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Proud to be Malaysian and Chinese

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AS we celebrate the coming of a new age, Malaysians must take a step back to reassess the developments of the past one year.

It has been a year of crisis and challenges for the nation. And Malaysians, irrespective of ethnic and religious background, have stood together.

On the eve of the next millennium, we are still together. We have come out of the economic crisis. The critics said our banks would collapse, there would be massive retrenchments, the price of essential goods would skyrocket, there would be riots and that Malaysia would burst into flames.

All these predictions by the prophets of doom have not materialised. Unlike our neighbours, Malaysia has successfully conquered these uncertainties with its own formula.

The Chinese community confronted these challenges playing their role as loyal Malaysian citizens - just as their forefathers had done in joining their Malay and Indian brethren in pursuing nationhood and in developing the country. Malaysia has been able to deal with the crisis because we believe in our country and its leadership.

One of the first steps taken by the Chinese community was the launching of the "Love Malaysia, Buy Malaysia" campaign. It was an active and concerted effort, to emphasise to all Chinese, the need to promote local products and to reduce the outflow of our currency.

Gatherings were organised nationwide in a display of patriotism. Thousands of Chinese women throughout the country were mobilised at "10,000-Women Dinners" during which the economic crisis was explained to all of them, and their role in the rehabilitation of the country was emphasised.

The Chinese have made their presence here since the first millennium. There are records of Chinese missions to the Langkasuka kingdom as early as 100 AD. Although the exact site is unknown, Victor Purcell's *The Chinese in Malaya* claimed that it was almost certainly in the north of the peninsula and very probably where Kedah is located today.

But the most noteworthy of Chinese presence was the arrival of Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) in Malacca in 1408. Zheng He, a Muslim, took with him another Muslim, Ma Huan, who could translate foreign books. That was the beginning of Sino-Malay friendship - and this bond has continued until the present day between Umno and the MCA.

As we move into the next century, we must understand that the burden will become heavier. Expectations and demands will be louder. At the same time however, the next millennium offers both opportunities and challenges.

Malaysia needs to be more skilful, more competitive and better equipped to compete with her competitors in the region.

To do this, the country must strive for excellence.

Meritocracy will determine our competitiveness on the world stage. For the "Malaysia Boleh" slogan to be meaningful, the Chinese community in Malaysia must see themselves capable of being excellent global players. We must be world-class material - whether in the economics field, in sports or others.

The emphasis for quality and ability must be the hallmark of the community in the next century. There can be no compromise over this if we want to excel. The community needs to be lean and firm.

We must constantly remind ourselves that to reach the ranks of developed nations, the overriding factor should be quality.

Quality should not be confined merely to the products we want to sell to the world but also in terms of human resources. Our younger generation need to be equipped as quality is the domain of all humans.

Thus, education continues to play a crucial role for the community. Quality rather than quantity should be the yardstick.

For the Chinese community, concerns over the lack of educational facilities should ease somewhat as the government continues to liberalise its policies on education, and opportunities and access to education at all levels - will increase for Malaysians of all races.

Education must not mean just securing a university degree but it must include computer literacy and the ability to speak more than just Bahasa Malaysia, English and Chinese.

We must remember, as we enter the next lap, that the world has become smaller. The next century will be a computer era, an age of advancements in technologies, expansion in global trades and advanced telecommunications.

The community must see their advancement as more than challenges. They are in fact opportunities. For these will help Malaysia to exploit opportunities, the community must adopt a new mental approach.

The community needs to see things from a global perspective, as the Japanese, Koreans and Taiwanese have already done.

The future is ours if we stand united and face the nation as Bangsa Malaysia. That is the challenge to the Chinese community. When we talk about the next millennium, we must talk in tandem about fulfilling the Malaysian Dream - the attainment of the Vision 2020 as set by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Today, the Chinese community is already very much an integral part of the nation. It will be more so in the 21st century.

The younger generation will see themselves more as Malaysians in the coming years. They will still be conscious of their ethnic identity. To quote the President of MCA, Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, "Being more Malaysian does not mean being less Chinese".

For a long time, the community has seen Malaysia as their land in terms of identification and loyalty. That, in fact, has taken root. This is essential as the Chinese community fully supports and subscribes to Vision 2020.

Dr Mahathir has taken the first step of drawing up this Vision. To the community, they must now ask what can they do for the country.

As Dr Ling Liong has said, the community must work together for the common good of all Malaysians. There is room to accommodate the aspirations and expectations of all Malaysians if the country is politically and economically stable.

It is also the sacred duty of the Chinese community to defend the stability of this country. The stability we enjoy today did not come by accident. It is the result of the far-sightedness of the early politicians of this country who formed the Alliance and subsequently the Barisan Nasional.

The success story of Malaysia is the result of accommodation, consensus and tolerance of all races. It is this stability, which has ensured that Malaysia stood tall as some of our neighbours sank into chaos. It is this stability, which has enabled us to talk about our goals in the next century.

Without this stability, stepping into the next millennium would have no significance at all. This is what the Chinese community must never forget. They must never forget the importance of working with the other races.

The younger generation must never forget that only a stable Malaysia would be able to harness the strengths, despite our diversity.

It may be difficult for us to experience the kind of phenomenal growth rate we saw during the last 10 years but try we must.

A robust economic growth is after all a basic ingredient for achieving our goal to be a developed nation. We must begin the momentum again to enlarge the economic cake and to remove the pessimism.

But all this talk of growth rate would have no meaning if the community does not uphold the values of sharing, tolerance and compassion. For these are not just values for harmony but also the hallmark of a developed nation and of social progress for the community in the next millennium is equally important.

At the same time, economic progress would be equally meaningless if the community doesn't have the political clout to secure and defend them.

The reality of the numbers game will continue to be important even as we enter the next century. There is a need for greater political consciousness among the Chinese.

Representation in the government is of paramount importance. As the government moves to seek a new mandate in the coming general election, this factor must be appreciated and understood by the community.

The success and progress of Malaysians in the next century will depend a lot on all of us working together towards common future goals. There must be greater cohesion.

We need to strengthen this cohesion. We must face the next millennium as one nation, one people and one heart.