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SOJOURN Symposium

***Home is Where We Are* by Wang Gungwu with Margaret Wang. NUS Press, 2021.**

Review essays by Hui Yew-Foong and Huang Jianli, with a reply from Wang Gungwu.

Keywords: Malaya, overseas Chinese, identity, history, memoir.

Review Essay I: Hui Yew-Foong

It is not common for academics to write their autobiographies; perhaps because not many people would be interested. In this case, however, the autobiography of Wang Gungwu, erudite scholar and prominent academic leader, has resonance beyond the walls of academia.

My impetus for reading Wang's autobiography was initially tied to an interest in how his contributions to the field of Chinese overseas studies were related to the larger historical environment that he found himself in. The book, however, offers more than that, since Wang's career spans the study of the histories of China and Southeast Asia as well. In addition, this second volume of his autobiography needs to be read together with the first volume—*Home is Not Here*—which relates the formative events of Wang's life up to his nineteenth year. As Wang himself emphasized in the book, we always have to dig a little deeper into the past in order to understand the period and events that we are interested in.

This second volume picks up the story with Wang's enrolment at the newly formed University of Malaya in Singapore. He had majored in Literature, History and Economics, and was also active in student life, having reprised the role of president of the Student

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Union in his third year and co-founded the University Socialist Club. It was also then that he met his wife, Margaret, whose narrative interlaced with Wang's. Wang eventually chose to do his honours in History, and as we all know, settled on History as his vocation.

What stands out in this story of a young Wang is not just how a nascent historian was born, but more importantly, how he was trying to understand and engage with history. His formative years were disrupted by war: the anti-Japanese war in China that prevented his family from going home to China; the Japanese Occupation that interrupted his secondary education; and the Chinese civil war that truncated his university education in Nanjing. Back in Malaya, he had to deal with decolonization and its implications. Brought up as an overseas Chinese who saw China as home, albeit an imagined home, what did it mean to become Malayan/Malaysian, a citizen of a new country? Wang was not content to be a passive bystander as history unfolded; he had a constant thirst for knowledge to understand what was happening, and to play a part in it, where possible.

He had kept up with Malayan politics while pursuing his doctoral studies in London, concerned with what decolonization and independence meant. Back in Singapore to take up a position with the History Department at the University of Malaya, he met with friends (Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam) to learn more about Singapore politics and its future in Malaya. In addition, Wang's curiosity extended to what was happening in the region, especially the revolutions, and he readily took up a commission by *Asia Magazine* in Hong Kong to visit India, Vietnam and Japan and report on their communist movements. He was an atypical historian, querying not only the past but also the present, and finding his answers not only in archives but also through interviews. His was an "age in motion", to borrow historian Takashi Shiraishi's term (1990), and Wang was keeping up every step of the way.

Committed to his new country, Wang made the bold move of joining the new University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital. As part of the pioneering batch of faculty in the History Department, Wang was involved in setting the agenda for

studying Malayan history. It was also at that time that his work on Malayan Chinese became widely recognized. Later, as department chair and professor, Wang was to attract a critical mass of scholars focusing on Malayan and Southeast Asian history to the department, and also to launch the careers of a new generation of Malayan/Malaysian historians. This gravitation towards Malayan/Malaysian and Southeast Asian history was based on recognition of the historical position of the Department of History at the University of Malaya, the flagship university of a new nation in Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, Wang had kept an eye on developments in China as he was, after all, a historian of China. And the development that captured the attention of almost every China historian in the 1960s was the unfolding of the Cultural Revolution under Mao. Having diverted some of his attention to Malayan history since finishing his doctoral studies, and having limited access to materials from China in Malaysia, Wang felt that he was ill-equipped to continue studying Chinese history, let alone understand pertinent current events such as the iconoclastic Cultural Revolution. Faced with a crossroads where his intellectual pursuits and career were concerned, Wang stuck to his chosen field of Chinese history, and left the University of Malaya for the Australian National University in 1968.

