

# WANG GUNGWU AND MALAYSIA

Edited by  
Danny Wong Tze Ken • Lee Kam Hing



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*Prof Wang Gungwu at his office in the University of Malaya circa 1961  
(Courtesy of the Chinese Studies Department, University of Malaya)*

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**Danny Wong Tze Ken**  
**Lee Kam Hing**



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Selected contributions to books include N. Tarling (ed.) *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (vol. I, 1992); Anthony Reid (ed.) *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Cornell, 1993) and *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies* (London, 1997); Karl Anton Sprengard and Roderich Ptak (ed.) *Maritime Asia, Profit Maximization and Ethics* (Wiesbaden, 1994); Richard R. Grove et al. (ed.). *Nature and the Orient: Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia* (Oxford, 1998); Michael Dove et al. (eds.) *Beyond the Sacred Forest: Complicating Conservation in Southeast Asia* (London 2011); Bernhard Gissibl et al. (eds.) *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in a Global Historical Perspective* (Oxford 2012); Geoff Wade and Li Tana (eds.) *Anthony Reid and the Study of Southeast Asian Past* (Singapore 2012); Vinita Damodaran et al. (eds.) *The East India Company and the Natural World* (London, 2015); and A.C.S. Peacock and Annabel Teh Gallop (eds.) *From Anatolia to Aceh: Ottomans, Turks and Southeast Asia* (Oxford 2015).

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LIM TECK GHEE's career has straddled academia and international development organisations. In his academic career, besides holding a Social Science Chair in the University of Malaya, he was a Visiting Fellow and Professor at various universities abroad. He has received a number of academic awards including the Rockefeller Reflections on Development Fellowship, the James Jackson Memorial Fellowship and the Harry Benda prize for his work on the peasantry in colonial Malaya. After leaving academia, he was Regional Advisor with the United Nation ESCAP and Senior Social Scientist with the World Bank, Washington DC. On his return to Malaysia, he was founding Director of the Centre for Public Policy Studies, ASLI; and CEO of the Centre for Policy Initiatives. His recent books include *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* (2009, as co-editor); *Challenging the Status Quo in Malaysia* (2017) and *Anatomy of An Electoral Tsunami* (2018, as co-editor) Currently a public policy analyst, his work appears in news portals such as *Malaysiakini* and at the Centre for Policy Initiatives website at <http://www.cpiasia.net/v3/>. He also writes the column “Another Take” in *The Sun* newspaper.

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*Woolley, Vol. 1: 1901-1907 (2015); Vol. 2: 1907-1913 (2016) & Vol. 3: 1913-1919 (2018), and The Chinese Overseas in Malaysia in an Era of Change (2018).*



# Introduction

In July 2017, Professor Wang Gungwu returned to the University of Malaya where he was once Professor of History to speak at the inaugural China Lecture Series organised by the university's Institute of China Studies. The occasion was graced by the university's chancellor, His Royal Highness the Sultan of Perak. More than 600 people turned up for the lecture, one of the largest attendances at a University of Malaya public lecture. Of these some 200 were Wang's former students who had turned up to meet their former highly respected lecturer, Head of Department and Dean. At the end of the lecture many went up to greet Wang and to wish him and Margaret Wang well. The large turnout to the lecture had earlier forced the conference organisers to arrange an additional hall with closed-TV circuit to accommodate those who could not get a seat in the overflowing auditorium.

Considering that it was more than 50 years since Wang had left the University of Malaya, the 2017 inaugural lecture event and the turnout is testimony of the high esteem Wang continues to enjoy in Malaysia. Many had followed the progress of Wang's illustrious career since he left Kuala Lumpur in 1968. Wang had returned to Malaysia on many occasions but the 2017 event seemed special. It was a sentimental occasion for many to attend a lecture once again by a popular mentor. For Wang it affirmed his continuing association with Malaysia.

It is to mark this association of Wang with the University of Malaya that this volume was conceived. Hence those who were invited to contribute to this volume are friends who were with Wang in UM or had an association with the university. UM in Singapore and later in Kuala

Lumpur was where Prof Wang began his journey in the academic world where he accomplished so much. The volume also commemorates the happy occasion of Wang's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is a volume dedicated to a historian who has influenced so many all over the world. His writings help make sense of Malaysia the country he grew up in, of the Chinese communities overseas of which he was part of, and of a rising China from where his parents came.

Wang was born in Surabaya in 1930. His father had gone there from China to head a private Chinese school. Shortly afterwards the family moved to Ipoh where Wang grew up and attended school. Although growing up in the largely Chinese town of Ipoh, Wang still felt as an outsider because the people around him spoke dialects different from the one used at home. In 1942 his schooling was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation.

