

EP5-Enerlan Diza May Yap_Clara

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Clara

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-Hi and welcome to Untold Hong Kong Stories, multimedia narratives from the margins.

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This is a podcast series where we hear the stories of people in our community.

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From Hong Kong's non-Chinese locals to marginalized members of our community.

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We hope that by sharing their stories, we can think about the way we live ours

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and create a more inclusive and diverse society.

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I'm Clara Chuan-Yu from the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University.

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And our guest for today's podcast is Enerlan Diza May Yap, an NGO staff member who works with Hong Kong's ethnic minorities.

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Here she shares her story.

Diza

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-I basically was born here and I grew up here my whole life.

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I went to school here, I even work here and now I'm currently working in an NGO as a program worker.

Clara

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-So maybe you can tell us also about your ethnicity and also the cultural background of yourself as well.

Diza

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-So I'm Filipino, but I was like I said I was born in Hong Kong.

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So I also have a bit of mixed bloodline if you could say.

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So from my mom's side, she is part Chinese and then she's also mixed with Spanish.

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And then from my dad's side, there's a bit of Portuguese.

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But I mostly grew up in Hong Kong, so a lot of my, I guess the traditional things I follow or even my upbringings,

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the values are mostly close to local Hong Kong culture.

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And just a few things that we would follow from Philippines, but mostly even Chinese New Year we would celebrate.

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And just a lot of how the way of life and the lifestyle of Hong Kong people is what me and my brother adapted growing up.

Clara

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-That's really interesting.

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And I mean these experiences of being a sentiment also peripheral and at the margins.

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You said you were born here and you also grew up here.

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Could you also tell us about what kind of school that you went to?

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Was it a local school, international school or other kinds of school?

Diza

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-So I went to a, I guess, semi-local in a sense, but it's also a private school.

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During my year, when I started and the year above me, there were a bit more ethnically diverse students.

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But the rest of the class afterwards below my year were mostly local Chinese students.

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So they actually divide the classes by one class is all for ethnic minorities or ethnically diverse people.

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And the rest, the three or four other classes are mostly local Chinese students.

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So it's kind of set up that way, but I guess because of my upbringing, I was kind of drawn to the local students more.

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And I was able to connect with them much easier compared to my EM classmates.

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And even my close friends, a lot of them are like half Filipino, half Chinese.

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But it wasn't really a race thing.

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Like I never really grew up with the mindset of, oh, we're the same race, so I have to be drawn to that community.

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It was more like similar upbringings and not so much about whether I'm local, I identify as local or whether I identify as Filipino.

Clara

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-And what kind of languages, which language or languages that were used in your education and growing up over here?

Diza

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-So English was actually my first language because my parents brought us up with the mindset that English was the international language.

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So it's more important to use anywhere.

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And then they made my technically my second language would be Cantonese because they also felt like living in Hong Kong, it was a priority over learning my mother's tongue.

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So my parents are from another city in the Philippines, so they speak a different dialect called Bisayan, not Tagalog.

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And so I would, I do understand a bit of Bisaya because they would speak that to me and my brother at home.

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But, and me and my brother do pick up a bit of the words.

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So we do, are able to speak like simple phrases.

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But for the most part, we would speak English at home and even outside with friends, mostly English.

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And sometimes, especially now in my work, it's a bit more Cantonese.

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I guess when I was growing up, because even for my kindergarten school, I did start in a sort of international school.

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So up to primary and secondary, it was the semi-private school.

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So I was still surrounded by a lot of my EM classmates.

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And during that time, it wasn't, there was not much differentiation about, oh, you are this race and you have to abide by this stereotype or the assumption of being your race.

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It was just us getting along as kids or just our personality.

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And so that time I was like, oh, okay, it's quite diverse, even up to university, because university, there's quite a diverse group of students as well.

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So I was like, okay, it's a quite diverse here.

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Like I didn't really see much gap.

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I thought like, oh, like Hong Kong is quite integrated, culturally integrated.

