power to address his concern, as the Race Discrimination Ordinance specifically exempts immigration matters, including naturalisation. And in line with practices elsewhere, the government does have the power to decide whom to offer citizenship, in accordance with the Nationality Law of China as applied in Hong Kong.

Yet Khan's frustration, and that of others in his situation, is understandable. Many ethnic minorities already feel marginalised from the mainstream society, and any sign of insensitivity could only serve to heighten this sense of distrust towards the government's intentions.

There are others who had reportedly applied nevertheless and been rejected without any explanation given. Their situation highlights the need for greater transparency from the Immigration Department regarding its reasoning behind such decisions.

In its absence, it is difficult to ascertain whether the process was indeed soundly based on the Nationality Law and the prevailing policy or whether the specified criteria were applied consistently and fairly.

It also remains unclear whether ethnicity, in itself, was taken as a key consideration and to what effect.

This is certainly not in line with our core value of openness and our tradition as a place of refuge.

Throughout our history, we have been enriched by the many ethnic groups who have made this place their home and helped to build our society from the ground up.

Our ethnic minorities are a part of Hong Kong's social fabric, and many want to serve this city actively and be identified as full citizens. Indeed, Philip Khan was seeking naturalisation to be eligible to run in last month's Legislative Council election.

Had he been successful, he could have provided a much-needed voice for the ethnic-minority community, an important step towards mainstreaming their concerns in policymaking.

How much talent have we wasted in leaving out our ethnic minorities? How many have left Hong Kong in frustration after they were denied naturalisation?

There has been much public debate lately about what defines a "Hong Kong identity". In forming an identity, often we take superficial factors to define the delineation between "us" and "them".

Yet such thinking focuses more on our differences than our commonalities. Whatever your definition, what we cannot afford to be is exclusionary. When we exclude our own talents because of features such as race, we all lose.

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