After the war, he went to China to study in the Central China University in Nanjing. But just a year later he had to leave China as the Kuomintang-communist civil war intensified. He returned to Malaya in time to join in 1949 the newly established University of Malaya in Singapore. That was the start of a long association with UM, first in Singapore and later at the Kuala Lumpur campus. Wang graduated in 1952 majoring in History. He went on to complete his Master of Arts degree and then left for London. On his return in 1957 after obtaining his Ph.D., he joined the University of Malaya. Shortly afterwards, he and a number of other lecturers left Singapore to serve in the new branch campus in Kuala Lumpur.

The pioneering group of lecturers brought with them youthful energy and enthusiasm to a just established university in the newly independent Malaya. Wang, barely 30 years old, was asked to head the newly established Chinese Studies Department and was also elected Dean of the Arts Faculty. In 1962 he stepped down from the deanship as well as responsibility in the Chinese Studies Department to take over the headship of the History Department. The founding head John Bastin was leaving for SOAS. Over the next few years, Wang proceeded to build a department that soon became known for its strong teaching and research in Southeast Asian and particularly Malaysian history.

Wang had already shown the academic leadership he could provide. During his one year as head of the Chinese Studies Department, he brought in three well-known scholars. They were Wolfgang Franke, the renown German Sinologist who came to teach Chinese history and to research on Ming history; Qian Mu, one of China's finest historians, who spent two years at the department; and Ho Peng Yoke, a physicist who worked on the history of Chinese science and civilisation. Ho collaborated

with Joseph Needham to produce the multi-volume *Chinese Science and Civilization* and later went on to be Director of the Needham Research Institute at Cambridge University. But before that, he took over from Wang as Head of the Chinese Studies Department.

In the History Department Wang managed a transition from a largely expatriate staff to one made of more locals. Zainal Abidin Wahid, Khoo Kay Kim, Chandran Jeshurun, Krishen Jit and Jeyamalar Kathirithamby were the new local staff. Wang identified promising graduates to take up postgraduate studies to become eventual department members. In this transition, expatriate scholars were still recruited, such as William Roff and Anthony Reid. Roff, well known for his work on the origins of Malay nationalism, and Reid for his early Southeast Asian history, went on to professorial positions in Columbia University and the Australian National University respectively after they left UM. The high point of the History Department was the hosting of the IAHA Conference in 1968, and the large number of international scholars who attended was a testimony to Wang's standing as a scholar in Asian history.

Wang's academic leadership was already evident when he edited the *Malaysia* volume. The volume, with chapters written by several scholars all of whom were colleagues or friends, was to mark the formation of the new political federation of Malaysia. The book provided much information and insights into a new nation that was still unfamiliar to many, both within the country and overseas. Wang had followed closely the developments towards the creation of a new nation state through the merger of independent Malaya with Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak where decolonisation was taking place. The book, *Malaysia*, remains an invaluable reference dealing with subjects ranging from prehistory and history, society and the economy, the flora and fauna, to contemporary developments.

Wang continued to encourage research and scholarly publications on Malaysian subjects. He became president of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and was editor of the society's long-running journal. Contributing articles himself, he encouraged members of the university community to write for the journal. Equally important was the Oxford University Press series initiated by Wang which published theses produced by young scholars. Wang was editor of the series and under him several works were produced, such as that of Rollins Bonney, Khoo Kay Kim and Michael Stenson that expanded knowledge of Malaysian history.

Under Wang, the History Department gave increasing attention to Malaysian history while ensuring that students were offered a selection of courses that was balanced in regional coverage. It was in the graduation exercises and postgraduate theses that attention to more local history

could be developed. He encouraged public discussion among staff and students on new directions in Malaysian history. This discussion extended outside of the department to include school teachers. In 1963 Jagjit Singh Sidhu and Zainal Abidin Wahid together with some school teachers organised a conference for history teachers in the country. The proceedings were later published as a book and the History Teachers Association of Malaysia (Hitam) was formed. A journal called *Peninjau Sejarah* was published. Hitam and *Peninjau Sejarah* were to keep teachers informed of new Malaysian history writings as well as on improving the teaching of history in schools.

Many former students remember Wang as an inspiring lecturer. He was approachable and always had time for students, whether they were first-year undergraduates or postgraduate students. He and Margaret attended their social events and in turn were gracious hosts to students and staff members to tea sessions at their home. Academic staff will recall the morning coffee sessions in the small department library where Wang would invariably join them. It was in such relaxed sessions of sharing of views and news that Wang built a spirit of camaraderie among a staff of different backgrounds. There were also the dinners to welcome or to bid farewell to staff members.