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Like there was never really a problem.

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But when I started working, especially now at my full time job, so I'm working at an NGO that is traditionally local.

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So even though we are doing service for ethnic minorities, but I did realize that there is some sort of gap that not only my colleagues, but their understanding towards EM communities is quite different.

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Like they have not really met a lot of EM people per se or interacted with such.

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So it's like there is that quite a large gap.

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And then even going through all these meetings or workshops about trying to understand the EM community in Hong Kong, and you realize like, oh, there's actually a very, very big gap.

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And so only like certain places or maybe certain jobs or certain places that you live in Hong Kong, there might be people that would be more exposed.

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As for the majority, it's actually, there is still quite a large gap.

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Yeah.

Clara

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-Thanks for also talking about your job.

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Would you introduce your job to the audience a bit?

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Like what kind of NGO it is and what your responsibilities are and why it involves working with ethnic minorities over here?

Diza

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-So the NGO I work in actually has a lot of different services, but I was put into the EM service.

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And so my role as a program worker is to create some programs or workshops that could help them with their employment needs.

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So we usually would have CV workshops or cover letter workshops or how to prepare them for interviews.

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And sometimes we would also have job fairs held by the marketing team.

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And it's all, the job fairs are catered to our EM service users.

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So try to find jobs that are more open to hiring EM people.

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And yeah, so that's majority of what I do.

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And apart from the workshops and the programs, I also kind of assist my team's social workers in terms of administrative stuff and sometimes just briefly explain our service to anyone interested.

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So any inquiries, I would also pick that up and explain our service to them.

Clara

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-That sounds like a lot of work and also it requires the EMs and communication EMs and also how you as the program officer, you could relate to both your colleagues in the NGO and also the service users.

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If I understand correctly, most of the service users are ethnic minorities themselves.

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Yes. Yeah. What are the ethnic backgrounds? Are they from?

Diza

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-So majority are usually from Pakistan, India or Nepal.

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And then some are also from Bangladesh or neighboring Asian countries.

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And we do have some recently that are from the UK, but mostly it's like Southeast Asian, the area, countries.

Clara

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-I see. Then how do you see your own bringing up your own experiences, which you described in a fairly as an international and the diverse experiences that we experienced here in Hong Kong.

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And all of a sudden you just mentioned that at the workplace, how you came to feel that there is this same divisions culturally and ethnically in the Hong Kong society.

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How would you describe that experiences and how do you think?

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Because if I understand, I remember that you majored in IT at university. What brought you to this career path to work at an NGO and also to serve people who are, let's put it this way, quote, unquote, marginalized?

Diza

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-So I'll start off first with how I got into this industry. So, yeah, I was studying IT in City University.

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And then how I came about this job is that I kind of realized I didn't want to do IT after I graduate and actually found this job by using their service.

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So they also have a youth team. And that time I got into the youth team, the youth service.

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And then I found this job as well as my previous part time for that service.

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And then after being a program assistant for one year, now I'm a program worker at the same company.

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And then I think it really allowed me to understand more about not only my view of Hong Kong and the cultural integration,

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but it's also my own experience as well as understanding the gap that I've mentioned earlier.

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So I'll share about my own experience first. So, of course, as I mentioned, I'm Filipino.

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And so I kind of thought that, OK, since I grew up with other EM classmates, I think it would be not too hard to connect with EM service users.

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But there is actually quite a gap because, of course, number one being the age gap.

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A lot of our service users that we're serving are 18 above, so kind of 18 to 60 or 60 plus.

Clara_Diza
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-So it's quite a huge gap. -Yeah, it is a big gap, a big range in terms of age.

Diza
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-And then so the second thing would be language, even though I'm from Philippines and we do have Filipino clients,

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but it's not the most highest percentage of clients we have.

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Like usually it's like I mentioned from Pakistan, India, Nepal.

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So I can't necessarily speak their language. And so I still have to use English.