We know that Wang later became vice chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, and thereafter went on to helm the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore. Having lived and worked in different countries at different times, it is inevitable that the question of home crops up, and Wang's reflections on the notion are evident in the titles of the two volumes. From *Home is Not Here* to *Home is Where We Are*, the concept of home evolved from a static place-centred one to a more dynamic people-centred one. The first volume foregrounded the notion of China as 'home' because that was where his ancestors originated, and also where his family and roots extended. In the second volume, 'home' followed his peripatetic exploits.

This shifting notion of home, and the corresponding shift in Chinese identity from *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese or Chinese

sojourner) to *huaren* (Chinese overseas) and *huayi* (ethnic Chinese) were changes in orientation that many Chinese in decolonizing Southeast Asia had to grapple with. Moreover, how one related to this reorientation was dependent on how recently one's family had migrated and which country one was situated in, among other factors.

It is clear that the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were complex and not at all homogenous. Wang was able to access and assess this complexity, I suspect, because he was not a typical *huaqiao*, but a non-Southern Chinese who nevertheless had the opportunity to blend in with the Cantonese, Hakka and Henghua during his childhood and adolescence in Ipoh. Although he was given a Confucian upbringing, Wang had met Chinese who "did not conform to the Chineseness described in the great classical writings", which exposed him to "different kinds of plurality, to social layers and hierarchies unimaginable" (Wang 2018, p. 83).

There were many other traces in the two volumes that indicated how Wang's experiences might have influenced his intellectual pursuits. What is also clear is how Wang drew on history to understand the present. By filling in gaps on what we know about Chinese, Southeast Asian and Chinese overseas history, Wang's work will continue to be drawn on to understand China's most recent rise and engagement with the world, as well as new waves of Chinese migration.

Review Essay II: Huang Jianli

Published three years after *Home is Not Here*, which recalls the initial nineteen years of his life up to the time when he returned from China, torn by civil war, to Ipoh in 1949, this second volume of Wang Gungwu's memoirs takes us to August 1968 when he relocated his career base from the University of Malaya to the Australian National University. The two publications are closely tied together by the theme of 'home': the earlier one about the failure of having China as home, as favoured by his parents; the latter on his happy family building with Margaret Wang, inclusive of having "to move [their] homes" as many as seven times during the first

twelve years of their marriage (p. 121). Apart from book titling, the theme is aptly reinforced by the narrative device of incorporating his mother's and wife's personal voices and accounts into large portions of the narrative.

'Home'—in terms of rootedness—also draws our attention to Wang's high level of 'Malayan consciousness', which in turn helps us to appreciate his identity transformation: from being born as a member of the Overseas Chinese sojourning diaspora to becoming a passionate young Malayan during the difficult times of British decolonization, Cold War and nation-building. Ipoh, the small town in pre-independent Malaya where he spent his formative years, can be identified as the primary source of that consciousness and identity formation. Although his ethnic migratory and minority dialect background—together with a relatively isolated family upbringing—initially made him "one of the least equipped to be Malayan" (p. 7), Malaya began to loom exceptionally large since he entered the University of Malaya in 1949.

As an undergraduate and in line with his early belief that "home was tied to a country, in this case one that was yet to be born" (p. 2), he plunged fervently into the cause of Malayan nation-building, advocating Malay as the national language and promoting a Malayan genre of national literature. Upon obtaining his doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and returning in August 1957 to be an assistant lecturer in the University of Malaya, then located in Singapore, he voted with his feet the next year by moving to the new campus in Kuala Lumpur, which soon became a separate national university of independent Malaya. His strong Malayan consciousness had fired up a desire to help "build a new campus that could shape the new nation" (p. 158). Indeed, in the opening paragraph, Wang summarizes the entire period covered in this second memoir as simply one in which he had "spent the next twenty years of [his] life wondering how [he] could make Malaya [his] country" (p. 5). The Malayan closure came only when he left for Australia, just months before the outbreak of racial riots on 13 May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, with "emergency turnarounds

in national policies [making] it less attractive for [him] to return" (pp. 212–13).

