

Awakening dragon fast shedding its red image

THE 15 journalists who were picked to cover the historic visit of the late Tun Abdul Razak to China in 1974 had to travel to Hong Kong before taking a flight to Beijing from Guangzhou.

First, they had to take a train to Lo Wu station, which was then the main gateway to China, from Kowloon.

The newsmen then had to walk cross the Lo Wu bridge, which spans a small river dividing China and Hong Kong, then a British colony.

The guards, according to Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee, who was then *The Straits Times* assistant group editor, were unsmiling when the newsmen handed their passports for checking.

His first impression of the country was that China was awash in red. Even the chairs and cushions in room after room were red – a reminder that the East was red, a favourite slogan of then chairman Mao Zedong, whom Razak would meet.

As Noordin, now Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) chairman, wrote: "*Chunghua*, China's most prestigious brand of cigarettes, was also in a red packet."

Much has changed 30 years after the visit of the Malaysian leader, who was

accompanied by 44 officials, mostly government leaders and representatives of political parties.

In April 1994 – 20 years after that visit – I was on board the inaugural Malaysia Airlines flight to Beijing. It was my first visit to China and I was terribly excited. Except for a small group of MAS directors, government officials and invited journalists, the plane was almost empty.

By then, China had opened up and the people were encouraged to set up private enterprises. It was glorious to be rich, as the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had said.

We stayed at the China World Hotel, owned by Malaysian tycoon Robert Kuok, and most of us, the first timers, were awed by what we saw. There were still plenty of red flags at Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, a short distance from the hotel. Tiananmen Square is still regarded as the symbolic heart of China and Mao had proclaimed the setting up of the People's Republic of China there.

Even at that point, we could sense that the sleeping dragon was about to wake up. China would never be the same again. The world would feel the

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▶ Wong Chun Wai

impact of its every political and economic move.

That Beijing trip was the beginning of many trips to the huge country, in my attempts to observe and understand how China was progressing. Over the years, I have travelled by plane, car, train, boat and even on camelback to see the breathtaking beauty of China.

Criss-crossing the country, I have travelled to Guangzhou, stopped by to see terracotta soldiers in Xian, been stunned by the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Shanghai, tried skiing in icy Harbin and crossed the Silk Road to see deserts and oases before ending up in

Urumqi, Xinjiang, the autonomous region of Muslim ethnic groups.

On one trip, I had the opportunity to travel to Nanjing to visit the tomb of Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho). The third generation Muslim was the first Chinese official to visit Malacca 600 years ago.

The numerous visits had enabled me to understand a little of the complexities and contradictions of China. From the poor workers in Shenyang to the politicians in the People's Great Hall, all giving different perspectives of their country, but all enormously proud of China.

I arrived in Beijing yesterday, ahead of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is visiting Beijing and Shanghai to commemorate the 30 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries from Thursday.

The MAS flight was full. Instead of government officials, it was packed with Malaysian businessmen in suits.

When Razak first arrived in China, his main agenda, besides meeting Mao and foreign minister Zhou Enlai, included a visit to a commune.

The Chinese wanted to show off

their agricultural expertise, where the peasants and workers were still the role models of the Chinese Communist Party.

This time, Abdullah's five-day visit will include a trade fair, a meeting with the Malaysia-China Business Council, a dialogue on trade opportunities, visit to business projects and witnessing the signing of bilateral agreements.

Times have certainly changed. In 1974, Razak was accompanied by 15 newsmen and 44 officials, but 30 years later Abdullah would have at least 30 Malaysian journalists and hundreds of businessmen with him.

Back then, the journalists took along their typewriters while their colleagues in KL had to take down their stories as they shouted down the telephone. If that was not bad enough, all 15 had to share one telephone line.

This time, we have brought along our laptops, cell phones with international roaming, and the Internet is all we need.

As I sat in the business centre at my hotel to file this article, I realised there was not a single red cushion in sight.