

SOJOURN Symposium

***On Home Is Not Here* by Wang Gungwu. NUS Press, 2018.**

Review essays by Philip Holden, Anthony Reid and Khoo Boo Teik, and an excerpt from Wang Gungwu’s memoir.

Keywords: China, Malaya, colonialism, historiography, autobiography, Chineseness, diaspora, belonging.

Review Essay I: Philip Holden

Two moments of self-discovery stand out from Wang Gungwu’s account of an Ipoh childhood in his memoir *Home Is Not Here*. The first arises from the world atlas given to him by his father on his tenth birthday. The book, Wang writes, “transfixed” (p. 50) him, so much so that he stopped playing with friends and retreated to his room, filling an exercise book with long lists of place names drawn from across the globe. Uneasy about his place as a child in a family of migrants from Jiangsu in Ipoh—a minority within a minority—and in a colonial plural society on the cusp of great change, Wang found “pleasurable calm” (p. 50) in the way the atlas made the world legible to him. The second occurred a few years later, during the Japanese occupation. Wang’s father asked him to help catalogue a library of books collected from homes abandoned by British expatriates. In the evening he learned classical Chinese, but during the day he took out popular and classic English novels from the library, often finishing three or four a week. These private acts of self-making through reading and writing then became more public. Towards the end of the Japanese occupation, Wang listened to English news on a secret shortwave radio, translating a summary

for his father's employer, and mentally plotting the battle zones on to a world remembered from the atlas. After the Pacific War ended, he succumbed to an "obsession" (p. 93) with movie-going in Ipoh, devouring cinematic representations of the history he had lived through and the books that he had read.

These acts of reading and analysis provide an entry point into a series of experiences of doubleness that constitute *Home Is Not Here*, experiences that produced several productive paradoxes for the historian Wang was to become. In his inaugural address as Professor at the University of Malaya, Wang spoke of three main "methods of presenting history". The third of these, propaganda, was the most dangerous because it put "forth only one point of view" (Wang 1968, p. 15). Historians in Southeast Asia after decolonization, Wang argued, needed to work with two other historical methods, each of which might intersect with and question each other. These were narrative or story, and "critical and analytical scholarship", drawing widely on contemporary developments in social science (p. 5): in the novel and the atlas, we might see this dyad in embryo. And in *Home Is Not Here*, Wang elaborates a second experience of doubleness that begins in personal experience and ends in an intellectual concern. Early in his memoir, he expresses trepidation about publishing a personal account of his early life. His interest in history, he writes, was premised on establishing "a critical distance in the hope of learning some larger lessons", whereas the book he is writing serves, in contrast, as more of an exemplum of "what people felt and thought who lived through any period of past time" (p. 1). At the end of the memoir, recounting his preparation to enter the University of Malaya in 1949, he returns to this concern regarding the relationship between individual and collective experience. Reading Karl Mannheim, he wonders "whether a society can be built which will give the benefit of collectivism without loss of freedom" (p. 201). Again, one thinks of the library and the radio, those solitary experiences of listening and reading that unfurl themselves in the comprehension of global historical events and public narratives.

Home Is Not Here tells the story of the first two decades of Wang's life, moving from his birth in Surabaya to an extended account of his Ipoh childhood. His father was a Chinese teacher, principal, and inspector of schools, but he had also studied English Literature. Wang's childhood was thus marked by transcultural crossings, yet also by a strong sense of national and civilizational identity, shown in his parents' expectation of an eventual return to their homeland, China. Wang lived through the Japanese occupation of Malaya and witnessed the temporary return of the British to a society on the cusp of decolonization. He did return to China in 1947, commencing study at National Southeastern University in Nanjing, only to go back to Malaya again as the People's Liberation Army marched southwards and the Nationalist forces crumbled. Applying on his father's advice, he received Malayan citizenship in February 1949, two weeks before Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square, and three weeks before he entered the University of Malaya in Singapore as an undergraduate. This individual life of searching and displacement is embedded in its historical context through three elements. At times Wang looks backward, recalling family stories and genealogical research regarding his father's and mother's ancestors in Jiangsu Province and beyond. At other times he looks forward, in particular when foreshadowing the traumatic effect of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of many of his fellow students in Nanjing. The most striking narrational element of Wang's memoir is the presence of translated sections from a narrative written by his mother, and left to him on her death in 1993. Wang's mother's story serves as a counterpoint to his. He is an only child, born into a "first generation nuclear family" that results from migration, experiencing a new world with curiosity and a lack of fear (p. 4). His mother's narrative, in contrast, reveals a world of extended kinship networks, and continual uncertainties concerning residence, finances, personal safety, and health. These are two different individual experiences, at times incommensurate, of the same historical world.

