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Reviewing the last century

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"THE last century - the twentieth - was the most violent in human history," said Prof Wang Gungwu at a conference of historians last week. In backing this statement, he alluded to World War I and II, other wars and civil wars, the invention of the most destructive weapons, and ethnic wars and ethnic cleansing.

It was as if he was responding to the theme of the conference: One Hundred Years of Asian History: The Twentieth Century Perspective, a theme selected by host Malaysia.

Besides being the most violent, Wang, the eminent scholar on Southeast Asia said the century was also characterised by greater efforts by mankind to seek more freedom - freedom from hunger as well as the freedom of historians to practise their craft.

In his special lecture on "The Search for Asian National History" at the 16th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, Wang said historians had much to write about especially recent issues like migrations and the human destruction of the environment.

The professor, from the National University of Singapore, said he was glad that people from the social sciences were entering the domain to help throw light into some areas of research with their special skills - a fact some professional historians are not too happy about.

There was still much to do in areas like biography writing and history textbook writing, an area professional historians should be involved in instead of leaving the task to professional writers of history textbooks.

Hence, perhaps, the lopsided history that pupils are learning in school, where the questions and answers in public examinations were disputed in Malaysia's newspapers.

The five-day conference saw academicians from 30 countries presenting 200 papers covering a wide range of subjects - from the smallest incidents to the landmark ones.

Naturally, some were well-researched and some were not. Some were well-researched but poorly written and some were poorly-researched but well written. Of course there were those that were well-researched and well-written and those that were poorly-researched and poorly-written as well.

A few - very few indeed - were on non-subjects and that is why, according to the organisers, not many papers would be chosen as part of a volume to be published soon. Some papers were written as of by journalists - with broad generalisations and no footnotes.

All sorts of people, other than the historians, seem to be interested in the conference. Some attended the five-day discussions while some came to inquire of the subject matter, collect a few papers and left in a huff, angry that they could not get all the papers.

And the historians were no different from schoolchildren when it came to the distribution of papers. They rushed. The distributors were quite overwhelmed seeing old and young alike rushing to snatch the papers from their grasp. They, of course, could not be blamed as a limited number of papers were printed for distribution by the organisers.

The subjects were really wide ranging and even the fate of an old political centre, the much neglected Chiang Tung, known as Keng Tung in English colonial language or Kyaing Tong in present-day Myanmar - now viewed as part of the Shan State - came under scrutiny of the historians.

Terms such as staatsnation (nation state), kulturnation (cultural

nation), nationalist history and national history were bandied about during the discussions at the conference.

A historian maintained that there must first exist a cultural nation. And then, from there, a nation state can emerge from struggles led by leaders who were compared to mystical figures such as min laung or to the bodhisatva traditions of Myanmar, Confucian tradition of Vietnam and the ratu adil tradition of Indonesia.

Another historian said that nation building is a long process and must incorporate many processes. Originally seen as an artificial multi-racial state, it can evolve into a single nation state. Its history is at first a nationalist history, and this can later be re-written into a national history.

Wang said there is no such thing as "the end of the nation state" because nation building in Asia is on-going and can only result in the emergence of strong nation states.

There was also a paper on the role of Radio Malaysia in national development with programmes such as the Malay traditional theatrical show, the Bangsawan, the Tamil talk show known as Truth Teller and a Chinese drama series, Lee Dai Soh. And there was Kebun Pak Awang - a series which ran for about 10 years.

The academicians also learned that although most Asian countries had achieved independence, their attempts to completely free themselves from dependence in scientific and technological terms have not been successful. In science, the centre-periphery model still prevails, with the West acting as centres of scientific excellence, and the East as its satellites.

Someone's paper spoke of the emergence of Malayu ethnicity as against Minangkabauness and how the two later became one Melayu as a result of the education policy of the British and the efforts of such textbook writers as Winstedt and Abdul Hadi.

"The Malays differ among themselves in physical type ... In the towns they have absorbed whole communities of foreign settlers and in the country-districts they have intermarried with the older aboriginal tribes. There is no such thing as a true Malay racial type and the expression 'real Malay' must be used guardedly", another participant quoted Winstedt as saying.

Someone observed that because the conference was hosted by Kota Kinabalu's Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Sabah and Sarawak were slightly over-represented in terms of papers presented at the conference.

Still, the papers were most enlightening. On Malaysian history, there were a number of papers presented by foreigners, especially Japanese and Indians besides those by Malaysians themselves.

The conference was told that shortly after they defeated the British, the Japanese started their Nipponisation programme and launched a campaign for the propagation of Nippon-go to make the Japanese language the lingua franca of Malaya, Syonan, and Sumatra. An editorial in The Syonan Times says:

"The substitution of Nipponese for English as the lingua franca in Malaya is but the natural recognition of a nation which has stood up for things Asian, and which is now in the process of saving Asians from continuing to be the victims of the British strategy to squeeze the wealth and culture of Asians."

It was stated that the ulama were quite happy to promote the cause of Dai Nippon and were quite willing to equate the Japanese East Asian or Daitoa war as a jihad or perang suci or holy war.

That all states employed Sikhs, Muslim Punjabis and Pathans as policemen and soldiers during British colonial rule accounts for their presence,

small though their number was, throughout the length and breadth of the country.

And if someone wants to research the formation of Malaysia he can begin by looking at 57 documents and about two hundred Press cuttings from the Sabah Daily Express, North Borneo News, Borneo Bulletin, Sabah Times, The Straits Times and Sunday Times systematically catalogued by a diligent Sabah librarian and historian.

The question of federal-state relations was also brought up and examples from several federal arrangements were dredged up to show differences and similarities world-wide.

It was recognised that the problem of immigration in Sabah, either legally or illegally, could not be solved overnight. The fact that Malaysia in general and Sabah in particular enjoy the rapid pace of economic development, and that neighbouring countries are facing serious internal conflict, accounts for the one-way migration, said a historian.

And then there was the disclosure that the Malayan Union was formed by the British to save them from international embarrassment and after it was formed it did not matter much to them whether it succeeded or failed.

Of course there were also papers on the history of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. And there were also papers on international relations and regional organisations such as Asean.

When concluding his keynote address: Varied Reflections On Asia in the Last Century, the United Nations Secretary-General's special envoy for Myanmar, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, said every decade has its identifying markers.

He said the Kennedy assassination, the Beatles, famine in Biafra, the El Nino effect, Bosnia and Nelson Mandela will figure in history books as events and people that shaped the reality of human existence in the second half of the twentieth century.

For Asia, he said the identifying markers include "names like Nehru, Sukarno, Dr Mahathir, or events and phenoms like the Japanese economic miracle, Vietnam War and People's power, begging the perpetual question - what or who makes history".

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