

Seeking their place in the sun

The economy and education are staple areas of concern for the Chinese community but recent times have seen them concerned about crime and security as well as the touchy issue of race relations, writes JOCELINE TAN

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DATUK Dr Ng Yen Yen greets many of her constituents in Raub with the quintessential Chinese greeting, "have you eaten?"

It is less about eating than a query about the state of one's well-being.

Quite often, she asks the other standard question, "how's business?" Of late, the replies to the second query have been less enthusiastic than those to the first.

"So-so," and, "like that lah," are some common replies.

Business is not great and Dr Ng takes it all in quite seriously for she is, after all, the Deputy Finance Minister.

But it is not exactly doom and gloom in her still largely rural parliamentary seat. Smallholders around Raub where she is a third-term MP and elsewhere in the country have been quite flushed with cash thanks to buoyant prices for palm oil and rubber the past two years.

"I'm thankful because that has helped offset rising costs in other areas," said Dr Ng.

The above scenario is very likely repeated in many rural constituencies elsewhere.

The economy has always been a prime concern of the Chinese constituency just as Chinese schools and education has remained a perennial issue.

But it is of particular concern for many in the Chinese community today because an overwhelming majority are private sector employed or run their own businesses. Chinese businessmen are very private sector driven but they depend on the government to create the right business and political environment.

"For those Chinese running their own business, their chief concerns are economic opportunities. One is eroding purchasing power. The other is looking for regional markets.

"They don't expect goodies but they want the government to provide the initiatives for them to access regional markets because they don't have the means to do that on their own," said economist Khoo Kay Peng who heads the Parti Gerakan think-tank, Sedar Institute.

For wage-earners, the economy centres largely around bread and butter issues. The salary structure has not changed much but living costs have, with fuel up 40% and utilities some 15%.

"The cost-push factor translates into smaller purchasing power and over the last two to three years, it's been more acute," said Khoo.

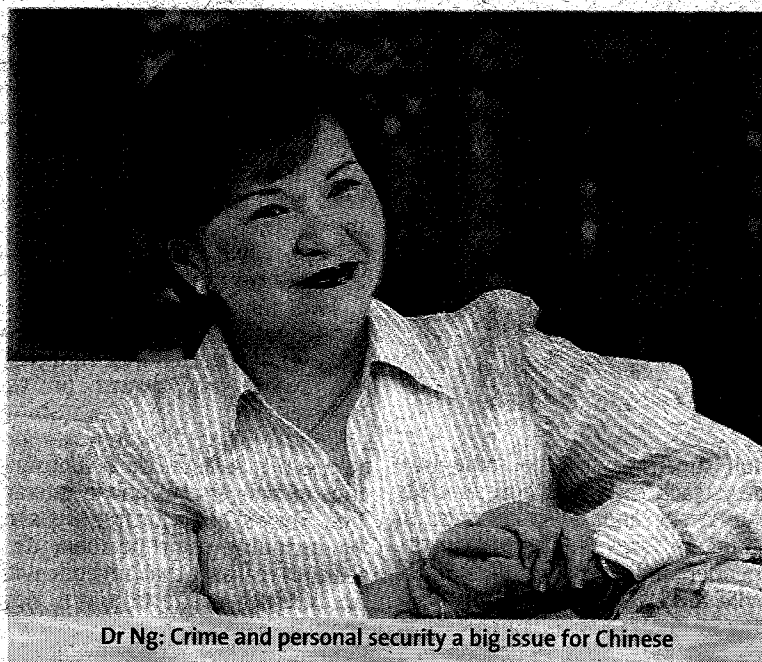
But talk to any Chinese politician and one would quickly realise that the community's concern has also extended to worries about crime and personal security.

"Security and personal safety is a big issue especially for women and children because they are the weaker group. So many of our party members raised it during the party assembly.

"They want action, they want to know why this is happening, what is the cause and what can be done,"



POWER OF THE YOUNG: They will be better educated, have access to information, expect performance and accountability of their leaders and want a say about their society.