Wang's own story often shows both incommensurability and the possibility of making connections. In Ipoh, he has the split

experience of studying in English at Anderson School, following a colonial curriculum, and a private world of family and friends steeped in classical Chinese. If these worlds diverge, there are also connections: there are “parallel lines” between Chinese myths and stories and those from the Mediterranean that found Western literary culture (p. 45); patriotic martial heroes such as Yue Fei find their parallels in figures such as the English vice-admiral Horatio Nelson. This experience of doubleness extends beyond colonial and civilizational pedagogy to the society in which Wang lives as a child. His father and mother were from a literati background that stressed Confucian values, and were part of a Mandarin-speaking circle of educationalists in Ipoh. Yet their neighbours in the area in which they lived, Green Town, were mostly non-European government functionaries. His neighbours were Malays, Eurasians, and migrants from China, Ceylon and India who were in the process of forming attachments to the plural society in which they lived.

Wang’s experience of Chineseness in the memoir is thus also split. On the one hand there is a sense of classical and Confucian heritage that might be channelled into nationalism. When Wang first visits Nanjing he recalls being taken by his father to visit the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum at Zijin Mountain, and the way in which this visit brought together China’s modern history with the classical tradition he had learned. Nanjing, for Wang’s father, was “not only the new national capital but was also to become the *modern* centre of an ancient Chinese civilization” (p. 139). Wang’s sense of this rationalized Chinese modernity that showed continuity with a cultural past was deeply embedded in his concept of self. He would boast to friends, he tells us, that his birthday was only one day before the date on which the 1911 revolution began in Wuchang; his name itself was romanized according to the system recommended by the Ministry of Education of the national government at the time of his birth. And yet, in Ipoh as a child and then later as an adolescent, he encountered a very different kind of Chineseness. When the Japanese came, his family left Green Town and, after a period in hiding, moved into a shophouse in Ipoh. Here he encountered a world of Chinese topolects—Hakka, Henghua, Hokkien, and Cantonese—

and of ritual religious practice very different from the Confucian rationality of his Mandarin-speaking family. This world, in contrast to that of Green Town, was marked by family and topolect-based social networks in which formal schooling often took a second place to involvement in family businesses or trade. Yet these discrepant notions of Chineseness might also be brought productively together. Later in life, Wang would return to the life of Sun Yat-sen as that of “China’s first modern politician” (Wang 2011b, p. 1) to argue that this modern identity came from a complex combination of factors. Sun was exposed to the Western modernity of an Anglican mission school in Hawai‘i’s culturally plural society, but also, through his brother who hosted him, to kinship-based networks and anti-Manchu secret societies that flourished in the diaspora. It was the total effect of such experiences that enabled him to see beyond the failure of the Chinese imperial system and envision a modernity that might come “out of the work of sifting, rejecting and improving on ... rich cultural traditions” (Wang 2011b, p. 13).

The process of sifting cultural traditions, indeed, might plausibly be thought of as central to Wang’s own life work as a historian. *Home Is Not Here* does not explore that career, but it does suggest some formative elements that would drive Wang’s academic inquiry in his chosen field. First, the twin sense of being both outside and belonging. In Ipoh, being part of society and yet also removed gave him a unique perspective on colonialism and two different nationalisms. In Nanjing, he experienced a sense of homecoming but also of *huaqiao* identity—of being “an ignorant and innocent outsider” (p. 172). Yet this innocence and ignorance paradoxically served as a pathway to knowledge: Wang read Sun Yat-sen’s *Three Principles of the People* not simply as propaganda but as a complex discussion of Chinese modernity that led him into observations about the disconnection between theory and social reality, and on to an interest in the social sciences. Second, a childhood and adolescence marked by avid consumption and later production of literary texts—a process that would continue during his early years to the University of Malaya, in the abortive attempts of Wang and his fellow students

to evolve a distinctly Malayan poetic practice. This interest in the literary would continue, in Wang's interest in the way narrative might be told, and the value of traditional sources that did not conform to cotemporary notions of historicity. At the same time, Wang would look beyond the confines of history as a discipline to the social sciences, expressing "scepticism" about "academic boundaries" between disciplines (Wang 2011a, p. 72). Again, one thinks of the atlas and the library, the analytic and the narrative elements of history, and the importance of interplay between them.