The memoir also touches on other notable political dimensions to Wang's academic life story as his commitment to the Malayan (and later Malaysian) nation-building project drew him into the vortex of several political storms. He describes some of them with interesting detail, but others are handled with ambivalence and distance. On the sensitive topics of his overall ideological leaning and personal inclination towards political activism, there is palpable caution in his narrative and an underlying tension of 'to be' or 'not to be'. On one hand, there are early notes about how his parents, by 1949, had conveyed to him that "the local Chinese community should stay out of China's politics" and did not want him "to be drawn to one side [Taiwan] or the other [Beijing]" (pp. 1, 6). There are also unequivocal declarations that he "was not interested in anything overtly political"; "[his] main interest was literary and that [he] was not inclined to activism" (pp. 12–13); and "[he] was personally not inclined to political partisanship" (p. 163). He also writes about how the popular literary phrase "I will not serve" had haunted and turned him "away from any career in public service" and had led him "to look for a greater share of freedom, away from the political realm" (pp. 28–29).

On the other hand, he readily consented to becoming the president of the University of Malaya Student Union with its anti-colonial undertones; the editor of its union newspaper *Malayan Undergrad* with a literary section that "pushed at the edges of the publishable" (pp. 26, 29); and the founding president of the University Socialist Club as the first on-campus political society when he "became convinced that it was political power that determined most things in life" (pp. 52–53, 59). Also, he later frequently visited Malaya Hall in London for exciting political discussions on Malaya, Singapore and Maoist China (pp. 120–21). Along the way, he had numerous close student friends who were arrested by the British colonial police's Special Branch for alleged involvement in the Anti-British League and the Malayan Communist Party. Although he claims "it was

a measure of [his] innocence that [he] was totally surprised", he confesses that these British detentions and banishments had made those "who were not born in Malaya all the more cautious about taking part in political activities" (p. 12) and that "[he] had to be careful of what [he] said and did" (p. 17). The central puzzle as to why the British security authorities had never arrested Wang himself surfaces, intriguingly, with no definite answers, on several pages of the memoir, including Margaret's tantalizing account of how his special cosy relationship with Richard Corridan as the Head of Special Branch might have protected him (pp. 12–14, 19, 86).

The most critical violent political firestorm in which he was directly involved as a leading academic was his chairing of the controversial 1965 review committee on Nanyang University. While still studying in London, he learned about the launching of this new university. He "certainly looked forward to being associated with it" on his return, but "little did [he] know that one day [he] would be entangled in the explosive politics" (pp. 120–21). His review report provoked major student protests, harsh government responses and a fiery public backlash. Reflecting on the unexpected ferocity of attacks, he defends the committee as having been "careful to concentrate on what was educationally appropriate ... and avoided partisan politics altogether" (p. 239). He laments the way in which the Chinese press represented him:

> I was disappointed by the extreme reactions, not least by parts of the Chinese press that singled me out for attack as someone who had set out to destroy Chinese education, something totally alien to my thinking.... I can understand disagreement and even the rejection of our recommendations but the practice of character assassination was both demeaning and hurtful. (p. 240)

Indeed, during much of the 1960s, Wang's political and academic lives intertwined with the swirling eddies of communal politics in Malaya (and later Malaysia). Wang confesses that he "had some kind of built-in resistance to ethnicity-based communal parties. These were exclusive in ways that [he] thought could not help to develop a sense of nationhood" (p. 201). Therefore, after the idea of

a 'Greater Malaysia' was floated in May 1961 to merge Malaya with Singapore and three northern Borneo states, Wang, as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, quickly mobilized a large cohort of his colleagues to produce a special survey volume to introduce new Malaysia as a hopeful 'multiracial nationalism' to the wider audience. But this 1964 publication was delayed a year by turbulent changing politics and then quickly undermined by Singapore's shocking separation from Malaysia the following year. Wang reflects: "I realized that I had been eager ever since 1949 to find my place as a citizen of Malaya" and "I had tried to do too much.… I have painful memories of the 15 months I spent on the book and promised myself not to get so involved in contemporary affairs in future" (pp. 203–7).