In 1963 Wang was appointed Professor of History. He was one of the youngest professors ever to be appointed in UM. The appointment also placed great responsibilities on him at a time when the branch campus became a separate independent institution to be known as the University of Malaya while the Singapore campus was renamed the University of Singapore. Wang was busy on the new university's many committees as well as in Senate and Council, drawing upon some of his student leadership experience in discussions to ensure that UM was on course to become a good university.

Amidst heavy university responsibilities, Wang agreed to sit on two important government commissions. The first was his appointment to chair a government committee to look into the future of Nanyang University. The university had been set up in 1956 by the Chinese community to cater for students coming from Chinese medium schools. Wang's committee was to recommend changes that would make the university more effective as an academic institution to serve the nation. By the time the report was released, Singapore where Nanyang was located was no longer part of Malaysia. The second commission to which Wang was appointed was formed in 1964 following racial riots in Singapore in July and September that year. There were questions then as to whether the riots were sparked off by the increasingly communally-

charged debates among the major political parties in the country or were they to be blamed on provocateurs at a time of Indonesian confrontation.

Despite noting the growing communalism around him, Wang was always hopeful of a multi-racial Malaysia to come. Hence, when Tan Chee Khoo came to see him about forming a multi-racial party, Wang was supportive. Tan was a senior to Wang in UM and had become an outspoken and respected leader of the opposition in parliament. Coming together with Tan to form Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia were several colleagues and friends of Wang including Prof Syed Hussein Alatas. Wang helped draft the constitution of the new party but did not become a member. By then he was preparing to leave for Australia to join ANU.

Wang's decision to take up the professorial appointment in Australia was, as he explained, to devote more time to his research and writing. In the view of many, however, he had already accomplished much in Malaysia as an academic administrator and scholar. The publication of his Ph.D. thesis and his other writings set firmly his international reputation as a historian on China. His *Nanhai Trade* and *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese* continued to be very influential and used as regular references. He had by then also written on Malaysia. He set many of his subjects against the long trajectory of history to show how the recalling of the past has been important in shaping change in his time. He proceeded to write about relations the Melakan rulers developed with Ming China based largely on Chinese sources. In the process, he demonstrated the value of the Chinese records in offering new data and perspectives to early Southeast Asian history. In his writings, he often drew upon analogy to illustrate his ideas such as when he likened Malaysian nationalism to "a nucleus of Malay nationalism enclosed by the ideal of Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership" (Wang 1981).

At the end of 1968 Wang left to join the ANU. It was to be the start of a new journey that later took him to Hong Kong and eventually to Singapore where it had, in a way, all started. Wang arrived in Canberra where Australia was soon to establish relations with China. The opening of diplomatic ties allowed academic exchanges between the two countries in which Wang played a major part. In Hong Kong where he became Vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University, he followed closely the opening up of China and the transition for the return of Hong Kong to the mainland. In Australia and Hong Kong, Wang set fresh directions to the academic institutions he headed. As in Malaysia, he was always forward-looking and he used his skills in persuasion to win support for needed change, and his wisdom was always sought.

In the places he went to since leaving Kuala Lumpur, Wang became an inspiring presence in the expanding studies on overseas Chinese and

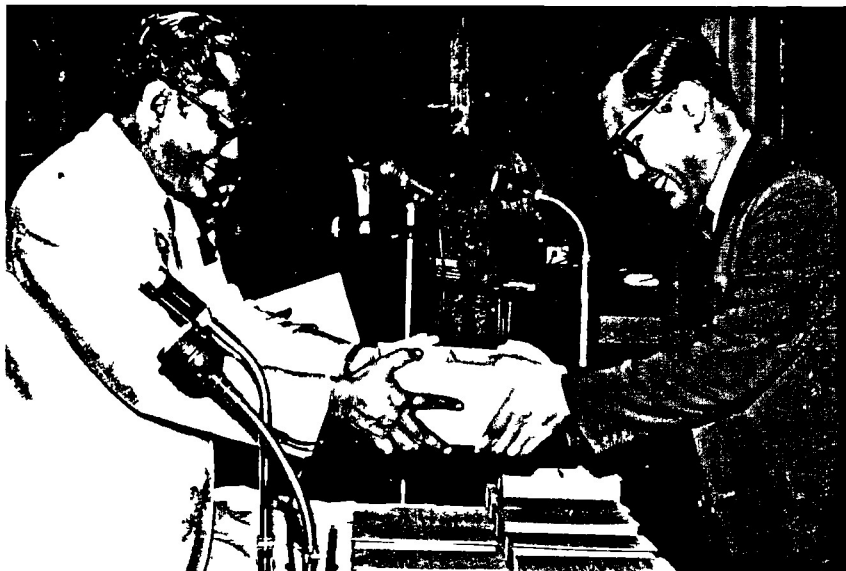
the rise of China. Drawing on his study of early Southeast Asian history Wang drew attention to Chinese traders from the ports of southern China who traded in Southeast Asia. Many were what Wang called as sojourners but some settled among the local population and, while still described as overseas Chinese, had been integrated or assimilated to become citizens. For his writings and lectures, Wang is recognised as the doyen of the study of overseas Chinese.