Home Is Not Here is, as Wang himself points out, a record of an individual experience of a world very different from that of the present. The tectonic plates of political geography and governance shifted, and Wang's childhood was marked by constant military conflict, "so much so that I almost viewed war as normal" (p. 15). In the years after the memoir ends, further conflicts would continue to erupt, but others would reach a temporary stasis, locked but under increasing tension. Such a stasis is, perhaps, not simply geopolitical, but also social, exemplified by the "high modern walls of wealth and power" that individuals seek to climb in contemporary societies (p. 177). Much of Wang's work on twentieth-century history, and his many contributions to public debate, have been concerned to show how historical knowledge might ease such tensions and allow slippages to take place. His memoir complements this work by its acts of witnessing in a period now vanished, a fluid time during which Asian nations and selves were being made and re-made.

Review Essay II: Anthony Reid

Wang Gungwu is probably already the most written-about scholar in or of Southeast Asia—at least in the English literature. The reason may be not simply that he is a fine, innovative scholar, writing and speaking authoritatively and fluently (in English and Chinese) on a wide range of topics in the fields of Asian History and International Relations. Nor that he has been one of the most prominent Asian

Humanities scholars to be entrusted with high administrative office—first Asian Dean of the University of Malaya Arts Faculty when he was just 32, Director of ANU’s Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies, President of the Australian Academy of Humanities, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong during its delicate transition, founding Director of NUS’s East Asia Institute, as well as the indispensable chair of many boards and bodies.

What made him of even greater interest to biographers and others, I believe, was as a role model for Asian diaspora success. He faced with apparent serenity the essentially diasporic dilemmas of identity—accommodation or assimilation; national loyalty or multi-national mediation; hybridity or purity; engagement or marginality; identification with (Chinese) parents or with (Australian) children? How far could or should one go in climbing the ladder of success in a place that did not feel fully one’s own?

For many, these dilemmas are the source of acute, if often creative, anxiety. Gungwu never appeared to be torn in this way. His calm poise in inherently tension-filled situations, one of his greatest strengths, came from somewhere else. One of my last initiatives before leaving Singapore in 2009 was to organize a conference on ‘Chineseness’.¹ (Indeed, Chua Beng Huat had told me if I was foolish enough to do that I had better be prepared to leave town the next day.) The other participants were all conflicted; some insisted they were not Chinese but Singaporean, Thai or Australian; some argued whether their double-cultured condition should be labelled bicultural, hybrid, *huaqiao* or *huaren*, a kind of Chinese or a kind of Southeast Asian, or perhaps by a local term such as *peranakan* or *lukjin*. Some emphasized the total reversal between the generations in a single family. Gungwu refused to go there. Speaking personally

1. Published as *Chineseness Unbound: Boundaries, Burdens and Belongings of Chineseness outside China*, ed. Anthony Reid. Special issue, *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3 (October 2009).

without apparent notes, he simply said (if I remember rightly), “My father was Chinese, my mother was Chinese, so I am Chinese. It’s that simple.”

Home Is Not Here opens the window into Gungwu’s diasporic condition in a remarkable way, not by theoretical analysis or labelling, but in telling the stories of how far those parents went to convince him that home was really in an increasingly unrealistic ‘China’ of the ages. As he summarized it in the Introductory chapter, ‘Why tell?’,

despite the kindness she encountered, my mother felt that the sooner we returned to China the better, before her son was totally confused as to who he was.

My father shared her concern that we should go home as soon as possible but ... seemed to have thought that, as long as he could provide me with the core of our cultural heritage, there was no fear of being anything but a proper Chinese. (p. 13)

My first reaction to the book and its title was a touch of disappointment that Gungwu was almost disqualifying himself as the role model of a real Southeast Asian. Did he mean to say that he could never feel at home in the land of his upbringing because he belonged somewhere else? Was the exemplary Chinese *Malaysian* who so influenced me in 1965–68 not the real Gungwu?

A little reflection on this fine and intensely honest memoir, especially at its beginning and end where he tries to make sense of it all, is sufficient to dispel these concerns. He means to convey something deeper, and more revealing about the diasporic condition. The source of the extraordinary cosmopolitanism that makes him appear at ease and at home everywhere, equally curious about French food, Filipino religion or Australian manners, was the very dilemma of his childhood.

