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Daim wins 'an Oscar' for brevity

Abdullah Ahmad

LAST month was an award season - Oscars. Taiwan savoured its first Oscar success as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* snapped up four statuettes. It was SAR's (Special Administrative Region's) night of glory in Los Angeles.

Tun Daim Zainuddin, the Minister of Finance, last Friday opened Maybank Shanghai, Maybank's first branch in mainland China. Daim was brief but the speech by Cai E Sheng, president of the People's Bank of China (Shanghai branch) was even shorter (and in Mandarin).

Laozi (also Laodan), the founder of ancient Taoism said more than two thousand years ago that "sincere words are not fine, fine words are not sincere. A good man is not eloquent, an eloquent man is not good. He who knows does not show off his learning, he who shows off his learning does not know". After reading and learning that, I can't help reviewing my assessment of various past and present Malaysian politicians, within and without the ruling Umno. Those who consider themselves always in the right cannot really tell right from wrong!

Daim gave two formal speeches, a closed-door briefing (with directors of Maybank) and an informal breakfast session with Malaysian business persons in Shanghai. The longest was the closed-door do. Daim's trademark is short speeches and at times, I get the impression that he really does not like public speaking because he is never comfortable up there. In private and small discussion groups - I mean four to six persons - he is another man, natural and less shy, even though still generally very economical with words. His answer is usually yes or not, rarely elaborating unless absolutely necessary. And he never shows emotion in public, always the same poker face. He speaks softly, often difficult to hear.

Think of it, there are no ruling party politicians who are on the hot list. Of course, everyone wants Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to grace his/her/an institution's function.

Daim's main stay is his capacity to work hard, fast, quietly and he can be quite decisive. He will be the first to admit that not all his deliberations and advice have been correct. But he knows what he does and takes criticism in good stride. I believe Daim has what it takes to keep us afloat and several steps ahead of the opposition and competition from within, no matter how bad the US economic slowdown is and how bad the political scene gets.

Who cares about awards? You must be kidding. Just continue to read the 14 annual honours lists (King's, Sultans' and governors' birthdays). They are the indicators that separate the merely lucky people from the truly deserving ones. Whatever, I like to nominate Daim for an award for brevity.

After 40 years of rejecting the market economy, private property and private initiative in favour of public ownership and planning which allowed the Communist Party to control patronage, distribute and even redistribute resources, China, Shanghai in particular, has embraced them with a vengeance. The result is clear: Pudong, on the east bank of Huangpu river, is a showcase of a fast emerging world class mini city within a city.

Maybank, said Cai, had made a wise decision (after five years of negotiations, according to Tan Sri Basir Ahmad, Maybank chairman, and the last crucial year by Datuk Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz, the governor of Bank

Negara) to come to Shanghai.

I have no doubt Maybank will be a success story in Shanghai: a bridge between the Shanghainese economy and ours for mutual benefit in an increasingly globalised world.

China (and the US) is a huge nation, economically and politically very important. Far better for us to work with the Chinese (and Americans), not against them. A non-confrontational attitude and even less rhetoric, I think, will allow better relations to emerge and trade to flourish.

Daim did not say it explicitly though he did by implication during the breakfast session, something that I could relate to the story told by Chuang-Tze, an ancient Chinese sage, about a giant who was convinced of his strength but was eventually crushed trying to stop a wheel that was rolling down the road. This is what happens when one thinks too much of his own ability.

Last Thursday night, Maybank gave a dinner (north Indian food in China!) in the beautiful former residence of Madam Chiang Kai Shek, now turned into an Indian restaurant serviced by Singaporean and Indonesian Chinese. Then, we went to the green-roofed Peace Hotel along the Bund to enjoy music from the roaring forties. The band leader is 84 years old!

Pudong, the twin city of Shanghai, is very clean and orderly, and its public parks and the People's Square are neat, better maintained and manicured than some of the golf clubs at home. So are the lakes.

Pudong is a glimpse of what China could be in 50 years: the sleeping giant has awakened and the world has been put on notice.

China said last Thursday that its population now stood at 1.295 billion against the world's six billion which means for every six persons on earth, 1.2 person is Chinese. A total 1.26 billion live on mainland China, 6.7 million in SAR, 440,000 in Macau and 22.28 million in Taiwan.

Beijing has called on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to place more emphasis on the right to development to eradicate poverty and to enhance this right through international cooperation.

I feel strongly that it is better to work with a rising China, not against it. I believe the European Union's attitude on the subject (human rights, the about-turn of Robin Cook's and Britain's policy) is more realistic. Each to his own. My argument is simple: I don't shout at my neighbours about the way they treat their wives, children and pets because I achieve nothing, perhaps enmity. Good example will do the trick. Don't make your neighbours feel they are under pressure and threat.

Politics aside, if anyone is looking for fun, generally good food, to make and lose money, and even a good education and Chinese sophistication, the new Shanghai is the place to be.

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