

We are 'Truly Asia' indeed

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Article

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WITH the recent celebration of Chinese New Year, Malaysia once again reaffirmed its commitment towards a multicultural society.

Reportedly, overall, this year's celebration seemed merrier than before. In Kuala Terengganu, in particular, it is claimed that for the first time leaders of other communities tossed "Yee Sang", the mixture of raw fish and vegetables, a dish costing RM888, aptly to signify prosperity.

The festive atmosphere in Malaysia was a contrast to the north of our border, where I happened to be during the eve of the Lunar New Year. The mood was more demure.

Perhaps this is to be expected because, unlike Malaysia, our northern neighbour is more homogenous in its stance.

According to an article in the Harvard Asia Pacific Review, "the governments have consistently stressed the homogeneity of the peoples" - and further went on to say that in modern times they "never had an official discourse on multiculturalism".

The predominant government policy towards cultural diversity has been one of assimilation."

And hence "perceived as Southeast Asia's most ethnically homogeneous nation" despite it "has always been an ethnically diverse place".

So other ethnic communities are encouraged to take "official" names in the language of the dominant indigenous community.

Indeed, according to Wikipedia, the majority of the Chinese in the country "seldom consider themselves Chinese" and tend to speak the national language instead.

While there is no precise number that could be accurately quoted, the Chinese constitutes an estimated 14 per cent of the population (US Library of Congress claimed an estimated 6 million people were of Chinese origin, which meant the largest Chinese population in Southeast Asia).

Adding to the confusion is the phenomena of intermarriages between the Chinese and other communities.

It is quite clear that Malaysia is very much ahead in manifesting its diversity and pluralism, true to the "truly Asia" tagline.

Some traditions that have long ceased to be practiced in its country of origin were still being celebrated here.

For those of us who are used to living in such a "heterogenous mix" and enriching cultures, to have it some other way seems "boring" at best.

But again, there are many who take things for granted without realising how lucky we are multi-culturally.

We must thank our lucky stars that this country is naturally sheltered from most forms of acute and chaotic climatic variability.

Consider the ten of thousands who were stranded in cities across China on the days leading to the New Year.

Consider those who were forced to abandon their most important annual family reunion during such an auspicious occasion. And those who went without power supply for days after the facility was disrupted by the severe winter.

It will be a very sad day for all Malaysians if we allow our beloved country to degenerate into anything less than what we are having now just because we fail to appreciate how lucky we are, and play a meaningful role as citizens of a nation of diverse people.

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