All thoughtful adolescents probably feel multiple alienations as they try to sort out who they are. His is beautifully described here, as the sense instilled in him by his beloved parents, both well educated in the Chinese classics, that the family belonged to China and its rich language and culture. This sense was perhaps more undiluted for him than for most of us, just because he was the only child of

two parents who agreed profoundly on this point. (I recall growing up in New Zealand my own mother sometimes spoke of England as ‘home’, but she was hopelessly outnumbered by husband and four children all born in New Zealand.) Yet by the end of the book it is those same beloved parents who accept before Gungwu did that the ‘China’ they loved no longer existed, if indeed it ever existed at all. They left the promised land of Chinese education more quickly than Gungwu himself, who stayed on at Nanjing University for several more months of 1948, after the parents “had to rush off immediately” in February after his father had taught only one semester in his Nanjing High School (p. 186).

Not only was Gungwu deprived of siblings with whom to share the generational negotiation, he also felt himself deprived of a shared experience with the local Chinese. His father was almost unique in having a Chinese university degree, and speaking only *guoyu* rather than any of the southern dialects prevalent in Ipoh. Gungwu himself could not avoid learning Cantonese and other dialects from his nanny and his classmates, but his parents had no such interest. Their only Chinese friends in town were fellow *guoyu* speakers from Shanghai. The Chinese and Buddhist temples that mediated between universal, national and local domains for most of the Ipoh population were regarded with something like disdain. “My parents made clear to me that they regarded all religious activity as superstitions that had nothing to do with us” (p. 25). Confucianism, on the other hand, was both cultural patrimony and duty, requiring a kind of paternalistic distance from the populace for whose education the elder Wang was responsible.

The profound disruption of the Japanese occupation was less traumatic for the Wangs than for some, but no less alienating for an adolescent Wang Gungwu. The Ipoh Chinese were spared the Japanese atrocities of other areas, perhaps because the brother-in-law of the leader of the Japan-backed Nanjing regime, Wang Chingwei, lived in the town. Yet there was enough disruption and trauma for a young life—fleeing the invasion in Ipoh’s limestone caves; shocked by an unexpected beheading; pulled out of first his English school,

then the Chinese school his father thought too subject to Japanese propaganda. He was tutored privately in the Chinese classics by his father for most of the war. Nevertheless, he was able to hone his English skills by devouring the novels in a collection of captured private libraries of the English in Perak, the custody of which was an agreeable sinecure given his father by a sympathetic Japanese officer.

The extraordinary sequence of disruptions of his young life, from colonial Malaya, to Japanese military rule, to post-war nationalism and communism, to Nanjing University in 1948 at the height of China's civil war, somehow produced concerned (Confucian?) detachment rather than cynicism or cultural confusion. While he was busy learning much from books, he had experienced the rival worlds of nationalism, fascism, communism, militarism all at first hand, none of them having much connection to the Chinese literature his father had instilled in him. Unsurprisingly, friends and teachers back at the infant University of Malaya in 1949–52 found him astonishingly mature. As he put it, "Ipoh had taught me that nothing was permanent, that change was always around the corner, and that people could easily be cut off from their roots" (p. 207).

Many will read this autobiography in different ways, to discover roots of whichever image of Wang Gungwu they favour. For me, the interpretation of Rachel Leow is congenial. "Faced with the unknowability of his own home, he learned to take refuge in the world.... He arrived at a capacious world-mindedness in which 'all places and people had become knowable'. For Wang, home became, in that sense, everywhere" (Leow 2019, p. 7).

Review Essay III: Khoo Boo Teik

Wang Gungwu's scholarly association with China is so firmly established and illustrious it needs no recitation here, at any rate not by a reader who is not a China specialist. But Gungwu's personal association with China in his youth is so arresting that it deserves

comment, a comment on his memoir as memoir.² Even then, China only occupies about half the story of Gungwu's first nineteen years, the span of the memoir under review. Colonial Malaya, or more precisely, the town of Ipoh, supplies the other, no less intriguing, half.

Gungwu tells us where he was born (Surabaya, Netherlands East Indies), what made for his childhood (variegated experiences), and how his parents kept busy (working, moving, surviving, and keeping faith) before and after they had him, their only child.³ Nothing in the memoir bores its author.⁴ He writes of personal things, originally "the story of growing up in Ipoh" (p. 1) for his children. And his parents have a voice here because of a splendid resource—the mother's account of family history and life, written in Chinese and addressed to her son—and an equally splendid idea of weaving her account into the memoir. Each of the first three parts of the book closes with a segment of the mother's writing translated by Gungwu himself.

