

HIMANSHU BHATT/THE SUN



There was already a very advanced civilisation existing in Kedah 1,500 years ago, as shown by these complicated architectural findings.

immemorial – more than any Malaysian I have met in my life.

So where do such age-old societies, little-known to most modern Malaysians, fit into the kaleidoscope of a nation that has seen its political formation in only recent times?

Whether they be the ancient seafaring Bajau and Dayak of the Borneo shores, or inland communities such as the Penan, the Kimaragang and the Runggus of the deep rainforests, they reap from the same soil and breathe the same air as we do. It is only that they have never defined, over centuries of their existence, political boundaries in the manner that we do today. Perhaps the notion of Merdeka reinforces on us that it is our obligation as Malaysians to duly recognise and protect these age-old cultures, while also preserving the great treasures that have evolved here over time.

One person who compelled me to understand this responsibility was Zainab Yaakob, among the last of the purist Mak Yong practitioners, whom I met in Kelantan before she died in May 2008 at the age of 85.

Unknown to many, Mak Yong holds great significance as a living element of ancient Malay cultural psyche. Yet today, with the passing of personages like Zainab, this ancient

performing art is on the brink of extinction.

Zainab was a matriarch of this most authentic discipline of the Malay world, which has been played since time immemorial in villages of Kelantan, Terengganu and the Patani region of southern Thailand.

Ironically, its preservation has now been left in the hands of the modern Malaysian, which includes descendants of the old Malays.

This call of conservation includes manifold treasures of the past.

Among the most fascinating assignments I have had was a visit to a brick monument dated 110AD – the oldest man-made building recorded in Southeast Asia – in Sungai Batu, Kedah. The structure, which is a remnant of the Bujang Valley civilisation in Kedah, is a testament to the oft-neglected fact that there already lived in this country a highly intelligent and advanced society, two thousand years before our time.

While the place has been a haunt for academics, villagers who have lived alongside the numerous ruins have shown me things and taken me to sites not covered by our history books, leading one even deeper into the shrouded secrecy of this unfamiliar legacy.

Where does a powerful but little-known history such as that of the

Bujang Valley fit into our definition of the Merdeka independence and the modern Malaysian identity? Where does the legacy of the great Malacca empire, with its myriad ethnic mix, its byzantine exploits in commerce, and its great tales of heroism, fit into the Malaysia we know?

How are the many other incidents, events, people and personages across the millions of years to be reconciled with the relatively new national character we have fostered for ourselves over just 50-odd years?

As much as we celebrate what the nation has accomplished over the last 54 years, we must be conscious that there is also a significant array of experiences that the land has gone through over countless years before that.

The imbibed perception of a Malaysian national identity, though rooted in a political deal signed on paper in 1957, needs to somehow endow upon me a sense of responsibility to acknowledge and be aware of what has already been part of this land long before.

And it is this consciousness, this sense of our diverse and bountiful heritage – no matter how far back in time – that must propel our modern patriotism, to safeguard and cherish the legacies of the past for the many generations to come.

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(Top) A relic found at the site of an advanced civilisation which existed in Kedah 1,500 years ago.



Among the last of the purist Mak Yong practitioners, the matriarch Zainab Yaakob, during a very rare performance before she passed away at the age of 85 in May 2008, taking all the treasures of the old Malay ceremony with her.

Malaysian no matter where I am.”

It seems that the pluses and perks of a life overseas, as well as the miles separating us from home, do little to dilute the intrinsic patriotism many of us possess. In fact, it is the distance that emphasises it. Why else are we thrilled to bump into a fellow Malaysian in a far-flung land, or stumble upon Malaysian restaurants everywhere from Paris to Puerto Rico? Poh enthusiastically shares with people she meets that she speaks four languages.

Aisyah Mohd Noor, 22, who spent three years studying in London, remembers the swell of pride she felt when her British friends spoke of Malaysian food, beaches and batik. US graduate Norasyikin Razali, 23, felt similarly when telling her international friends she was from Malaysia, and recalls Merdeka celebrations she and fellow Malaysians organised on their

Michigan campus. Patriotism, as most would attest to, doesn't manifest itself on a day-to-day basis, but that doesn't mean it is reduced when we are abroad.

Perhaps it is our upbringing in this country – and our appreciation of the rich cultural grounding we receive here – that enables us to thrive overseas. We respond well to change and cultural differences that accompany a new life in a new country because they are what we know.

Sasha Mahadaven, 21, who has studied in both Britain and Australia, explains the Malaysian ability to adapt. “Being raised multilingual and surrounded by so many cultures means that we pick up languages relatively quickly, we'd give any cuisine a go and broadly speaking, we're an easygoing bunch.”

For many lured overseas by the promise of better education and

employment, these promises are more or less fulfilled. Why would we return home? After all, we've escaped messy politics, become experts at using the subway and found a café we love as much as our favourite *kopitiam*. We've learnt to navigate the configurations of a new country.

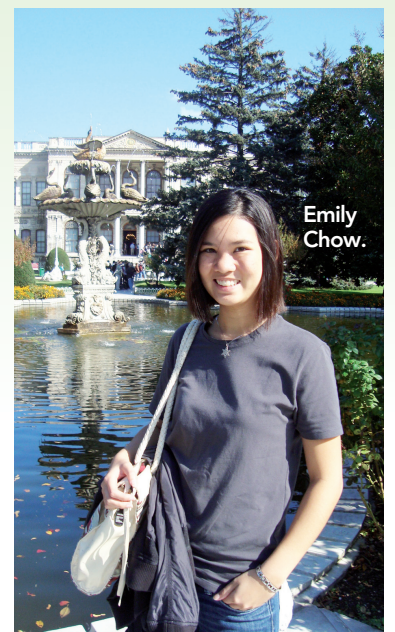
“At this point, the only thing that stands between staying overseas and coming back is whether one loves Malaysia enough to put its interests and the interests of its people before theirs,” says Aisyah. Unfortunately, “for many Malaysians, personal goals and aims in life prevail”. While this is the case, Aisyah herself plans to return and help build a generation of scientists.

Sasha, too, feels the pull of home. “I can't deny I want to live overseas, but I'd love to come back eventually,” she says. “Malaysia is and always will be home to me.”

All is not lost for a land that has watched thousands of her sons and daughters depart for foreign shores. Whether the Government Transformation Programme succeeds in retrieving these denizens, or the brain drain swells into an exodus, Malaysians abroad haven't forsaken the memory of their motherland. As Poh says, “I have never felt more Malaysian than when I am away from home. Leaving Malaysia made me fall in love with it all the more.”

The diaspora may be ever expanding, but however widespread its reach, Malaysians find a place in displacement, maintaining a bond with home that neither distance nor disparity can loosen.

Soraya interned with *theSun* for a month and has returned to New York University where she is pursuing a liberal arts programme.



Emily Chow.