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Work with China, not against it

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I WILL put good governance rather than too much democracy as the factor that will secure a better, stronger and more dynamic Malaysian society. Shanghai and its twin-city Pudong have in some ways proved it; a focused government has turned a river-side village into China's showcase of fast-track modernisation and development in a mere decade.

Granted, it would have been good if democracy and good governance had combined to do it. But to me results are more important than the means. Malaysians have more ability than willpower and because of that I often hear the excuse that we can't do this or that.

I did not hear people in Hong kong and Shanghai talk about what happened in Tiannamen Square in 1989. Indeed, it seems that despite the publication of The Tiannamen Papers (in English) and the impending Chinese version by the middle of this month, many people believe that given the break-up of the Soviet Union and its ensuing economic woes, Beijing's hardliners were justified in the crackdown on the protesters in order to preserve the Chinese revolution.

Maybank was wise to have opened a branch in Shanghai. Singapore banks were in Shanghai much earlier.

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.

While the US and Japan are facing economic problems China appears to be able to cope thus far. What could happen in five years' time is anybody's guess, but if China could learn from the mistakes of others - Japanese and Southeast Asians - it will have a sustainable economy with or without further democratisation.

Last month was an award season - the 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).

Maybank, said E Sheng, 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.

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!

In Henry V, Shakespeare says men of few words are the best, which straightaway disqualifies me. A speech is a mirror of the soul; as Daim

speaks, so is he.

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 no, 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 mainstay 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. They are the indicators that separate the merely lucky people from the truly deserving ones. Whatever, I would 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, have embraced them with a vengeance. The result is clear: Pudong, on the east bank of the Huangpu river, is a showcase of a fast emerging world class mini city within a city.

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-Tzu, 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 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 co-operation.

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.

Seriously, Shanghai is a cool place for making money. I acknowledge China (like us too) has room for improvement in many areas and even on human rights but at the same time no one, nor any political force from within or without should be allowed to derail its national objectives and ours.

Daim's decision to travel to Shanghai is a recognition Maybank well deserved. Maybank has made a good start in China and I hope it will, when the time is ripe, push forward.

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