Gungwu's father, Wang Fuwen, mastered the Confucian classics and was accomplished in classical poetry and calligraphy. He studied

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2. I use his given names in the way most Chinese would use such to refer to a third person, not to claim a personal familiarity, although he graciously let me interview him twenty-four years ago and we later met briefly at conferences.
 3. I could not think of a comparable memoir of young life when I set out to review this book. Instead I fortuitously recalled J.D. Salinger's classic novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London, Penguin, 2010), and thought its protagonist, Holden Caulfield, could serve as a counterpoint to Gungwu's project. Here is the fictional Caulfield's defiantly anti-autobiographical declamation in the opening paragraph of the novel: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them" (p. 1).
 4. Unlike Caulfield, above.

Foreign Languages and Education at the National Southeastern University, Nanjing. He chose English Literature “because he felt he knew enough of Chinese literature and needed to improve his understanding of the world” (p. 11). Encouraged to teach the children of Southeast Asia’s ‘Overseas Chinese’, he travelled to teach first in Malacca and then in Surabaya. From the latter he went to Ipoh in 1932, recruited by the Perak Education Department to be an Inspector of Chinese Schools in the state. Thereafter his career was almost entirely bound up with Chinese education in Malaya.⁵ Gungwu’s mother, Ding Yan, came from a business family that was, she often regretted, past its once considerable fortune and prestige. Taught to read and write at home, she was “well trained to appreciate prose literature”, and proud of “her beautiful hand in writing the standard *xiaokai* calligraphy” (p. 7). She told her son endless stories, regarding it her duty to teach him as much as she could of family and China because he was growing up in a foreign land and because they would eventually return to China.

In his boyhood Gungwu attended English school, while at home his father taught him Chinese language and classics. He first set foot in China in 1936 when the father took the family with him on home leave. It was not yet the time to remain in China because “war between China and Japan was imminent and my grandparents asked my father to keep his good job in Ipoh so that he could continue to send money home when the war began” (p. 23). The father resumed his work in Ipoh where the family stayed before. During and after the Japanese occupation of Malaya they remained in Ipoh.

In 1947, with the war over and Gungwu having completed school, the family returned to China, determined this time to stay. The father started to teach at the High School in Nanjing, established by his alma mater, renamed the National Central University. Gungwu passed a qualifying examination and entered the same university. But his father’s poor health, brought about by harshly cold weather, compelled

5. Even past the time of Gungwu’s memoir.

his parents to leave in February 1948 for Ipoh once more. Gungwu remained in Nanjing but was “recalled”, his mother explained, when “Xuzhou fell [and] we knew the situation was grim” (p. 189). He wanted to “wait for the outcome of the war” but his parents “feared that Nanjing would become a last ditch battleground” (p. 190). And, so, he reluctantly set sail for Singapore in December, arriving in Ipoh “with joy and sadness” (p. 196) in the last week of 1948. He held temporary teaching jobs before entering the new University of Malaya in Singapore.

Thus ends a poignant memoir, written in the methodical manner of a practised historian, rendered in the measured tone that perhaps only an 88-year-old man can muster to reflect upon his formative years.⁶

A short review cannot do justice to the rich detail of the book. Naturally their own curiosities will lead readers to be more enthralled by some sections than others. For example, Gungwu’s reminiscences of university in Nanjing convey a Malayan student’s exciting meetings with teachers (pp. 158, 160–62, 165–67) and classmates (pp. 173–82). Gungwu found their knowledge of language, literature and philosophy, Chinese and Western, to have a depth he had not plumbed before. On the one hand, his wartime accounts of “nomadic living” (pp. 74–76), friendships made in boyhood innocence (pp. 77, 82), and exploration of Ipoh town (pp. 83–85) provide insights into the probably neglected subject of urban teenage life in occupied Malaya. On the other hand, his mother’s anxious attention to the quotidian—household budget, housing, rents, food prices, and family wellbeing—and news and yet more news on China gives a view of colonial urban salaried life rather removed from the elite society portrayed in some roughly contemporaneous autobiographies.

