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BY SUSAN TAM

IT WAS his interest in China's history that landed Tun Haniff Omar an opportunity of a lifetime when he volunteered to accompany the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein to China in 1974.

Haniff, then the deputy IGP, had quickly raised his hand during a meeting to select the delegation members for the trip with Malaysia's second Prime Minister Tun Razak Hussein.

"I took the opportunity to ask if I could join the group," said Haniff, adding that his boss, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Hashim also expressed interest in joining the delegation.

"But Tun (Razak) said, 'Only one of you can join the delegation', and I was fortunate enough to be selected," said Haniff in an interview.

The other members of the delegation included Tan Sri Michael Chen, MCA party veteran Datuk Wong Seng Chow, Umno veteran Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat, Tan Sri Thong Yaw Hong and the late Tun Raja Mohar Raja Badiozaman.

"I was very excited; I have been interested in China's history since my days in Universiti Malaya. I was keen not only because China was a closed country at that time, but because of its rich history," said Haniff.

The six-day trip was significant, he said, as Malaysia or Malaya at the time was still fighting the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

"We were hopeful that the visit would enable us to influence China to advise CPM to cease its insurgency," he added.

Nevertheless, Haniff said, the insurgency was under control and Malaysia needed to find a new niche in diplomatic relations with China.

Fighting the CPM certainly gave him a different impression of the Chinese reception when Razak stepped out of the plane at the Beijing airport gave me a whole different feeling," he said.

The cheers and colours shown by the youths who greeted them indicated their enthusiasm, openness and friendliness.

"It gave me the impression that the people of China had great dynamism. We were visiting the second largest communist regime but yet they made us feel at home," he added.

For Wong, who was the Deputy Communications Minister at the time, he recalled the delegation being closely guarded and they were not allowed to move around freely.

"Security was tight. Understandably, it should be so as China was hosting foreign visitors.

"However, there were exceptions when we wanted to go shopping. I remembered during dinner one night,



Razak and the delegation visiting the Great Wall of China. Wong is at far right.

A part of history

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one of us remarked that we wanted to make a shopping trip and one of the Chinese ministers ordered a multi-storey shop to be opened, just for us," he said with a smile.

Haniff, the 65-year-old former IGP said the delegation did not seem to get to see "ordinary citizens".

"When you read about China, you when we were there, we didn't really experience the heavy traffic or saw the crowd of cyclists," he said.

It appeared to him and some other members of the delegation that the crowd was being ferried to wherever the delegation went.

"It was as if the same group of people greeted us in the different places we went to," he remarked.

Wong agreed but pointed out that at that time, China was still very much closed to foreigners and for the Malaysian entourage, they felt privileged to have the opportunity to step onto Chinese soil.

Haniff also recalled his missed chance to meet Chairman Mao Zedong as he spent time shopping.

"Initially, I was told that only two people could accompany Razak to meet Mao, so it was his aide-de-camps and someone else. Later, I found out that Razak was looking for me to join

him at the meeting," he lamented.

He explained that Razak had asked Mao the whereabouts of CPM secretary-general Chin Peng at that time. But Mao had replied that he did not know.

"It would have been an experience for me if I had the opportunity to meet Mao," said Haniff.

At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Haniff's only words to describe the moment of having dinner under the influence of the Gang of Four, was that "it was something else".

"As overwhelming as it was, when we arrived back in Kuala Lumpur, there was hardly time to reflect on it as too many events were taking place."

Several months after the trip, the CPM had launched a number of high profile attacks, which killed Haniff's boss Abdul Rahman and the Perak Chief Police Officer Tan Sri Khoo Chong Kong.

"We could not understand why CPM did it at the time when we returned from China. Perhaps it was Chin Peng's way of telling us that he was independent of the Communist Party of China," he said.

Other than the political aspect of the

trip, it was obvious that China also wanted to showcase its achievements to its Malaysian visitors, as other venues visited were factories that reflected China's strengths in various industries.

Among the places visited were the Great Wall of China, a commune on the outskirts of Beijing, various hospitals

"I expected the factory to be staffed by a large number of workers banging on hot steel, but it was the opposite. There was a small number of workers manning modern machinery and even computers were being used to control the processes in the factory," he said.

The trip also enabled the delegates to learn from the Chinese as they were shown China's advanced methods in the health sector.

Haniff remembered the hospital visit where the delegation was brought into an operating theatre.

"There a woman lay, with her stomach cut open. She was not under general anaesthesia and did not appear drugged, but yet it seemed like she didn't feel any pain. We learnt that she had been sedated by acupuncture.

"In fact, she could even have a conversation with the delegation members. I was impressed with the use of

acupuncture by the Chinese," he said. For Wong, he went there with an open mind as it was "a government delegation paying a visit to a foreign country".

"I knew the importance of the trip, but it was also good to keep an open mind because you will not know what to expect when you arrive there," he said.

Haniff and Wong both agreed that the trip was a significant occasion in Malaysia's history.

"The sharp increase in trade between both countries reflected the impact of the trip. In fact, it was time for both countries to elevate their relationship.

With the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's upcoming trip, both Wong and Haniff believe there will certainly be opportunities to do so.

Mohamed was 29 when he was chosen to be part of the delegation for the 1974 trip.

"We know that China is a big country and we have to recognise that. Malaysia is always looking for new friends, new markets for economic expansion and of course to strengthen political ties," he said.

Mohamed Rahmat was the deputy Umno Youth leader and Education Ministry's parliamentary secretary at that time and felt "he was lucky" to be chosen by Razak for the visit.



Razak waving to the crowd during the welcoming ceremony.



The Malaysian team receiving a colourful reception in 1974.