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And sometimes I would come across some clients that speak Cantonese.

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So we will also use Cantonese as a means of communication.

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But it did made me realize that I still have some kind of cultural gap from them because those three countries per se are more similar and more alike.

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Whereas Philippines, we're still sort of Southeast Asian, but still like we are quite different from Pakistan, India and Nepal.

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And so there is that cultural difference. And because I was brought up here, so I kind of understand the way of life, the work expectations in Hong Kong.

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Whereas most of our clients are used to the work culture by their own country.

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So coming to Hong Kong, it's kind of like a culture shock for them and they have to relearn the culture.

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And maybe some things that are deemed acceptable in their countries are not acceptable here.

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So it's like even through that process, I'm learning things about their country or their experience.

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And then like trying to share, like help them get into the Hong Kong work culture.

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And it is quite difficult because you're especially at that age, 30, 40, even 50s, where you have to relearn everything.

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And I could tell that it is quite, it can be quite frustrating to get into a new place,

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especially at that time when they're so used to something else.

Clara

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-Yeah. And thanks for sharing that story.

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It's really fascinating to when we learn about the same thing, learn about ourselves and how we understand this concept of culture and diversity from different perspectives.

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Right. Also, along with different things, people and experiences, that's how we're exposed to.

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So I wonder how would you describe or how do you think we may understand being, I think, minority in Hong Kong and what we mean by minority?

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And are they necessarily marginalized?

Diza

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-I guess when I first hear the word minority in Hong Kong, it sort of still made sense to me because we are not,

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the majority is still local Chinese population and we are outside of it.

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But then after coming into this workforce, I was like, oh, there's actually a lot.

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Like, even if we don't count our clients, there's also, for example, a large number of Filipino overseas workers, domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

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And I feel like adding all those numbers up, we might sort of,
I'm not too sure,

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but maybe like sort of close to the number of local Chinese
population.

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So I feel like there is now an awareness that we're actually a large
population,

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like not individually by country, but if you add us all up together,
we are almost, maybe almost the same.

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And so I think using, that's why I remember in the social work
industry,

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they kind of changed the name to ethnically diverse instead of
ethnic minority because they don't want to marginalize or say like,

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oh, we're such a small group because in reality we're really not.

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And so I think that's at least a first step in becoming aware that this is recognizing that our population is quite big.

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And yeah, I think the way they changed the word is good.

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And yeah, for other groups, I'm not too sure.

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But so yeah, for at least for the ethnic groups, I think that the fact that they changed the word is quite good.

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It's a good start.

Clara

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-Yeah, I really like that.

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We're now beginning to refer to non-Chinese or even

amongst the Chinese, you know, there are people who are mixed racially.

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And it's very difficult to exactly define someone by using a fixated term.

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So we started to change this narrative instead of using the term of ethnic minority,

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but we see the ethnic groups and also I think the Hong Kong government, you know,

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they release the census statistics every 10 years.

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They used to group all non-Chinese and ethnic minorities, including white South Asians, so on and so forth.

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And as you mentioned, now it's changed to emphasize the narrative has started to emphasize the diversity of the Hong Kong society.

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Do you think Hong Kong is culturally diverse?

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And also we talk about languages a lot as well.

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So in terms of the linguistic and the cultural diversity and the dynamics, what do your experiences are like?

Diza

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-I think at this point, I would say there's still a long way to go.

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I'm glad there is that awareness, but at the same time, I'm also kind of like a little bit shocked that we're still a bit behind compared to other countries.

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Of course, we cannot really compare side by side with Singapore, because Singapore has a whole different history.

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But I would think from, I would expect from my upbringing through secondary and university that the workplace would share a similar environment of cultural inclusivity or cultural integration.

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But there is still that gap, especially if you're working for local traditional companies.

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And for my personal experience, I guess, thankfully, I did not face a lot of discrimination growing up.

