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Razak drew back 'bamboo curtain'

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HISTORIC VISIT: Second PM ended Malaysia-China schism when he flew to Peking in 1974, starting diplomatic ties



Malaysia's second prime minister **Tun Abdul Razak Hussein** (third from right) in Peking in 1974. File pic

BEFORE 1974, Malaysia and China had no diplomatic relations. That changed on May 31 of that year when Tun Abdul Razak Hussein flew to Peking (now Beijing) and broke years of political strain between the two countries to officially establish diplomatic ties. It is hard for readers to imagine now just how historic that meeting was.

At that time, Malaysia was still engaged in a bloody armed conflict against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), despite the official termination of the Emergency in 1960. Government officials believed that the guerrillas, made up mostly of ethnic Chinese, were being supported morally, and perhaps, even materially, by China and as such, were regarded with suspicion, fear and mistrust.

It was Razak's pragmatism which finally ended the schism between the two countries as he was convinced that it would be more expedient for Malaysia to open a dialogue with China rather than continue with the prolonged confrontation.

The softening of the relationship with China started as soon as Razak became prime minister. It began as a tiny trickle when the Chinese Red Cross sent US\$200,000 (RM842,100) worth of emergency aid to the Malaysian Red Cross to help Malaysian flood victims in January 1971. This was significant as Razak was president of the organisation.

Then, trade, between the two countries was encouraged to increase, and by 1972, China became Malaysia's third-largest direct importer after the United States and the Soviet Union.

In 1974, after two years of hard

negotiations, it was decided that the time was right for China and Malaysia to establish diplomatic relations with each other. To formalise this agreement, Razak was to make a three-day state visit to China.

This was how I found myself on a Malaysia Airlines System (now Malaysian Airlines) Boeing 707 jet aircraft at 9am on May 28, 1974, bound for Peking. The 44-member delegation, consisting of ministers, politicians, senior officials and journalists, were grouped into six categories. I was placed in category C (senior official), along with Datuk Thong Yaw Hong, director-general, Economic Planning Unit (EPU); Zakaria Mohd Ali, permanent representative to the United Nations and Malaysian high commissioner to Canada and Haniff Omar, deputy inspector-general of police.

The sense of history being made was palpable in the airplane that day. There was a heightened level of excitement and anticipation as we looked over our notes, made last-minute changes and discussed various issues relating to the trip. When the airplane landed in Peking at 3.15pm, I was eager for my first glimpse behind the "bamboo curtain". And China did not disappoint. As I walked down the airplane steps, I could see thousands, perhaps 20,000 Chinese men, women and children, shouting words of welcome, waving the Malaysian flag and clapping enthusiastically. The scene was overwhelming.

I observed the Chinese members of our delegation looked especially

moved to be on mainland China soil. They included Micheal Chen, a member of parliament, senator Wong Seng Chow, an MCA representative, Datuk Phang Tet Tshong, a Sabah Alliance representative; Sim Kheng Hang, Sarawak United Peoples Party representative; Ong Boon Siong, Gerakan representative; Khong Kok Yut, People Progressive Party representative; Datuk Thong Yaw Hong, EPU director-general, and Khor Eng Hee, under-secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Perhaps as mostly second generation Chinese Malaysian, these men were curious about this yet unexplored part of their history. It would not surprise me if they felt an emotional tie to this country, which gave birth to their fathers and mothers.

Razak was greeted at the tarmac by vice-premier Li Hsien-nien. Accompanied by Chinese officials, Razak reviewed a guard of honour and took a slight detour to watch a performance of dancers and mingle with the welcoming crowd. In the meantime, a long fleet of cars efficiently came to collect the rest of us. There were two types of cars. The bigger black model with red flags were for the use of the politicians and Raja Mohar, special adviser to the prime minister, and Tan Sri Zaiton Ibrahim Ahmad, secretary-general, Foreign Affairs Ministry. The rest of the delegation, senior officials down were given green cars headed by my car (car No. 10), which I shared with Thong.

That night, the 76-year-old Chou gave a lavish banquet for Razak at

the Great Hall of the People, a modern structure which laid to the west of the imposing Tiananmen Square.

His presence was an honour as Chou had not attended functions of this nature for the past three months due to ill health. Present was Chairman Mao Tse Tong's wife, Chiang Ching (Jiang Qing), who earlier greeted Razak on his arrival.

I couldn't help taking a closer look at Chiang when I stood behind her during a group photograph session. Of course, we now know of Chiang's eventual fall from grace with the Chinese people, but that night, she exuded power and authority. She appeared austere and almost masculine. She dressed very simply with no adornments whatsoever.

Her face was bare of make-up. She wore no jewellery, her feet were encased in low stumpy-heeled shoes and her hair was styled simply and practically. The only feminine concession she made was that the material of her dress was of good quality. She barely smiled and spent most of the night looking stony faced and rather fierce. I would not have liked to have crossed path with her!

→ Part 2 continues tomorrow

The writer, a trustee of Tun Razak Foundation, was the first director-general of the Implementation, Coordination and Development Administration Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, responsible for monitoring the progress of programmes and projects under the New Economic Policy reporting directly to the prime minister. He was also Razak's special assistant

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A PAGE FROM MY DIARIES

