

From the Taoists, a leader as old as Malaysia
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BY RITA JONG

There is a large altar in the room, emanating incense that rolls over gently to every corner. Here at a large meeting table sits Tan Hoe Chiew, the leader of the Federation of Taoist Associations Malaysia for the past two years.

He has just lit the joss sticks and made offerings. Surrounded by memorabilia and books, he is in a white Chinese samfu and striped black pants.

The way he speaks fits the long view you would expect of the leader of a federation which has 400 members. Even when speaking of his age, Tan describes himself to be as old as Malaysia.

When asked on his take on the current racial situation in the country, he was pessimistic.

"It would be great to have life as it was before, but I don't think that can happen. I think it is only getting worse," said Tan.
Then he takes the long view...

"We never had any religious issues before. I am from a kampung in Segambut and there were only six Chinese families surrounded by many Malay families. My family didn't have television and we were free to go to our Malay friends' houses to watch TV and dine with them," he reminisces.

"We would attend many kenduris and enjoy their silat. We had a peaceful mix of culture."

Tan went to three primary schools of very different character: SK Sri Dhandayuthapani, SK Hishammuddin, and then to Batu Road Boys' School.

"My mother moved me due to logistic issues, not disciplinary problems," he adds with a smile.

He was educated in English all the way through to A levels at Kolej Tun Abdul Rahman.

He does feel some regret that he has a poorer command in the Chinese language.

"I was denied my rights to attend Chinese class in primary school as the schools said I never took the class from the beginning of the year. Until today, I am still unhappy about this as I felt I was denied my right to learn the language," Tan says.

"But today, I can read some simple Chinese characters, thanks to my wife who is my tutor. I can also speak and understand the language. I have also sent all my children to Chinese school because I know the handicap and how important it is to know our own language," he adds.

He notes that in his case it is more so as 95% of the Taoist scriptures are in Chinese.

"So I have to get the pin yin copies."

Tan's childhood ambition was to become an engineer. But he began working after his A levels as a salesman selling electronic goods. Two years later, he quit his job and joined his father in the family business selling building materials.

He tried his hand at his own business, supplying timber products but that went bust when a recession hit in 1984.

"I then decided to open a hardware shop and that supported my family," he said.

Tan is married to Low Lin Hua, who he knew from when they were kids. They have seven children and two grandchildren.

Tan is also the immediate past president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, which is the biggest gathering of religious groups in Malaysia. Its aim is to speak in one voice on matters of interfaith unity, something that he has noted is becoming more fragile in Malaysia.

"To me this is due to the rapid Islamisation of the country in every sector, be it social or economic," he says.

"And the religious authorities like Jakim and other Islamic religious departments, they are becoming more and more powerful. What they say is not written law but it is becoming the law."

On the future of Malaysia, he says, it's "not so bright".

"I just hope that the government will realise the importance to focus on the people and not on one race, one religion. This is our country too. They should be taking care of everybody. We don't want to be neglected." – September 29, 2013.

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