Nonetheless, Wang plunged into yet another political involvement on the eve of his departure for Australia in 1968. It was an act of expressing his "personal distaste for the ethnic-based politics" and of flagging his belief that "communalist power sharing could not be in the interest of nation-building in the longer run" (p. 264). He assisted his close friend, Tan Chee Khoon, in drafting the political manifesto and party constitution. He attended the public launch of Gerakan (Malaysian People's Movement Party)—a new party that aspired but eventually failed to break the ethnic-based political framework of Malaysian politics. Today, its official party website still lists Wang as one of its six founders. Admitting that he is "reluctant to tell this story", Wang reckons that it is "both a story of friendship as well as of openly showing [his] political sympathies in the face of the social realities", and claims that, "however, peripherally, it was the only time [he] found [him]self publicly involved in partisan Malaysian politics" (pp. 264–65).

Another discernible thread running through the memoir is his 'academic strategizing', which explains several key moments in shaping Wang's learning process and illustrious academic career—with the attainment of full professorship by 1963 before his thirty-third birthday and an ever-growing high international reputation for his scholarship. It appears that Wang's career trajectory was seldom accidental and often involved a series of calculated decisions after

some agonizing mental struggles. It was also less dependent on senior faculty or collegial mentoring and much more on the "self-taught apprenticeship" of self-reflexive struggles in adjusting to evolving personal strengths, weaknesses and aspirations (pp. 22–23, 88, 107). He worked methodically towards an academic life once he realized that the university campus and its rich library resources "could be the ideal place where [he] could get [his] share of freedom" (p. 95). In terms of subject discipline, his first love was Literature, which served as his entry portal into a Malayan identity via local writings and his own explorations into poetic verse-making. But after a painful struggle, it was History that eventually triumphed when he realized his genuine interest in historical questions about "conditions that governed the lives of people and how events unfolded in response to changes over time", as well as interrogations about origin and how they could illuminate the present (pp. 93–95). He thus eventually became anchored as a historian. Nevertheless, his continued academic borrowings from the social sciences and inclination towards interdisciplinary approaches created occasional ambiguous receptions about him being a "sinologist" or "some kind of social scientist", thus giving "[him] a strange in-between feeling that remained with [him] for years" (p. 196).

Another related strategic struggle was over which particular field of history to position himself in. Much of his work by 1965 as dean and head in the Malaya University were on Malaysian and Southeast Asian history, but he was mainly known as a 'China historian' in Europe and the United States. Hence, he agonized over whether his "priority [should] be the study of China or … Malaysian and Southeast Asian history" (pp. 234–35). The memoir registers 1967 as his turning point, after attending three consecutive conferences in Chicago, Ann Arbor and South Korea relating to Chinese history and politics and which were held amidst the ongoing tumultuous Cultural Revolution in China. It dawned upon him that he "was not keeping up with the best work being done", which led him "to confirm [his] wish to get back to dedicated research on China and go to where [he] could have access to all publications about China"

(pp. 254, 258). Being painfully reminded of "how much [he] did not know", and "after several sleepless nights … [he] rang home [from Seoul] to Margaret to share [his] feelings"; he could not wait to tell her that "it was Chinese history that [he] wanted to spend [his] life doing" (p. 263). On the phone, they made the decision to leave the University of Malaya and for him to take up a professorship at the Australian National University (pp. 261, 263). His 1968 departure for Canberra and the subsequent 1986 relocation to the University of Hong Kong signalled his academic strategy of placing primacy on the study of modern Chinese history. In the end, however, both Australia and Hong Kong still provided him with the intellectual space to retain considerable attention beyond China. In retrospect, considering his 1996 return and lengthy stay in Singapore, along with his portfolio of publications, one of the keys to his academic success was the ability to straddle strategically the two domains of China and Southeast Asia and to probe the intricate ever-changing interconnections between them.