Dr Ng: Crime and personal security a big issue for Chinese

said Dr Ng who is also Wanita MCA chief.

The letters page of Chinese vernacular papers is testimony to this.

There is a perception that crime incidents, especially those affecting ordinary citizens and on a rather violent scale, has gone up.

"It's not an exclusively Chinese problem but the Chinese seem to be taking it much more seriously. I think it's because issues of safety not only affect their personal life but also their work and business," said corporate figure Rita Sim.

Even newspaper vendors who are out on the streets at the crack of dawn have grown security conscious.

Sim, who was at a recent dinner for newspaper vendors, said the vendors had spoken about how several of their members were attacked and robbed in their paper rounds.

One was even killed, leading the association chairman to appeal to the media to highlight the problem so that people would be vigilant and the authorities more serious about tackling it.

A leading Chinese vernacular paper, *Sin Chew Daily*, last month launched an anti-crime campaign with special reports and a booklet with tips on crime prevention, how to lodge police reports and listing emergency numbers.

Another issue of concern to the more educated and thinking class of Chinese in recent times is race relations.

There has been an unease about public remarks and debates touching on race and religion.

Just as many Chinese felt uncomfortable at the height of PAS political push for an Islamic state, they also feel uncomfortable about expres-



Khoo: looking at society and the rights that come with it

sions on the Malay Agenda and "*ketuanan Melayu*" (Malay supremacy).

They are not quite sure what to make of it, especially the post-Merdeka generation who were born here and grew up during the New Economic Policy (NEP) years.

"My generation grew up accepting the NEP as a stabiliser. We regarded it as necessary for socio-political stability of our country," said a Chinese lawyer in his mid-40s.

But it has been more than 30 years since May 13 and a whole new generation had emerged, what some call the post-May 13 generation.

They see themselves as thoroughbred citizens and they do not understand why they are treated differently.

"I speak to young Chinese Malaysians whenever I'm abroad. There is

a struggle among them to define their identity. China are not home for them and neither is the western societies where they studied. This is where they call home. At the same time, they are looking at their society and the rights that come with it," said Khoo.

There is a social transformation going on especially among the younger Malaysians which many politicians are still grappling with.

It may also explain the reaction to the remarks made by deputy Umno Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin last month.

Younger Chinese Malaysians, especially, found it unwarranted and out of tune with the times.

"People would have expected this 20 years ago but things are so different now. That is why you see this sort of reaction," said Khoo.

But he does not think that race relations have worsened.

"It's always been more or less like this. The perception that it has worsened is because of the amplified political rhetoric and the discussion going on in the Internet. The thing is to recognise it as a problem and do something. Ignoring it could be dangerous in the long term," said Khoo.

It is likely the political leadership is still learning to respond to this new generation who are better educated, have access to information and expect performance and accountability of their leaders.

For instance, the above Chinese lawyer recently attended a DAP forum on the 1988 judicial crisis and was taken-aback by the large number of young Chinese in their 20s in the audience.

"They couldn't have been more than eight or 10 years old during the judicial crisis. Yet they were interested enough to sit there and listen. It really made me wonder what the future would be like," said the lawyer.

The power of the young voters can only grow and will be hard to ignore.

All said and done, said Sim, this is still a good country to belong to.

"There are ups and downs but there have been no wars or violent conflict," she said.

Or as a Chinese scholar from Sarawak put it: "The Chinese are diehard optimists. They are very pragmatic in the sense that whatever hurdles that are in their way, they work around it.

"The affirmative policy of the 70s were very tough on many ordinary Chinese but they actually survived and moved on and up.

"I was doing my research in the Klang Valley back then and I came across so many Chinese families who spoke about how they scrimped and saved to send at least one child overseas to university because they could not get into local institutions," he said.

Education has always been an uncompromised priority for the Chinese because it is seen as the passport to a better way of life.

It is also an empowering tool and its effects are already being felt.