

50 years of enduring Malaysia-China ties

THERE is profound significance as Malaysia and China celebrate the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic ties this week, marking a special friendship between the two nations.

Just three decades ago, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim made his official visit to China as deputy prime minister (DPM) but it was an unprecedented journey that looked beyond business opportunities.

Upon becoming prime minister (PM) in 2022, he reaffirmed the importance of this relationship by choosing China as the first country to visit after his customary calls on the various Asean countries. He made two visits - in late March and early April of 2023, drawing considerable attention.

However, unlike previous Malaysian PMs and other world leaders, Anwar has always looked beyond economic and strategic opportunities.

His trips to China, from day one, have been about Chinese values and philosophy, especially the Confucian mind, and the positive commonalities with Islam.

I was lucky to join then DPM Anwar to visit China in the summer of 1994, as part of a delegation of businessmen and newsmen. He sent a simple but significant request to Malaysia Airlines a few days before we left for China. Anwar wanted the national carrier to screen an award-winning movie on the Chinese opera for his entourage.

He read the minds of the passengers well. They probably wanted a Hollywood movie but Anwar wanted to set the mood for the five-hour journey.

Not many Malaysians are aware that Anwar's interest in China began after having read the works of Confucius as a student in Penang. His father, the late Datuk Ibrahim

Rahman, a former health ministry parliamentary secretary, had a collection of books on the great sage in his private library.

"By the time I became a temporary teacher at Jit Sin High School (in Bukit Mertajam), I began to appreciate it more after listening to my colleagues," Anwar told newsmen on that trip.

He was excited when we arrived at Qifu, the birthplace of Confucius, after a two-hour flight from Jinan, the capital of Shandong province.

Anwar walked around the shady courtyard of the temple immersing in the atmosphere as he posed questions to Chinese officials, not just about the philosopher but also his disciples such as Mencius.

He wanted to feel how and why Confucius had been credited for the economic success of Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore.

However, his sentiment was reserved for Admiral Zheng He or Cheng Ho as most Malaysians know him. Zheng He sailed to over 30 nations in Asia and Africa during his time. He made seven stops in Malacca, in the early 1400s. His ship was five times the size of the ship which Christopher Columbus used to cross the Atlantic.

Anwar said: "There was a great difference between Zheng He and the others. He did not conquer the nations he visited. He sought friendship instead."

At the great admiral's tomb, about 1 km from Nanjing, Anwar became the first Malaysian leader to visit the site, where he offered the *al-Fatihah* prayers.

The caretakers told Anwar and the Malaysian visitors that Zheng He originated from Yunnan. His father, a devout Muslim, had sailed to Mecca to perform the *Hajj*.

In Beijing, Anwar performed his

Friday prayers at the Niujie Mosque, one of the oldest and biggest in China. He had a message for Muslims back home - that Muslims ought to realise that the Chinese embraced Islam long before the Malays and the number of Muslims in China was larger than in Malaysia.

"We are always reminded by a saying of Prophet Muhammad almost 1,400 years ago: "Seek ye knowledge even into China," he told fellow Malaysians in Tokyo, a stop on his 12-day tour.

Anwar wanted the businessmen and newsmen to learn about the values of Chinese philosophers and the success of China, not to think of just investments and the signing of trade agreements.

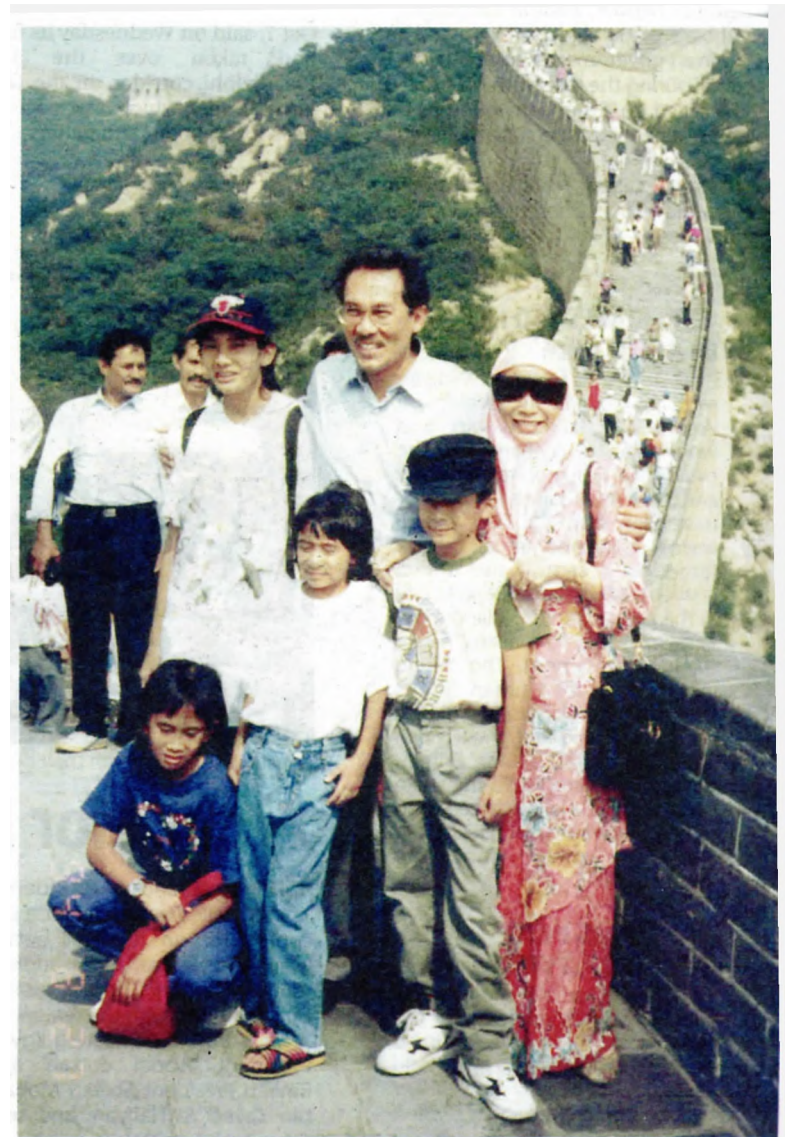
"It is an educational trip, not just for Malay businessmen. A lot of Chinese businessmen too are confused when it comes to Confucius; now we all learnt," he said, as a wrap-up of the trip.

As Assoc Prof Dr Ngeow Chow Bing, a director of the Institute of China Studies at Universiti Malaya, rightly pointed out - during the meetings between Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Anwar, one of the themes that emerged from the text was the importance placed on "civilisation".

Ngeow wrote that the term appeared five times in the readout text. He wrote that Anwar has a peculiar "civilisational lens" in approaching China, and this was indeed borne out by the readout of his visit last year.

For the first time, he wrote, that a Malaysian leader had displayed such a "highly appreciative outlook towards a Chinese culture and civilisational heritage" and had a life-long passion for Confucian-Islamic dialogue and efforts.

Malaysia became the first Asean nation to establish diplomatic



Anwar with his daughter Nurul Izzah and Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail during the Beijing trip in September 1994. - BERNAMAPIC

relations with China at a time when China was in isolation.

As Tan Sri Nazir Razak put it, the handshake between the late chairman Mao Zedong and the late PM Tun Abdul Razak was arguably "the most important diplomatic handshake in Malaysia's history". "This anniversary celebration will be a perfect time to take advantage of

nostalgia and re-energise the relationship."

It is time for both countries to strengthen their friendship and take it to another level.

Datuk Seri Wong Chun Wai
is a veteran journalist and the
Bernama chairman.

Comment: letters@thesunday.com