



Learning Chinese is crucial for South Asians to kick-start their careers in Hong Kong, writes Ben Sin

Tongue tied

Vivek Mahbubani has made a name for himself by cracking jokes about his ethnicity. An ethnic Indian, born and raised in Hong Kong, the 28-year-old builds his stand-up comedy routine around cultural and racial stereotypes about South Asian residents like himself.

His patter is that much funnier to Hong Kong Chinese because it's delivered in fluent Cantonese with clever word play and the latest slang.

The part-time comedian, who is also a web designer, knows his shtick is just that. In real life, he reckons, his ethnicity hasn't held him back in Hong Kong and he has his mum and dad to thank for that.

"My parents made a conscious decision to make me go to a Chinese school as a child, so I could adapt to local culture and learn the language," Mahbubani says.

His mother, Bhavna, a teacher who relocated from India in the early 1980s after she married his businessman father, was motivated by her own struggles.

"Hong Kong was tough for me because I didn't speak the local language," she says. "I didn't want my children to face the same

problem, so I sent Vivek and his sister to Chinese school."

The youngsters found it hard going at first, with Mahbubani finishing second to last in his Chinese-language class. To catch up, he and his sister went for Chinese tuition after school every day. As a result, Vivek reads and writes Chinese. That ability, along with his talent, has led to success in entertainment as well as web design.

Literacy in Chinese also enabled two young Hongkongers of Pakistani origin to secure high-profile jobs in recent years. Nabela Qoser became a reporter for Chinese-language news on Cable TV and, since this year, TVB Jade. In May, Abdul Faifal became the first ethnic Pakistani to join the Hong Kong police force in 14 years. But they are the lucky exceptions.

Hong Kong has a long-established South Asian population dating to the 19th century, when Sikh Indians and Pakistanis made up a significant part of the police force. Today, there are about 45,000 people of South Asian descent living in the city, about half of them permanent residents. While a good portion speak some Cantonese,

most cannot read or write Chinese characters. That didn't present much of a problem when Hong Kong was still a British colony. But since the handover in 1997, a lack of literacy in Chinese has become a severe barrier to a better life for South Asian residents.

Poor Chinese-language results mean lower total scores in local university applications, for example. This affects chances of getting a tertiary education. What's more, stiff requirements for Chinese-language skills have also prevented many from joining the civil service. Mohan Chugani, treasurer of the India Association Hong Kong, says the policy is a pretext for excluding the community. "We've been pushing for years for the government to allow South Asians to become civil servants," says the 65-year-old Hong Kong native. "They've been stalling, and this strict language testing policy is an excuse."

Critics say the government's failure to provide South Asian youngsters with adequate help in mastering Chinese-language education has aggravated the situation, condemning many from poor families to dead-end jobs.



I've heard my brother say, 'What's the point [of school and learning Chinese]. We're outsiders in the city'

ALI SHAN, THIRD-GENERATION HONGKONGER

"Learning how to use [Chinese] language fluently is crucial for the next generation of South Asians in Hong Kong," says Fermi Wong Wai-fun, director of Hong Kong Unison, a group campaigning for the rights of ethnic minorities.

The chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, Lam Woon-kwong, highlighted the problem earlier this month when he reprimanded the Education Bureau for not doing enough to help ethnic minority students integrate with Hong Kong society. He called on officials to provide them with better Chinese-language teaching.

Education offered the means for families to escape poverty but that avenue of escape would be cut off if youngsters still had a poor grasp of Chinese when they leave secondary school, Lam says. Many were forced to enrol in designated schools where the student body is mostly made up of ethnic minorities and where there was less opportunity to master Chinese. Ali Shan, a third-generation Hongkonger, is among those who came through this system. The 22-year-old attended Li Cheng Uk Government School in Sham Shui Po, which was made up