For this reviewer, how China and Ipoh coevolved, as it were, in the young Gungwu’s heart, mind, and, shall we say, soul holds the key to a subtle appreciation of *Home Is Not Here*.

6. Gungwu was 88 when the book was published.

Although they seemed separate, each could not do without the other. China was aspiration transcending realization: the dream home never acquired reality. Ipoh was actuality trailing expectation: the lived physical home never approached the ideal. In Ipoh, a vision of China was nurtured with the aid of home instruction by both parents. In China, an experience of Ipoh, grounded in English schooling and voracious personal reading, was tested. To learn, as in entering a university, Gungwu had to move to China. To move, as in going to China, he had to learn in Ipoh. Between the one and the other, movement and learning came together.

Protracted preparation to return permanently to China culminated in an abrupt retreat to Ipoh. As the mother related to the son on the eve on her departure in 1948:

With the country in such a state, the family so poor, with an elderly father and a young son, the civil war tense and his employment prospects uncertain, your father recognized that he had no choice other than to leave. He told you that if the university moved, you should follow it wherever it went, but you can imagine the pain in his heart. (p. 186)

In the event, Gungwu left China (1948) and Ipoh (1949), never to make either his permanent home. Seen from the historical imaginary and experiences of the 'Overseas Chinese' of Malaya, can it be said, one wonders, that he underwent a double sojourn, long but unsettled in Ipoh, brief but intense in China?

There is, finally, the matter of the title of the book, which has to raise the question, 'If home is not here, then where is it?' The memoir lays out the two obvious candidates for 'Home' in an emotionally complex yet non-committal way. An outsider cannot find it easy to decide which exactly qualifies.

Must 'Home' be China, the birthplace of the parents, the seat of ancestral families they helped with small remittances, the country to which it was assumed Wang Fuwen's family would return, and even the locus of Gungwu's incipient sense of patriotism (pp. 41–42, 48–49)? Or should it be Ipoh, the residence of the family for over

fifteen years, the terrain of the young boy's socialization, and the vantage point from which he glimpsed empire and the world?

Or is 'Home' a bewildering composite of things surreal and material? First, there is the parents' loyalty to their 'true homeland'. It is now captured by the mother's memory of the old families, now expressed as the father's devotion to classical Confucian learning. Second, there is the physicality of colonial Ipoh. Gungwu roamed the town in 1942, his "year of adjustment ... [and] self-discovery" (p. 83), and encountered 'other Chinese'. Their alien dialects (Henghua, Hakka and Cantonese), petty trades, mundane occupations, and Buddhist and Daoist observances "did not conform to the Chineseness described in the great classical writings" (p. 83). Third, there is an intellectual space within which he "no longer felt burdened by being located in any single space" (p. 50). Gungwu created and widened it as he mastered Chinese and English, pored over a world atlas (p. 50), chanced upon a trove of English books (pp. 86–89), followed Allied broadcasts with a hidden shortwave radio (pp. 90–92), and had a post-war "frenzy of indiscriminate film going" (p. 99). There is even the actuality of studying in Nanjing after the war only to transfer on the eve of revolution to university in Singapore.

In the several worlds of a teenager who once wondered if he could be called an "Ipoh Chinese" (p. 105), in which movement and learning were inseparable, can many homes cohere as a single Home?

An Excerpt from Wang Gungwu's *Home Is Not Here*

[A note from Wang Gungwu: I am impressed how carefully the three reviewers have read the book and how much they have covered. After considering what they have written, it became clear to me that I have little of consequence to add or question or elaborate; there is also the danger of appearing to go over much of the same ground. Instead, I should focus on writing a "continuation" and get on with telling more of my story after 1948. This is what I am

now doing. I shall leave the reviews to stand and “answer” with the next chapter.]

My nine months in Ipoh passed quickly because so much was happening around me and in China I was gradually distancing myself from the dramatic events in China and concentrating on getting to know the new Malaya that the British were hoping to establish with the Malay leaders. For the first half of 1949, trying to understand what the Emergency was doing to the local Chinese community that I belonged to was uppermost in my mind.

I was less innocent than I had been in 1945–46 when the Anti-Japanese Army came out of the jungle and supporters of the MCP joined trade unions to organize strikes against their employers. Now the MNLA was fighting a guerrilla war inspired by the successes of the People’s Liberation Army in China. During my months in Nanjing, I had learnt about a guerrilla strategy that led to the growth of a formidable army when the CCP successfully persuaded many in the peasant and working classes to join them to fight against those who supported a corrupt and incompetent government. I had also experienced the demoralizing effects of runaway inflation and the financial fiasco of August 1948, when the new currency introduced was a devastating failure.

