

It all began with a letter

Correspondence between then premier Razak and his Chinese counterpart Zhou in 1971 proved to be the starting point of a longstanding friendship.

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It began with a letter from then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak to his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai in 1971. That letter paved the way for the establishment of Sino-Malaysia ties.

The correspondence proved to be the starting point of a longstanding friendship between Malaysia and China, way before official diplomatic ties were established three years later.

Razak saw an opportunity to reach out to Zhou, China's then premier, when a Malaysian team participated in a table tennis tournament in the republic in September 1971.

He grabbed the chance and wrote the letter in his capacity as the Olympic Council of Malaysia president.

According to a Bernama report, the letter was handed over to Zhou via Tan Sri Michael Chen, who was the secretary-general of the Alliance Party - predecessor of today's Barisan Nasional.

After reading the letter, Zhou reportedly instructed his foreign affairs minister to meet with Chen. This proved to be a pivotal moment that led to some serious thinking on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Three years would pass before Razak made a historical six-day visit to the republic to sign the Joint Communiqué between Malaysia and China on May 31, 1974.

His arrival at Peking Airport (now Beijing Capital International Airport) three days before the momentous occasion was met by a crowd of some 10,000 people, led by then Chinese vice-premier Li Xiannian.

Razak's maiden visit was made all the more special with Changan Avenue, the main street of the Chinese capital, decorated with rolls and rolls of colourful overhead streamers strung across the wide boulevard.

Zhou, despite being critically ill at the time, hosted a banquet in honour of Razak at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing where both leaders gave speeches and exchanged toasts.

Delivering his landmark speech in Bahasa Malaysia, Razak said that the differences in their ideology and size, and approaches to some international issues, should not present obstacles to the development of a fruitful relationship and beneficial cooperation between them.

"Malaysian foreign policy seeks to avoid tension, to strengthen international cooperation and to bring about a greater awareness of the common interest of every country in a peaceful, just and equitable international order," said the Prime Minister, who was also known as "Bapa Pembangunan" (Father of Development).

His speech was translated into Mandarin by interpreter Assoc Prof Obaidallah Mohammad, who recounted that it was drizzling outside when the remarks were being delivered to a packed hall.

During a series of talks organised by the Malaysian Historical Association in Kuala Lumpur in 2022 to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of Razak, the academician said he was only 27 years old when he had the honour of accompanying the Prime Minister on the historic trip as his interpreter.

Obaidallah praised the statesman for his honesty, integrity and wisdom during his meetings with foreign leaders.

"He was able to remain calm and controlled during tense situations and during discussions with leaders and delegations from China.

"He was very open and kept abreast of international political changes and the



Razak and his delegation visiting the Forbidden City during his 1974 visit. - Photo from The Star archives

"Razak said that the differences in their ideology and size... should not present obstacles to the development of a fruitful relationship."

communist ideology," Bernama quoted him as saying.

Throughout the Prime Minister's stay in Beijing and Shanghai from May 28 to June 2, he also called on Chinese leader Mao Zedong where they had a friendly and frank talk, according to the website of the Chinese embassy in Malaysia.

Photos of their famous handshake were also splashed across the front page of multiple Chinese newspapers the next day on

May 30, including the influential *People's Daily*.

In the days leading to the signing of the agreement, Razak and the Malaysian delegation visited iconic sites such as the Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City and the Great Wall of China.

They also enjoyed a concert in the Chinese capital and visited the Peking Handicraft Factory, mingled with students at Tsinghua University, went to the Palace Museum to look at archaeological findings and a commercial and industrial exhibition in Shanghai.

The trip and news of the official beginning of diplomatic relations were captured on the front page of *The Star* on June 1, 1974 besides making headlines in other local and international newspapers.

His move to foster ties with China was seen as a bold one, as it took place at the height of the Indochina War and the Cold War.

During that time, Malaysia was also facing active communist insurgency.

Malaysia-China Friendship Association secretary Tan Kai Hee told Bernama in 2014 that China appreciated the former

Prime Minister's boldness in establishing diplomatic relations as the republic was literally isolated by the world then due to its communism ideology.

Malaysia became the first among the South-East Asian nations to normalise ties with China, setting the tone for other countries in the region to follow subsequently.

When Razak returned to Kuala Lumpur after a triumphant six-day visit to China, he and his delegation were given a rousing reception to welcome them home.

International online archive British Pathe carried a video clip by Reuters, which documented the occasion in which Razak alighted a Malaysia Airlines aircraft to a cheering crowd of officials and members of the public.

A kompong band could be seen accompanying the nation's second Prime Minister as people rushed to greet him and shake his hand.

The brief one-minute and 12-second clip managed to capture the mood of the people during that time, no doubt feeling proud and happy about Malaysia's significant move, which is still bearing fruit 50 years on.