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Study-visa snub for Kim Jong-il grandson

Immigration Department refuses entry after international school agrees to enrol Macau-based teenage son of North Korea's former heir apparent

Christy Choi
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The grandson of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has been denied a visa by the Hong Kong government, scuppering the plans of a local international school for him to study here.

Kim Han-sol, 16, was set to enrol at the Li Po Chun United World College in Wu Kai Sha last month, but despite several requests from the school - which has been making wider efforts to help bring North Korea out of isolation - immigration officials refused to grant him a student visa.

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As a result of the snub, Kim has now enrolled at a UWC sister school in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Former Li Po Chun United World College principal Stephen Codrington (pictured), who interviewed Kim in April as part of an application process that began in February, said he was impressed with the teenager.

"I think it's Hong Kong's loss that the visa wasn't issued. It could have been a great thing in terms of building a relationship between Hong Kong and a part of the Asian region I think is very significant. It could have helped to foster a bond, which won't be able to happen now because of some hyper-conservative immigration officials," said Codrington, who is now head of The Awty International School in Houston, Texas.

"I think it was [Kim Han-sol's] idealism, the fact that he really wants to make a difference to the state of the Korean peninsula. [Han-sol] felt that in order to do that he had to understand better what people from all around the world think."

Kim Han-sol's father is Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's eldest and exiled son. He and his father have lived in Macau for years, supposedly after his father fell out of favour after he was caught trying to enter Japan with his family on a fake Dominican passport, claiming he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland. Before this episode many considered Jong-nam the front runner to succeed his father. Kim Jong-il is now said to be grooming his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, to rule.

Kim Han-sol is not the first North Korean to apply to study in Hong Kong. The Immigration Department has granted visas on a discretionary basis to two North Korean students now at Hong Kong University.

Nor is he the only student visa applicant with a colourful family background. In 2009 Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's daughter Bona was enrolled to study at the University of Hong Kong.

The Immigration Department declined to comment on Kim Han-sol's case. However, a spokesman said: "The entry arrangement for study does not apply to nationals of certain countries including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [North Korea], Nepal and Cambodia. Notwithstanding the general policy, the Immigration Department will consider



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Ex-UWC principal Stephen Codrington

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the merits of individual cases.

"In formulating [...] visa policy, the government will take into account factors which include immigration and security considerations, economic, social and cultural ties between Hong Kong and the country/territory, as well as individual circumstances."

Codrington said of Kim Han-sol: "He's a lovely kid. Very bright, charismatic, good English. Good sense of idealism. One of these people with a twinkle in the eye, and a real sense of humour."

The visa denial is a particular blow for Li Po Chun United World College, which for the past seven years has reached out to the secretive nation, taking student ambassadors to North Korea with the specific aim of building trust with the country, and ultimately bringing North Korean students to study at their school.

The last group visited in August, and, says Ronny Mintjens, who is currently running the initiative, they are still hoping North Korean students will be able to come to their school in the future.

While most comments on United World Colleges' official Facebook page welcomed Kim's acceptance by the Mostar school, some raised questions about nepotism and the lack of regular North Koreans among those selected.

"I would have been much more comfortable had this been coupled with awarding UWC scholarships to 'regular' North Koreans and North Korean refugees abroad, wrote Sara Slama, an alumni of UWC Atlantic.

"Assuming North Korean nationals may not normally be allowed to exit the country, the issuing of such permits could have been a condition of Kim Han-sol's enrolment. For the benefit of Kim Han-sol himself, I would imagine that one of the most transformative aspects of a UWC education for him, could be studying with, and befriending ordinary people of his own."

"I wish it were that simple," said Codrington in response to Slama's post. "I think it is inevitable that one day we will see students being selected for UWCs from within the DPRK, and hopefully sooner rather than later - but the time isn't ripe for this yet, for a multitude of reasons that would not be appropriate to post publicly on the internet."

One possible difficulty is the ability of students from the isolated country to be able to integrate into the community.

"I'm not sure how they would adjust," said Aaron Sekhri, a former student ambassador to North Korea in a previous interview with the *South China Morning Post* ([SEHK: 0583, announcements, news](#)). "I don't imagine they'd be allowed to learn our version of history."

Codrington said he believed Kim Han-sol would be able to fully adjust to the school.

"He's been going to school in Macau for the last six years or so. He has been mixing with students from a variety of backgrounds, but he still returns to North Korea during the summertime. So he is in touch with his own culture, his own society. Equally, he's mixed with people from around the world, his fellow students. He's had access to the internet, Facebook, all that sort of stuff."

What he is concerned about is the effect of the media frenzy around the Kim family. "I feel sorry for any 16-year-old that has to endure this," said Codrington. "Particularly when it has nothing to do with himself, it's to do with who his grandfather is. I think it's really sad that people make judgments based on someone's ancestry rather than on their own individual characteristics.

"When he applied for the college, he was evaluated on his own characteristics and potential, his own merit. Who his grandfather was is not a factor, as it's not a factor with any other applicant."

Scott Snyder, a senior fellow of Korea studies at the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, described Kim Han-sol as a special case because of his father's relationship with the North Korean leadership.

"His son [Kim Han-sol] will have had a completely different experience. In North Korea it's



well known that the family pays for the sins of anybody who creates difficulty. I think that probably extends to Kim Han-sol as well," Snyder said.

The North Korean consulate in Hong Kong said it had no knowledge of Kim Han-sol's decision to attend school in Bosnia.

Meri Musa, a spokesperson for the school in Mostar, confirmed Kim had been accepted. However, it was unclear whether he had been issued with a visa to enter Bosnia.

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