In addition, my exposure to the compulsory course on Sun Yat-sen’s *Three Principles of the People*, however poorly I understood the book, had introduced me to the vocabulary of politics, something that my father and the education I received in school had carefully avoided. Taken together with what I saw around me in China, that course made me aware that abuses could negate idealistic calls for social progress. I had also become more sensitive to propaganda. The Three Principles course alerted me to the power of ideas behind words like nationalism, democracy and people’s livelihood, but it also warned me of the extreme measures that political activists were prepared to take to capture power, and seek more and more of it.

One of the first things my parents told me was that as a result of the Emergency, political pressure was being applied to Chinese

schools throughout Malaya. As inspector of Chinese schools, my father's responsibility was to assure the schools that they would receive government support if they kept strictly to their educational goals and provided quality teaching. My father was also very keen on providing teacher training to ensure that there would be enough teachers to meet the growing demand. He regularly visited the schools around the state to talk to principals and teachers as well as key members of school boards. Perak was where the MCP secretary-general, Chin Peng, had his headquarters and the party there had many supporters. With frequent reports of Chinese community leaders being killed, my mother feared for my father's life when he visited smaller primary schools in remote rural areas. He occasionally had to spend the night in a nearby town and my mother had sleepless nights whenever he made such trips. I offered to accompany him. My parents did not agree, but I insisted and did go with my father on two occasions.

The first was when we went south to three schools near Bidor and had to spend the night in Tapah. I remember visiting Chenderiang, a small town off the beaten track, where I was taken to see a beautiful waterfall near the local primary school. There were reports of communist activity and we had to go through several roadblocks manned by British soldiers and Malay policemen. My father insisted on traveling unarmed and unescorted because he was convinced it was safer for him that way. The trip was uneventful. My father called on all those responsible for the schools and we never felt unsafe.

Some months later, we made a second trip, this time to Lenggong and Grik in the north. My father planned to visit several schools, including one in the town of Kroh (now named Pengkalan Hulu) bordering Thailand and the state of Kedah. We were told when we got to Grik that the road beyond the town was not secure, so we did not go any further and spent the night in Grik. It was a long journey, and most of the way, apart from a few rubber estates, it was all jungle. I was surprised so many Chinese lived there. The community was mainly from Guangxi province in China, and had fought the Japanese during the occupation, not with the communists

but as patriots in support of the Guomindang government. By 1949, the MNLA had moved some of their units close to the Thai border and these local Chinese decided to help the Malayan forces fight against them. My father told me that this was the first time that a Chinese school inspector had visited Grik after the war and he was impressed with the dedication of the teachers, and with how strongly the community supported the school.

The two trips made me realize how large Perak was. But, more than that, they gave me a sense of belonging to it that I had not felt before. Everywhere the mix of peoples was similar to what I had grown up with before leaving for China. No one thought I was foreign or strange. In fact, the only thing unusual about me was that I had studied in a university in China and circumstances had forced me to return. When people learnt that, they made clear that they were aware that China was on the cusp of historic change, and that their future home was likely to be Malaya.

One other matter impressed me. During both trips, we met people who spoke of the help they were getting from the newly formed Malayan Chinese Association. The MCA was formally established in February 1949, soon after I returned, but the event had not registered in my mind. I had thought it consisted mainly of businessmen seeking to help the government defend their interests. Because many of them were identified as Guomindang sympathizers, they were targeted as enemies by the communists. In the towns we visited, I found that MCA members were leaders of the local community and were generous supporters of the local schools. I began then to pay more attention to what the party was doing.

I particularly recall the afternoon when my father attended a Perak Chinese Chamber of Commerce reception for the MCA president, Dato' Tan Cheng Lock. It was in April 1949, two months after the MCA was formed, and communist agents threw a hand grenade at Tan Cheng Lock while he was addressing the gathering. Although badly wounded, he survived the attack. My father was lucky. His seat was near the blast but he was not hurt. That event had made my mother even more nervous about my father's travels outside of

Ipoh. After our two trips south and north of Perak, I became more aware of the important role the MCA was playing in lobbying for the *jus soli* principle to be applied to everyone in the country so that more local Chinese could be given federal citizenship. The political stakes were not only about defeating the communists but also about the future of Chinese who wished to make Malaya their home. This added an extra dimension to my understanding of the difficult road ahead for the new country.