Wang Gungwu's academic accomplishments have been widely acclaimed. A series of awards including the prestigious Fukoka Cultural Prize (1994) and an honorary Doctor of Letters from Cambridge University on its 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (2009), as well as the Tang Prize in Sinology (2020), are some of the recognitions attesting to his academic achievements. Yet, Wang was academic administrator par excellence. He laid a strong academic foundation for the History Department and the Arts Faculty where he served as head and Dean respectively. He went on to helm the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, and then spent nine years setting new directions for Hong Kong University (1986–1995) at a time when China was opening up and modernising, requiring tactful and wise leadership to steer the university. When he returned to Singapore, he was responsible for guiding the East Asia Institute and providing leadership and support to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Wang is a rare combination of excellence in academic and institutional leadership – and setting such a high benchmark that few could measure up to. One could only aspire to be like Prof Wang.

Prof Wang had not really left Malaysia. A number of his most important writings produced when he was in Canberra and in Hong Kong were on Malaysia. He wrote about the Chinese in Malaysia, elite competition, and power centres in the changing political landscape of Malaysia. He was in regular touch with former students and colleagues, and his support was always sought, whether in the setting up of the new Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman or advising various learned societies and institutions in the country. But without doubt it is the University of Malaya that claims his abiding affection.

## II

The connection of Prof Wang Gungwu with Malaysia serves as the theme of this volume. Sixteen friends and colleagues contributed to this volume. Some had studied or served with Wang. Others have in the course of their research or career been impacted by Wang in one way or another.



*Minister for Education, Encik Mohamed Khir Johari (left), handing a set of books for the History Department to Prof Wang Gungwu, 16 November 1966 (Courtesy of New Straits Times Press)*



*Inaugural meeting of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, 15 April 1968.*

*From left: V.Veerappen, Syed Hussein Alatas (partially hidden), Wang Gungwu, Tan Chee Khoon, Syed Naquib Al-Attas and V.David (Courtesy of Ms Tan Poh Lai)*

This book is a fitting tribute to the doyen of historians of Southeast Asia, Wang Gungwu. A host of distinguished contributors discuss Wang's unparalleled achievements as a pioneer, teacher and mentor, and bring unique insights into the academic study of history and its place in Malaysia's intellectual life.

**Tim Harper**

**Professor of the History of Southeast Asia  
Head, School of the Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Cambridge**

A well-conceived book on Professor Wang Gungwu's multi-faceted connections with Malaysia through the eyes of his colleagues and friends. It is not only about Wang, but also about a remarkable era that witnessed decolonisation, nationalism, and globalisation. A must-read for anyone interested in the intellectual history of post-colonial Southeast Asia and the Chinese diaspora.

**Hong Liu**

**Tan Lark Sye Chair Professor, School of Social Sciences  
Nanyang Technological University**

Professor Wang Gungwu's ties to the University of Malaya (UM) run deep – he studied at the campus in Singapore and began his illustrious academic journey at the new History Department established in Kuala Lumpur. This collection from Wang's colleagues and former students provides a fascinating account of Wang's time at UM and of the lasting influence his early works have had on research and writing of Malaysian history and the Chinese overseas.

**Leo Suryadinata**

**Visiting Senior Fellow, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute  
Formerly, Professor at Department of Political Science,  
National University of Singapore**

This is a volume to honour Professor Wang Gungwu, whose long and distinguished career began in the University of Malaya. Wang inspired a generation of scholars and his writings continue to be very influential. This collection of 16 essays by eminent scholars is a major contribution to the study of humanities and social sciences in Malaysia.

**Syed Farid Alatas**

**Professor, Department of Sociology,  
National University of Singapore  
Visiting Professor, Department of Anthropology & Sociology,  
University of Malaya**