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There were a few comments here and there, but it was nothing too impactful towards myself or towards my families, or compared to my other colleagues who, let's say, even have darker skin color, they would face more discrimination.

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So in a way, I am a bit more privileged compared to them and thankful for that.

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But at the same time, it also made me realize that I cannot really completely understand what they're going through, because this is something they might have gone through almost every day.

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But then because of my skin color or how I look, I was able to not get the same experience per se.

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So it's kind of a good and bad. I'm glad it doesn't happen.

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But I also wish that I could understand more in a similar sense.

Clara

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-So you mentioned that there is some space for Hong Kong, there's still space for Hong Kong to grow, to develop in terms of enhancing the social inclusion, cultural inclusion.

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And your friends or colleagues, EM friends or colleagues, encountered maybe unpleasant experiences, if not yourself.

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Are there any stories that you might share? And what makes you feel that Hong Kong still has a long way to go in terms of becoming a more inclusive society?

Diza

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-For my mom, she would experience being asked, "Oh, you're Filipino? Your skin is so fair, you don't look like Filipino."

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I guess maybe on the surface it doesn't seem too negative, but the fact that she has heard this a lot, it does raise a question.

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There's the assumption that Filipinos are expected to be darker skinned, and it's almost a shock to see a light skinned Filipino.

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Or even the same thing happened to one of my colleagues who is from Nepal, and she also is on the fairer side.

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And she also kind of experienced the same thing in her past job, and it was a bit of a culture shock to her, seeing that she also was fairly new to Hong Kong.

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There is this assumption, like I said. And on the more extreme side, there's some colleagues of mine that, even though they're fluent in Cantonese, but because of the way they look, they get rejected.

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So even though he would answer an interview call, and they hear him speaking fluent Cantonese, and they're like, "Oh, we seem to connect, we would hire you."

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But the moment they see them, they're like, "Oh, this is not what we expect." And they kind of reject him. So yeah, it's kind of unpleasant, one of the unpleasant situations that he faced as well.

Clara

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-Yeah, it's quite surprising for me to hear that people are still judging about his cover over here. And especially, like you said, comparing to the social inclusion dynamics in other countries,

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even our "traditional" competitors, Singapore, which is quite culturally diverse. You also mentioned that some of your colleagues are not ethnically Chinese.

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What kind of interactional experiences do you have with your colleagues, with your EM colleagues and Chinese colleagues? Admittedly, I am dichotomizing this unconsciously.

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Do you see any differences on how that experience is like?

Diza

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-Yeah, it's quite different. And I actually sort of catch myself being like, "Oh, I'm quite different." Like it also comes with the language.

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And I had this discussion with my brother before that even if you speak a language, there is a little bit of that culture that you have to almost embody as well with the language.

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So with my EM colleagues, I speak English with them, but I relate to them in a more, I guess, similar to my Southeast Asian upbringing that I can relate to more of like how they view the world or how they're experienced with the local Chinese population.

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And it's a bit more mixed with a little bit of Western ideas or concepts in a way that we're like, "Okay, so we see that there's a lot of assumptions from the other side."

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And we can laugh it off, but at the same time, we also discussed that it is quite problematic to see these assumptions still being taken place.

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And then towards my local colleagues, I understand that some of them may not have really interacted with much EM staff, but I feel like that is one of the good pros that they got to practice their English, for example, or for themselves to interact with them and step out of their comfort zone.

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So at least that even though they may not have much experience interacting with ethnically diverse people before, at least this is their chance to educate themselves, put themselves out there.

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And so even though there was a gap at first, and I could sense that they still have this stereotypical assumptions, but because we do have mixed colleagues, at least their stereotypes or their assumptions are kind of broken down and they learn, "Okay, that's not right."

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And so it's like a learning process. It's quite beautiful to see that as well, like better late than never that they can learn these things.

Clara

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-Yeah, I think to try to, or this kind of mutual understanding and the connections built throughout the process of getting to know each other and interacting with each other are what we all go through.

