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COMMENT

# Mao was well informed about Malaysia

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**PART 2:** After three days of talks between Mao and Razak, formal diplomatic relations were established with China



Then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein meeting Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing in 1974. File pic

**T**HE next day (May 29, 1974) our itinerary continued with a blistering speed. Our first stop was at the Peking University and like the reception at the airport on May 28, the response here was terrific.

Students were shouting words of welcome, dancing and waving. In the afternoon, we visited a steel plant. Again the welcome was very warm although Tun Abdul Razak Hussein was not with us as he was having his first talks with Premier Zhou Enlai. At the factory, we were, of course, introduced to the senior managers, but also to a rather unorthodox trade union leader. He seemed a very tough fellow whose main job was, it appeared to me, to ensure that there would be no strikes among the workers.

Recalling back the discipline and obvious strong work ethics shown by the students and workers I met that day, I am not at all surprised by the country's amazing economic growth in recent years.

On May 30, the whole Malaysian delegation visited a people's commune called the "Korea-Chinese Friendship Commune". China's people's communes were launched by Mao Zedong during the Great Leap Forward in 1958 to improve agricultural production. The commune we saw was a combination of smaller farm collectives and consisted of 4,000 to 5,000 households of Chinese and North Korean origin. However, larger communes could consist of up to 20,000 households.

I found the trip fascinating as everything in the commune was shared — kitchen, animals, grains, food, cooking utensils, chairs and tables. All farming activities were also centrally assigned. Everything looked tidy and well-organised.

In all probability, the commune we were shown was a model one, but I observed while the villagers definitely had to work hard, they did not seem to have a hard life.

During our visit, I saw children chasing each other along neat paths, old men smoking around tables and women whispering to each other while cooking. They seemed to me like ordinary people, no different from those living in Malaysia or elsewhere. Maybe that was the point of the visit.

Our next stop was the Palace Museum, the national museum housed in the Forbidden City. It is famous for its priceless imperial collection

from Ming and Qing dynasties. My first impression of the museum was that it was huge. The guide told us the museum was the world's largest surviving palace complex and covers 72 hectares. I walked through rooms filled with priceless bronze wares, sculptures, enamel objects, paintings, textiles and ceramics.

However, it was the museum's exquisite jade collection which finally attested to me the opulence and awe-inspiring wealth of the emperors of China. Somewhere in the room, among the jade urns, carvings, jewels and pots, I spied my favourite piece of artifact in the museum, a beautiful burial suit for a prince made from pieces of fine jade connected by gold thread. I would have very much liked to have seen the prince's missing pair, the burial suit of the Jade Princess, which was at the time on loan to a London museum.

After the trip to the museum, we had the opportunity to do a bit of shopping. I think it is a well known fact that at present, the Chinese are the most enthusiastic luxury shoppers in the world, with one study showing their purchases making up 46 per cent of the global luxury market last year.

Beijing is now filled to the brim with department stores, markets, shops, malls and boutiques. However, in 1974, the city was not exactly a shopping haven that it is now.

One of the very few places to shop was at the Friendship Store, which I found very strange as it only catered to foreigners. Apparently, Chinese people couldn't even enter the shop. Most of the men and women working in Friendship Store could speak a little English, which was very rare in those days and there was even a bank one door away in case you wanted to change your travellers' cheques to Chinese yuan. Malaysian currency was then at the rate of 76 yuan for RM100.

We arrived back at our hotel in a cheerful mood. So far, my visit to China had been a real eye-opener.

Even then, Peking (Beijing) was a vibrant city although many of its small businesses, restaurants and shops had been shut during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Communes and fields were still common sights.

Yet, even then I saw the beginnings of modern China with the newly built high-rises, the cars on the roads and the factories sprouting out of the landscape. The city's energy was infectious.

About 5pm, Razak invited all the politicians, and also Raja Tun Mohar Raja Badiozaman, Datuk Thong Yaw Hong and me, to update us on his discussions with Chairman Mao. Originally, it was expected that Razak would meet Chairman Mao only after his talks with Premier Zhou were over. However, Chairman Mao decided to meet Razak immediately. This is considered to be a rare honour. Razak was surprised on how well Chairman Mao was informed on events in Malaysia by his foreign office boys. Razak said: "He even knows about my trip to Penang with Ne Win (the Burmese prime minister) last week."

They touched on the sensitive issue of China's involvement with the Malaysian Communist Party.

Razak asked Mao to agree to be put in the communiqué that China will have nothing more to do with the communists in Malaysia. Chairman Mao refused to do so, saying that he cannot do it as he has helped the Malaysian Communist Party one way or the other.

However, Razak felt Chairman Mao made an important concession when he said: "This is your internal problem, internal matter and it is for you to deal with. China will not interfere in the internal affairs of Malaysia."

According to Razak, Chairman Mao last met the long-time leader of the Malaysian Communist Party, Chin Peng, at the Bandung Conference in 1955, but was now unaware of his whereabouts. When asked if he

trusted Chairman Mao on this matter, Razak told us he felt the Chinese leader was sincere.

The two leaders also discussed the issue of overseas Chinese in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries during the 90-minute meeting. Razak felt Chairman Mao had little interest in allowing them back into China. He said he did not trust these men who he saw as too ambitious and money-oriented and described them as "speculators and thus exploiters" who had no place in China.

After three days of talks and a one-on-one meeting with Chairman Mao, Malaysia and China signed a joint communiqué in Peking, formally establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. As expected China's stance on overseas Chinese was made clear in the communiqué: "The Chinese government considers anyone who has taken up on his own free will or acquired Malaysian nationality as forfeiting Chinese nationality."

The day after signing the communiqué, we flew to Shanghai, where we stayed overnight. The next day, we returned to Malaysia. As we landed on Malaysian soil I couldn't help but feel a sense of achievement. As a country we were the first in Southeast Asia to make an agreement with China and by doing so Malaysia had become a leader among the Asean countries.

Of course I am proud to be in the delegation. The bonus was to get a glimpse of China many people never got to witness.

*(The first part of this story was published yesterday.)*

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 and reporting directly to the prime minister. He was also Razak's special assistant

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APACE FROM MY DIARIES

