

## A pretty tale of Ma and the maiden

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Article

New Sunday Times - Comment - 02/12/2006

**BY the time the muezzin called for maghrib prayers at the Masjid Kapitan Kling in Penang last weekend, the Gong Xi Fa Cai National Open House was about to wind down.**

As some Malaysians congregated at the mosque, the songs of celebration in conjunction with the open house were relayed over the nearby loudspeakers.

Streams of people were mingling in front of the mosque as the chingay troupes skilfully showed off their artistic performances.

Meanwhile, at the nearby "Little India" it was more than just business as usual.

Nowhere else can these scenes be true except in Malaysia which is noted for its tolerance and richness as a confluence of many cultures.

That the open house was graced by the King and Queen was testimony to the importance of the occasion.

Later in the evening, there was another pleasant surprise — a royal musical theatre telecast live over TV2. It was the first of its kind following an open house, indeed a truly creative extrapolation of an already eventful day.

This modest yet highly entertaining show reinforced the richness of a confluence of cultures. Its message was plain and simple: one of harmonious cross-cultures built on love.

The show was a love story of a Chinese admiral and a Malacca maiden during the height of the Malacca Sultanate, in the days of the famous Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho).

The Chinese emperor was keen to establish ties with Malacca. Just as the Chinese New Year was approaching, a mission headed by Admiral Ma Ho Huan was dispatched to do the honours.

Ma was received in Malacca with full pleasantries and he later met local beauty Siti Dewi, and the two fell in love.

Despite an initial attempt to frustrate the relationship by a group of locals, Ma and Siti endured with support from the community at large.

The musical ended with the couple betrothed and, like all good love stories, they lived happily ever after.

More than that, the colourful musical ably illustrated the meaning of cross-cultural understanding and, more significantly, the display of inter-ethnic openness and trust.

Songs and dances, based on the traditions of Malacca and China, were blended in imaginative ways, bringing out the true cultural diversity.

But what was witnessed on that Penang stage may not necessarily be the same on the Malaysian stage of life.

Sure, we exhibit the truly Malaysian character when it comes to sharing and savouring the diverse foods and special delicacies, as well as joining in the celebrations.

But has our cultural understanding improved over the years of sharing each other's company and food?

Have we matured culturally as true Malaysians (Bangsa Malaysia) as we like ourselves to be known?

Are we happy with the level of understanding that we think we have at the moment?

These are searching questions that beg to be answered quickly.

Otherwise, we may go on celebrating the open house year in year out only to go back to the prejudices and chauvinism that we have collected along the way.

Whether we realise it or not, of late a number of incidents are warning enough for us to look deeper for better and newer commitments to what Malaysia has to offer.

More alarming still, some of these signals come from the "older" generation which has lived through many an open house.

So it is time to cut out the small talk and play acting for whatever expediencies they serve.

The "truly Malaysia" brand must be supported by truly Malaysian gestures beyond just the open house and theatres.

As "Ma Ho Huan" teaches us, it is the display of inter-ethnic openness and trust that is the important ingredient for a truly lasting solution.

Come June, university students nationwide will be exposed to some concepts and knowledge on how to be truly Malaysian through an inter- ethnic course with the hope that it is sufficient to transform the "bigots" and "chauvinists" among them.

This is important to understand as someone can pass the course with flying colours but still fail the test when it comes to the stage of real life.

It would help if the main actors on that stage, including those in the political circle, are educated inter-ethnically in a truly Malaysian context and sincerely put what they learn into practice.

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