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So we talked a lot about what happened in the past and what your friends, family and colleagues experienced. So I wonder what, so if we look at the future, what future means to you when being someone who's not ethnically Chinese?

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You see, I'm trying to avoid the term "ethnic minority" now. So what future means to you when being non-Chinese in Hong Kong?

Diza

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-Wow. I feel like after coming into this industry as well, it does show me that I do hold some kind of responsibility, especially that I have mentioned in our past conversations that I don't want to stick to the label of being local or being grouped as Filipino.

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So being with this upbringing that I had of sort of just creating my own identity, I feel like I have the responsibility to educate people.

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And especially when it comes to the sense of belonging or trying to figure out their identity, that's something that I could share, hopefully my experience, that it's okay to not fit into a mold.

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You don't have to choose one and discovering your identity, no matter at what age, is still a process and it's still acceptable.

Clara

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-Yes, exactly. So I think it's a process for everyone to get out of our own comfort zone.

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And everyone is biased, I'm sure I'm biased one way or another, and everyone has assumptions and stereotypes. And it's really great to have you here today to talk about these things.

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The last thing that I'm really curious and would like to ask you is that how would you describe your being in Hong Kong in three words?

Diza

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-Three words? I would say complex, blended and culture.

Clara

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-Complex, blended and culture. Wow, so culture is complex, it's blended, and identities and languages are all blended.

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Would you like to elaborate a bit more what you mean by those and why did you choose those three words to describe your being in Hong Kong?

Diza

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-So for culture, I guess I chose that because it's also part of who I am. I've been sort of mixed by different cultures, not only by my bloodline, but being raised, being a Filipino, but born and raised in Hong Kong.

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But I was also exposed to a lot of Western media, so that really summarized my upbringing as cultured or my sense of belonging as cultured in a sense.

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And then for blended, it's also a similar concept that it's mixed. And I chose that because I'm mostly mixed between the Philippine culture and Hong Kong culture.

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And so I'm not fit into exactly one category, but I have a bit of both and that also represents who I am as a person.

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And complex, because it can get complicated, complex. As I mentioned, having this identity crisis growing up.

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Sometimes there is that societal expectation that you have to be put into a box or a label.

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And for example, there's also a lot of communities out there, right? And I really like and respect the concept of community, but somehow it was something that never really worked for me or my family members.

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That we've grown up in a way that's more almost isolated in a sense, like more of our own. Like we just grew up in our own bubble that we don't have to necessarily comply to a Filipino community or a local Chinese community.

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So it was like, that was my upbringing and that was what they taught us growing up as one of our values.

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So growing up, it is quite complicated, not only in terms of race, but sometimes with sexual orientation as well.

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Like they would ask you to choose a label and especially in the early, I guess, 2010s, that's the area where there was a lot of expectation to label yourself with a lot of things.

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So that people have a sense of what you are. And I thought, okay, that's what I have to do. That's the trend, sort of, or expectations.

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But then it does get a bit overwhelming sometimes because you're like, I'm a bit of this, I'm a bit of that, but I cannot fit.

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Like I cannot call myself exactly this. So that's the complex side of being cultured or a mix of blended cultures.

Clara

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-And also I know that you also travel back to or travel to the Philippines. And when you are visiting your family members in the Philippines and then you're coming back,

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what are the experiences like culturally and linguistically? Do you use English with them? Or how do you switch and shift between different use in the Philippines and back in Hong Kong?

Diza

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-Since my first language is English, that's primarily what I use. So even though I can understand them speaking Bisayan or a little bit of Tagalog,

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I still kind of reply in English or like, sometimes we call it Taglish or just Tagalog English or Bisayan English.

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So we just mix a few words in and they understand, but it is, I guess, the language is a very important connection.

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And it is a little bit of a barrier since I grew up with being taught that that is too, not too,

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well I shouldn't say not too important, but my parents prioritized Cantonese over that.

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So even though I still understand, but it is a little bit of a gap in a sense.

