

Chinese schools: Growing despite prejudice

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COMMENT Ask most Chinese-educated parents in Malaysia what the most important issue is in the upbringing of their children, and they will tell you it is their mother-tongue education.

Ever since Merdeka, right into the first decades of our independence, mother-tongue education had always been the most emotional subject for many Chinese parents.

This aspiration of theirs is a key part of the maintenance and development of their 'Chinese-ness' in our multi-racial society.

The determination of Chinese Malaysians to have their 'vernacular' education has long been the object of repression from the BN government.

They have had to fight every step of the way in furthering the cause of their mother-tongue education. And many political crises have arisen from this political conflict in the last half century of our country's independence.

NONE Until today, the Chinese community has to stump up the entire funding for running their Chinese secondary schools, and are forced to bear most of the cost of administering their primary schools.

There are now 60 independent Chinese secondary schools and well over a thousand Chinese primary schools - all funded by the Chinese community.

Chinese schools are run by the Dong Jiao Zong, also known as United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM) .

The Dong Jiao Zong is a combined effort of the Chinese guilds and clan associations, plus the various teachers' associations. They have accumulated tremendous social capital during their half a century of work for the community.

As Kua Kia Soong said in his article, "Ever since 1975, the Chinese community has administered the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) of the 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools, which have a total enrolment of some 60,000 students."

Today that certificate is recognised by most countries where Chinese is spoken, and around the world, except Malaysia.

In the process of our ongoing political reform movement, it ought to be the aspiration of all Malaysians for the UEC to be recognised by the Malaysian government as well.

Groundswell of support

Despite the institutionalised prejudice against Chinese schools, Chinese education has grown by leaps and bounds.

In recent years, the Dong Jiao Zong had established the New Era College in Kajang to provide higher education for Chinese-speaking students in the country.

new era college 131108 buildingI taught in the New Era College for a couple of years, and was amazed by the groundswell of support from the community for this private tertiary college.

One feature that distinguishes Chinese schools in Malaysia is the linguistic skills of their graduates. Students from Chinese schools also pick up Bahasa Malaysia and English through a process of osmosis, by merely living and studying in the community.

Inevitably, those Chinese-educated students also pick up their fundamental grasp of other languages, especially through tuition classes, a rage throughout Malaysia.

This is what distinguishes Chinese Malaysian students from students in China and Taiwan.

Malaysian students tend to be multi-lingual. This ability places them a cut above Taiwanese and Chinese students.

chinese school inconvenience 190104 petrol stationOne telling statistic is that of all the youngsters studying in Chinese primary schools, about 10 percent are Malays and Indians, Ibans and KadazanDusunMuruts and others.

Their parents have enrolled their children there for various reasons, chief of which is the high academic performance level of these schools.

It appears the high standard of Maths and Science in Chinese schools is a major attraction for families of Malay, Indian and other ethnic parentage.

The Malaysian economy has grown to such an extent that it is not hard for graduates of Chinese schools to find jobs in private companies, though it is a near-insuperable challenge for them to find any such avenue in the public domain.

Multi-lingual graduates of Chinese schools now form the core of the workforce in the private sector.

We - all Malaysians - ought to recognise their achievements and contributions to the growth of our young nation.

In memory of Lim Lian Geok

This article is dedicated to the memory of the late Lim Lian Geok (1901-1985), the former chairman of the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia, also popularly known as Jiao Zong.

book lim lian geok soul of the malaysian chinese
Lim was a teacher who had to endure endless persecution under a Barisan Nasional led by Malay bigots.

He was renowned in Chinese education circles and was highly visible, always in the forefront of the struggle for Chinese education in Malaysia.

His struggle for mother-tongue education saw his Malaysian citizenship and teaching licence revoked in 1961.

His offence was to oppose the 1960 Rahman Talib Report, which intended to abolish Chinese schools, and the 1961 Education Act, which required all secondary schools to teach in English or Malay.

Fortunately for us, Chinese education has remained an integral part of the Malaysian education system, thanks to the contribution of people who did not flinch in the face of oppression, like Lim Lian Geok.

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