

## Increasingly lonely Peranakan

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Article

New Sunday Times - 03/02/2008

"IT is lonely to be a Malaysian." This was what Emeritus Professor Khoo Khay Kim said when we met last week at the inaugural National Conference on Penang Peranakan Chinese and Chinese Muslims.

Coincidentally, on the same day, some Malaysians were filing their nomination papers for the impending elections. Going by the crowds and shouts they drew, it was far from lonely. Instead, the mood was rather festive, with bunting and flags of various colours and sizes.

What the professor meant, I thought, goes beyond the superficial tangibles that meet the eye. For example, how comfortable are the citizens of this country when it comes to going beyond their comfort zone of ethnicity, religious beliefs and cultural practices?

To gauge the situation, one just needs to look through who's who on the electoral list of candidates. What's obvious is that most seem more comfortable among their very own.

Thus, in areas where a certain ethnic group is the majority, chances are a candidate from the same ethnic group will be fielded with the likelihood he or she will be voted in. In other words, the tendency is towards ethnic polarisation.

We have not even begun to fathom the instances of intra-ethnic polarisation. A case in point this time around is where the candidate, allegedly, has an unimpressive command of language of the dominant group he represents.

To make things worse, affiliated organisations, too, begin to take sides, risking splits among members. So, not only differences in ethnicity seem to matter, in some cases sub-ethnicity as well. Malaysians willing to forgo these narrow divides, without doubt, will be the lonely ones.

Now, let us return to Khoo, who is also an eminent Malaysian historian.

In his keynote address, he revealed that for at least three generations, his family has been Penang Peranakan, a group arguably more Malaysian, culturally speaking.

Being a Peranakan, his assessment has special implications unknown to many of us. For example, the Peranakan have a history going back 200 years with notable levels of success in the economic field, various professions and sports. The community has a fair share of the rich and famous as well.

Despite this, according to him, "over the years, the community was affected by numerous changes as a result of which the boundary that divides the Peranakan from the rest of the Chinese has become increasingly vague".

In other words, the Peranakan are starting to lose their centuries-old unique "Malaysian" identity which cuts across the diverse cultures around it.

In terms of language alone, the Penang Peranakan use a great deal of Malay words, which lace their Chinese dialect and expressions till today.

The Malacca Peranakan speak Malay even more widely.

The Peranakan, also known as "Baba" (which is regarded as a better term by Khoo), are facing mounting pressure "to undergo a process of resinicisation" (for example, the need to send their children to Chinese schools). This is especially so after the overwhelming migration of the non-Baba or totok Chinese population in the 1930s, so much so the political future of the Baba Chinese as a distinct ethnic group of Malaysians has all but evaporated, to cite Khoo.

Some are said to feel apologetic that they lack all the qualities of "Chinese-ness" (vis-a-vis "Malaysian-ness") which are extolled by the mainstream Chinese community.

Even among the present generation of the Peranakan Chinese, there are those who prefer publicly to deny their proud Baba heritage. This is particularly so among the younger generation.

Khoo may be right after all: it is lonely to be a Malaysian.

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