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So they sometimes, my relatives, they sometimes feel hesitant or a little bit like embarrassed to speak

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because they would think that I have to speak in English and then their English may not be as good.

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And there is that gap of embarrassment from both sides.

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But in the end, that would be the case for a few days.

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But then later on, it's like, it kind of slowly blends, well, it kind of slowly comes out, like all my Filipino words or like vocabularies,

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it kind of like comes out as I live there for a certain period of time.

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And then their English also kind of improves and like our communication does get better as time passes.

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But yeah, I feel like I do connect much more easily with the local community,

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seeing that I do use a lot of Cantonese more on my daily time, especially now in my work.

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So it's a bit easier for me to connect that way.

Clara

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-Through the languages. Yeah, that's fascinating.

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And also you mentioned that in your schools, when growing up and also now at work,

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you have many colleagues and friends who are Cantonese speakers.

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How are your experiences and interactions with them?

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Because like, for example, for me, I'm a non-native Cantonese speaker and I try to use it as well.

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And as soon as I started using some native speakers with replying in Mandarin, which is a bit uninvited.

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I mean, I feel like, oh, is it that bad?

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So I wonder what kind of experiences that you have and how you connect with the Cantonese speakers.

Diza

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-Yeah, I've experienced that too. And it is quite confusing as well.

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Because it's like I would want to practice Cantonese and then my colleagues,

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maybe not exactly by the assumption, but sometimes they want to practice English or.

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Yeah, at least I feel like this is more mutual.

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But when I go out, sometimes I would speak Cantonese at the shops and they reply me back in English.

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And I'm like, but I talk to Cantonese. I want to speak Cantonese.

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And so there is that like language clash, I guess you could say.

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But apart from that, going back to the topic about my colleagues.

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Yeah, I think it's mostly about our upbringing and the fact that that's what I'm mostly drawn to.

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So as long as we have similar upbringings, the language kind of or the understanding of language

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kind of flows naturally. So there might be a little bit of a gap or a block at the beginning.

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But as long as we understand each other or we can come to the concept that, OK, like language is a tool.

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Yeah. But as long as we have that, I guess, mind to mind connection, it's kind of flows the language naturally.

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And I'm kind of glad that I got to have more colleagues that I are now my friends that I get to practice Cantonese with.

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And they also get to practice English with me. And it was just flows naturally now.

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And it's quite nice and beautiful to see. That's that's that's real.

Clara

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-Yes, that sounds really nice. So.

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So can I understand that you do like I feel that you do feel home at Hong Kong, you would call Hong Kong your home.

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Despite the fact that there is this linguistic challenges or also the fun that you have experiences.

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Yeah. Yeah. What do you think we can do to make Hong Kong a more inclusive, culturally and linguistically diverse and also more tolerant society over here?

Clara_Diza

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-What else can we do? -Like I mentioned earlier, I'm glad that there is already that first awareness, first step of awareness.

Diza

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-But what they could do more is maybe not look too much on the surface level.

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That instead of just seeing what food they eat, what clothes they wear, what religion, I feel like these can be discovered individually, like on our own time.

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But it's not something to that has to be repeated every time because you can almost practically Google search this on your own time.

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But so having this basic awareness for each person is important.

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The second thing for as a community and a society is to just acknowledge each other as their individual person, not put too much emphasis on race.

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And maybe that way, the understanding will be deeper and they're like, try to take away the assumptions and the stereotypes towards one another.

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And I think that would blend the connection of the more smooth.

Clara

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-I really like that you mentioned just acknowledging this person as an individual and go from there instead of labelling someone and expecting someone to be the way that we expect them to be.

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Yes, it was really enjoyable and very enlightening to talk to you today, Diza.

Diza

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-Thank you.

Clara

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-And we will bear in mind of awareness, complexity, blendedness and culture.

Diza

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-Yes.

Clara

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-Thanks so much.

Diza

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-Thank you.