My father had looked out for ways that I could continue my studies after I returned to Malaya, and he saw no alternative for me other than to study locally. Being in education, he knew of the British plans to merge the two colleges in Singapore into a new university. It also occurred to him that I might stand a better chance of studying there if I became a federal citizen of the new state. I was qualified to apply but it would mean giving up my Chinese citizenship. I was surprised to see how carefully he had thought this through and how willing he was for me to turn away from a China that he seemed to have mentally written off. He never explained what made him urge me to take this step and what made him act so politically, something I had never seen him do before. I could only guess that his exposure to the threats by the MNLA against his beloved Chinese schools in Perak, added to his disillusionment with the corrupt Nationalist government in China, had hardened his resolve to act that way.

I was admitted to the University of Malaya before I finally received my federal citizenship, on 16th September, three weeks before I set off for Singapore. By that time, I had been preparing for the new university. I had learnt some elementary French before going to Nanjing; there, in the Department of Foreign Languages, I took German as my second foreign language. My father thought that, for a British university, it would be advantageous for me to know Latin. He found someone who could teach me Latin and

encouraged me to improve my French and German. In between my teaching jobs, this kept me busy.

As it turned out, the university in Singapore assumed that in a plural society most of their students would have at least another language and did not require its students to learn a second language. So I gave up studying Latin but continued for a while to keep up my reading knowledge of French and German. Eventually, I realized that my bazaar Malay was inadequate and concentrated on the national language so that I could read its literature, not least the Generation 1945 writings coming out of Indonesia.

When I left for Singapore in October 1949, I did not foresee that I would never live in Ipoh again. I returned once for a brief stay during the summer vacation, but my father was transferred to Kuala Lumpur soon afterwards. It was many years later, in the 1960s, before I visited Ipoh, and only for a day. I found that almost all my friends were working elsewhere. Walking the streets in New Town that day brought memories of how insecure and confused I was when I was growing up there because I was always preparing to go somewhere else. Ipoh had taught me that nothing was permanent, that change was always around the corner and that people could easily be cut off from their roots.

In 1949, I spent nine months reassessing my future after seeing all our family plans for China come to nothing. That led me to weigh the sense of heritage and duty that I was brought up with against the desire for my mind to be open and free. My brief encounters with an ancient civilization trying to modernize did not give me confidence in what China had become. I also realized that the slogans about race and nation that were being broadcast in Malaya had little appeal. What I knew I had was the love of my parents. They had given me my most precious possession, the urge to study. I longed to make new friends and hoped to earn trust and respect wherever I was destined to go. For that, I knew that order and harmony was best and not violence and war.

The week before I left to study in Singapore, on October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's

Republic of China. I was happy that China had been reunified and a new China was being born, but sad that I would not be part of what would happen there. I was sure I would always be Chinese at heart and admiring of the China that my parents and my Nanjing teachers and fellow students had taught me to love. I also wanted the best for the new China that the people in China have longed for during the past half-century. I had lived nearly seventeen years in a Malay state and eighteen months in China. Yet it seemed sometimes that I cared for both in equal parts. The pull of a plural society was great, but the cultural attraction of China in all its dimensions was deep and irresistible. I was not to appreciate until much later that there was no conflict there and that the co-existence of the two had become normal for me. And then I would recall how I struggled in 1949 to adjust to the new Malaya and the new China and wonder if my life had really begun anew during that year in Ipoh.

(Reprinted with permission from “Starting Over” [pp. 203–8] of Wang Gungwu’s *Home Is Not Here*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018.)

Philip Holden is an independent scholar currently residing in Vancouver, Canada; email: philip@pulaaujong.org.

Anthony Reid is Emeritus Professor, School of Culture, History and Language, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia; email: anthony.reid@anu.edu.au.

Khoo Boo Teik is Professor and Director, State Building and Economic Development Program, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, 7-22-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-8677, Japan; email: khoo-bt@grips.ac.jp.

Wang Gungwu is University Professor of the National University of Singapore; his office is at the East Asian Institute, Bukit Timah Campus, 469 Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259756; email: eaiw@nus.edu.sg.

SUGGESTED CITATION STYLE

Holden, Philip, Anthony Reid, and Khoo Boo Teik. “SOJOURN Symposium on Home Is Not Here”. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 1 (2020): 138–59.

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