Question for critics

Chinese schools in Malaysia have built a strong reputation over the decades but it's not an entirely successful story.

I SENT my daughter to a Chinese school when she was in Year One for good reasons. The Puay Chay school in Petaling Jaya was within walking distance of our apartment.

It was a prestigious school and was also well known for its education and discipline standards. It is an open secret that parents who do not live nearby forge addresses to try to get their children enrolled in this school where places are limited.

Although I come from an English medium school and I am unable to speak or write in Chinese, my wife and I took the decision to send our daughter for early Chinese education because we wanted her to speak Mandarin. By then, we were already realising the growing importance of knowing Chinese.

As with many children from urban middle-class homes, my daughter spoke in English with us and her school mates at Puay Chay.

When she entered Form One – she was in PJ Catholic High School, a national-type school – she continued to learn Chinese. Again, English was widely spoken in her school.

In fact, in the United Kingdom where she sat for her A-levels, her school even offered Chinese as a subject and encouraged its predominantly British students to study the language and sit for exams.

In my case, my parents sent me to an English medium school even though they were Chinese educated because the world revolved around Britain in the 1960s. English had economic value and my father had no sentiments with China.

In fact, we have no family links with anyone in China.

I chose to send my daughter for early Chinese education simply because China was by then heading towards becoming a major economic power. Besides, the language would be useful not just in China but Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore as well.

It is this Chinese language asset that has enabled us to have a strong and advantageous link with China, just like our Malay and Indian brethren have their links to India, Indonesia.
and the Middle East in their linguistic and religious connection.

At Puay Chay, parents were prepared to pay extra money to have the classrooms air-conditioned and they had to personally collect their children's school report cards. If a student's average results were not up to standard, the school sometimes called up the parents to explain.

Chinese schools in Malaysia have built a strong reputation over the decades but it's not an entirely successful story. There is a danger that many students have become monolingual, unable to speak good Bahasa Malaysia and English.

On April 26, 2011, the online news portal The Malaysian Insider, citing a study, reported that a significant number of secondary school dropouts with Chinese primary education had little or zero command of English or the national language.

Studies had shown that nearly one in four Chinese students had failed to complete secondary school and their dropout rate was virtually the same as that for Malays and other races, the news portal reported.

In a survey of 159 schools nationwide in 2010, the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) found that one-third of students from those schools could not understand either English or Bahasa Malaysia when they transferred to national secondary schools.

Another one-third was found to be able to understand only a bit of English or BM, while the remaining one-third could fully comprehend both languages.

The report quoted NUTP secretary-general Lok Yim Pheng as saying that the survey was done to find out the reasons behind the high dropout rate among Chinese students who were required to take part in the "remove class", a year-long programme to ease their transfer from Chinese primary schools to national-type schools.

Chinese educationists should pay serious attention to this problem. The fact is that while there are many Chinese primary school students who are fluent in English and BM, a huge chunk do not have these skills because they or their parents do not interact with people of other races and English or BM is not spoken at all at their homes.

So, when a Chinese education group like Dong Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia) demands that non-Chinese speaking teachers be removed from their vernacular schools, it runs contrary to what we are trying to achieve for Malaysia.

It smacks of racism and intolerance. In short, it is unacceptable.

What kind of schools are we trying to run by having only teachers of a single race?

What's wrong with having non-Chinese speaking teachers who can teach Bahasa Malaysia or English?

They may just encourage these children from Chinese-speaking homes to meet Malaysians of other races, learn about the religion of other races and, in the process, become friends.

Those who sign up for French classes would know that the teachers would never use English to teach the language.

The position of the Chinese schools is guaranteed under the Federal Constitution. Period. It is acceptable to suggest that more should be done. Fair enough. But to suggest or to imply that the government has not done anything to help Chinese schools when the figures show otherwise is a lie.

This year, Chinese schools partially aided by the government would receive RM100mil. The government has also agreed to allocate RM95mil for the relocation of 13 schools, the setting up of seven new schools and reconstruction of eight others.

Allocations are deposited directly into the school board's account to avoid unnecessary accusation of interference from civil servants or politicians.

In fact, the government has even allowed Chinese schools to be built on land which could be used for national schools. The government is also now paying RM2,000 of the monthly utility bills of Chinese primary schools.

Last year, a total of 1,648 Chinese students received government scholarships and this does not include the MCA's Kolej Tunku Abdul Rahman (KTAR) and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR). KTAR has produced 185,000 graduates and UTAR 27,000 graduates.

The question to critics here is what they themselves have done for Chinese education and whether they have successfully produced a generation of confident, multi-lingual students who are at ease with other Malaysians.