



## On The Beat WONG CHUN WAI

I FIND it very hard to accept when Malaysians struggle to speak the national language or have little understanding and appreciation of our history and cultures.

I spent all my early life in an English medium school but that did not stop me from signing up for the Sejarah Islam and Kesusasteraan papers for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination, the equivalent of today's Sijil Pelajaran Tinggi Malaysia (STPM).

The Malay Literature paper actually included a section on Indonesian literature and reading up *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) was not easy but it was manageable.

When I entered Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1981, I opted to sign up for the Malay Letters Department, or Jabatan Persuratan Melayu, in my first year.

The Islamic paper, Tamadun Islam (Islamic Civilisation), was compulsory and has remained so, but under a different name – Penghayatan Etika dan Peradaban (Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation).

Applicants to UKM knew exactly what they were signing up for when they opted to study at the National University of Malaysia.

Studying at a university with a predominantly Malay student population exposed me to a better understanding of Islam and Malay culture – and more importantly, friendships with Malays.

I understood better why financial support had to be given to underprivileged Malays. Many even had to use their scholarship money to support their parents and siblings in villages.

I was a tutor for some who had to attend compulsory English classes because they had never spoken the language with anyone in school, at home or in their surroundings.

Some shared that they were mocked by their friends when they tried to speak English. For fear of ridicule, they just clamped up.

They, in turn, found out that not all Chinese were well-off and many expressed their sadness when their varsity mates did not secure scholarships even though they needed it, too.

They were also taken aback when learning that not all Chinese could speak Mandarin. A foreign language is compulsory for all UKM students and we had objected when we were not allowed to sign up for Mandarin.

The university did not want Mandarin-speaking students signing up for the language course as it would have given them an unfair advantage.

However, there should not be any doubt about the status of Bahasa Malaysia as the



**Constitutional right:** A strong Malay language curriculum ensures that no child grows up isolated from the broader society they will eventually have to navigate, says the writer. — Filepic/The Star

# A common ground for a united nation

Being a Malaysian means being able to speak the national language, understand the country's history and embrace its diversity. That is what nationhood is about.

common tongue. It is our national language.

Malaysia's diversity is rightly celebrated. We are a nation of many cultures, religions, and languages, shaped by centuries of interaction and exchange.

But diversity alone does not make a nation cohesive. What binds a people together is a shared civic framework – common rules, shared symbols, and a unifying narrative.

It is within this framework that the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's message on the importance of accepting Bahasa Melayu as the national language, and the Prime Minister's directive that all schools and institutions of learning must teach the Malay language and Malaysian history, should be understood and supported.

At its core, it's not about exclusion or coercion. It is about nationhood. Why should there be reservations?

Bahasa Melayu is constitutionally enshrined as the national language – not to elevate one community above others, but to provide a neutral, shared medium through which all Malaysians can participate equally in public life.

Without a common language, society fragments into parallel worlds – each functioning internally, but disconnected from the whole.

The King's message is therefore a reminder of a basic civic reality: choosing to live in Malaysia means accepting the foundations upon which the country stands.

Every country has such foundations. In France, it is French; in Japan, Japanese; in Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia.

Acceptance of Bahasa Melayu is not a denial of one's heritage or mother tongue.

Tamil, Mandarin, Iban, Kadazan, English, and many other languages continue to thrive.

What is required is not abandonment of these languages, but the willingness to meet one another on common ground.

In Europe, especially in Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, citizens place importance on their national languages but are able to speak English and other languages.

A shared language reduces social distance. It allows a hawker, a teacher, a civil servant, and a student, regardless of background, to speak to one another as equals.

Education is where these values must be firmly rooted, which is why the Prime Minister's order regarding the teaching of the Malay language and Malaysian history across all schools and institutions of learning is both logical and necessary.

Schools are not merely places to acquire technical skills; they are where citizens are formed. There is no excuse for any Malaysian not to study Bahasa Melayu and the country's history, which should include the Constitution.

Language proficiency opens doors – to higher education, employment, public service, and civic participation.

If one cannot speak Malay proficiently, then how can you deal with our institutions, especially the civil service, effectively?

When students are denied adequate exposure to the national language, they are not being protected; they are being disadvantaged.

A strong Malay language curriculum ensures that no child grows up isolated

from the broader society they will eventually have to navigate.

Likewise, if Malaysians are not able to speak or write English well, then they would be at a disadvantage because English is an international language. It has to be used in the private sector because it deals with the rest of the world.

When Malaysians travel abroad, like it or not, they have to converse with foreigners in English.

We all know that the ability to speak Mandarin and to understand the Chinese mind is important because China has become a super power. The inability to speak Mandarin is a language handicap to me.

There is no reason to still question the existence of Chinese vernacular schools. They are an asset.

The fact that more and more Malay parents send their children to these schools is evidence that they understand the importance of knowing Mandarin.

Equally vital is the teaching of Malaysian history. A nation without historical consciousness is one that's vulnerable to division, myth-making, and resentment.

Malaysian history, taught honestly and inclusively, reminds us that our independence was not inevitable, that it required compromise, and that our social contract was carefully constructed to balance diversity with unity.

Our students need to be reminded that we achieved independence because the Malays, Chinese and Indians worked together – and that without Sabah and Sarawak, there would be no Malaysia.

Let's all be clear on this. These historical facts have to be ingrained into young minds that have been poisoned by racists on social media.

History will teach young Malaysians why certain institutions exist, why certain sensitivities matter, and why mutual respect is not optional but essential.

Critics often argue that such policies risk being perceived as narrow or intolerant. These are concerns that should be addressed with clarity, not dismissed.

Teaching the national language and history does not mean suppressing other identities. It means ensuring that all identities exist within a shared national framework.

In fact, a confident national identity is what allows cultural diversity to flourish without fear. When people feel anchored, they are less defensive and more open.

But policy must be accompanied by good implementation. Teaching Malay and history should be done well – by trained teachers, with engaging curricula, and with sensitivity to Malaysia's plural reality.

History should not be reduced to rote learning or propaganda; it should encourage critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of responsibility.

Ultimately, the message from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the directive from the Prime Minister are about responsibility as much as rights.

Citizenship carries obligations; to understand the country's history, to respect its Constitution, and to communicate in the language that binds its people together.

The King is right. Those who reject these obligations should seriously reflect on whether they wish to be part of the collective project that is this nation.

It is a shame when there are Malaysians, who were born here and live here, cannot converse in Bahasa Malaysia well while migrant Bangladeshi workers are able to speak better than them.

**National Journalism Laureate Datuk Seri Wong Chun Wai is the chairman of Bernama. The views expressed here are solely the writer's own.**