

Asian immigrants face delays getting applications processed

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Frustrating delays anger Canadians following the rules

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Elton Woo figured his fiancée in China would be joining him soon in Edmonton.

But one delay led to another in his sponsorship application of Cai Ling Yang in January 1996. Even his fiancée's medical checks had to be done again in Beijing because so much time had elapsed.

Woo, 43, began to fear his fiancée wouldn't be allowed here, where he's carved out a successful career in the restaurant industry. "It was nerve-wracking not knowing what was going to happen," said Woo.

Finally, after the involvement of Edmonton lawyer Shirish Chotalia, Woo's 3½-year wait ended happily. Cai Ling arrived here in July and the couple were married a month later.

Woo heaped praise on Chotalia for "making our dream a reality."

But Chotalia, although pleased for the couple, said the fact her help was required at all is an indictment of Canada's immigration system. Chotalia said a local group of immigration lawyers plans to raise the matter with their parent body in Ottawa.

"I've heard of cases taking four or five years," said Chotalia, vice-chair of the immigration section of the Canadian Bar Association for northern Alberta.

"We haven't developed a system which really can accommodate an expeditious interview in a case where the bona fides just aren't an issue."

Bill Cheung, another local immigration lawyer, agreed it can take a long time to process sponsorships from Asia. He advises clients from mainland China to file their immigration applications through Canada's consulate general in Hong Kong.

Although China's population is 1.3 billion, and mainland China has been Canada's largest source of immigrants for the past three years, Cheung said there are still more immigration officers based in tiny Hong Kong.

In recent weeks, *The Journal*

has published several letters from individuals complaining about visa delays keeping couples apart. Most are from Asia.

"After my outing with Canadian Immigration, I am not the so-proud-to-be Canadian," says a letter this week from Will Hughson of Edmonton.

Hughson said he's been waiting almost two years to sponsor his Thai wife to Canada. "After hiring an immigration lawyer, at a cost of \$7,000, he said it was no longer a question of 'if' but 'when'.

Hughson said he has "compassion" for Chinese boat people who've tried to slip into Canada. But other letter writers caught in the backlog say they resent people "buying" their way into Canada.

Steve Ballantyne of Hinton said he and his wife, who are legal guardians of a Filipino girl, have tried for almost three years to bring her to Canada.

"Maybe I should buy a rusty old boat and fill it with people from there, said Ballantyne. "I bet they'd not only get into Canada a lot faster, but they would be offered all they need by our government."