

A centuries-old connection

REMEMBER Puteri Hang Li Po?

Every Malaysian student knows of the story told in *Sejarah Melayu* (*The Malay Annals*) about Princess Hang Li Po, a daughter of the Ming emperor, who came to marry into the Malacca Sultanate and enhance ties with China way back in the 15th century.

While historians might dispute her existence, she is a deeply entrenched part of Malaysia's historical narrative, and even nowadays is sometimes referred to when diplomacy requires a soft touch.

It's pretty amazing that today, centuries later, we can report on a friendly visit by a Malaysian leader to China's shores. That's a long time to be connected.

Reports on Prime Minister Datuk

Seri Anwar Ibrahim's visit to China last week - the first by a Malaysian prime minister since 2019 and following the start of the Covid-19 pandemic - are almost wholly positive, with much talk of re-energising ties and deepening economic investments.

That's not to say the two countries' relationship has not been without its hiccups.

There was the issue of connections between Malaya's communist party and the newly established communist People's Republic of China after WWII which indirectly supported local communists and their guerilla actions against the colonial government during the Emergency (1948-1960s).

In the early 1960s, Malaysia

viewed China as a threat to national security during Konfrontasi (Confrontation), a period of armed conflict with Sukarno-led Indonesia that had the diplomatic support of China.

And we are still locked in decades-long disputes over territory in the South China Sea, while as recently as 2021, Malaysia claimed China had illegally overflown Malaysian airspace (though China counterclaimed it had abided by international law).

Usually, such moments lead to a ratcheting up of tension and a deterioration of relationships, but with China, these disputes generally do not seem to impinge on long-established cultural and economic ties.

In modern times, Malaysia and

China's diplomatic relations started as early as the 1970s, when then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein saw how the world's political climate was changing, especially with US-China rapprochement through visits from US national security adviser Henry Kissinger in 1971 and President Richard Nixon a year later.

When Tun Razak visited Beijing in May 1974, Malaysia formally established diplomatic relations with China, beginning trade ties that have steadily increased over the past five decades, from US\$24mil in 1974 to US\$117bil (RM516bil) in 2020.

The ongoing US-China trade war can also benefit Malaysia, directly and indirectly, although it has its

challenges. The situation has the potential to benefit Malaysia from increased trade and investment opportunities from China as well as improved technology transfer and innovation partnerships, and of course, increased tourism.

As China faces increased US tariffs and trade restrictions, Chinese companies are looking to expand their businesses in other countries, and Malaysia makes for an ideal location with its long-established connections and the familiarity with Mandarin that Malaysia's Chinese community has.

Next year will see the two countries marking 50 years of diplomatic ties. Puteri Hang Li Po would undoubtedly approve of how we have continued her legacy.