One niche of those interconnections, for which Wang became very well-known, is the sub-field of Chinese overseas studies. But here the degree of deliberate academic strategizing is more ambiguous. His account suggests that it was after attending an impactful 1950 Manila undergraduate workshop for young writers that he was awakened to not only the larger Southeast Asian world beyond Malaya but also its diverse Chinese overseas communities in their respective post-WWII nation-building processes. Later, as a young faculty member, he was conscious that this area was receiving heightened global scholarly attention and incentivized funding during the 1950s and 1960s because of the raging Cold War. He became a beneficiary of this wave of interest via a CIA-linked Asia Foundation sponsorship of a four-month 1960 tour of fourteen United States universities to observe how they were responding to the changes in post-war Asia (pp. 31–35, 153–56, 171, 174–75, 191). Margaret's version, however, suggests it was more accidental—believing that it was Wang's 1961 full-year Rockefeller Research Fellowship in London working on early Ming dynasty relations with Southeast

Asia that had initiated "a new field for him but was the beginning of what he was to become very well known for—his work on the Chinese overseas. In the end he fell into this field of study almost accidentally" (p. 199).

The degree of openness and personal intimacy of memoirs is often carefully calibrated by their authors. The deepest moment of penetration into Wang's non-academic life is arguably his brief exposition on "that elusive something called love" (p. 89), in the context of his relationship with Margaret. In the chapter titled "Learn to Share", he confesses that prior to meeting Margaret in the university he had encountered the word 'love' only as a Chinese and English literary cliché and had used it mainly to express a casual preference for things he enjoyed. But thereafter,

> the word gained a focus.... I became shy about using it.... We met in early 1951, married at the end of 1955, and the word took clearer shape in our lives through the years. I no longer hesitate to say that I have loved and know how I have been loved, but I must admit that the word still creates some turbulence in me from time to time. (p. 84)

The epilogue-like ending of this second memoir touches only briefly on his subsequent stints with the Australian National University, the University of Hong Kong and the National University of Singapore; all of which are equally impactful if not more so in terms of education, academic administration and larger societal politics. In an interview, the nonagenarian Wang has hinted at a serialization—each volume dealing with about twenty years of his life. Hence, there are heightened expectations that there will be more forthcoming revelations and lessons to be learned from the interesting personal life stories of this leading intellectual.

Author's Response: Wang Gungwu

Home and Politics

I thank the reviewers for their close and sympathetic reading of our book. The idea that *Home is Where We Are* is the second volume of a series that could be several volumes of memoirs is intriguing.

I agree with the point about why academics rarely write their autobiographies. Academics are primarily concerned with teaching and research and few of us do little else that would be of interest to the reading public. The two observations above remind me to say that I did not set out to write my memoirs or autobiography.

Home Story

My late wife Margaret regretted that she had not asked her mother about growing up in a world that was totally different from ours, and her mother did not volunteer to tell. After her mother died, it was too late. She therefore decided to tell her story and not wait for her children to ask. Not knowing one's parents' past might matter little in Chinese extended families because the clan's story was often recorded. However, that could be a serious loss for migrant families that settled in foreign lands and had unusual experiences to share.

Margaret told her story well. Our children found it interesting and asked me when I was going to write mine. I made vague promises but kept finding excuses to postpone doing so for years. Eventually, I agreed that my early years preparing to return to China and then being forced to return to Malaya should be of interest. I also discovered that what I wrote about that time in my life was really about not finding home. To enliven my story, I translated the story my mother had written for me. In her case, she regretted that I never asked about her life, and took the initiative to write it for me. When she gave me her beautifully handwritten account just before she died, I wanted to share her story with our children.

Home is Not Here was written for the family. Sometime after I finished, I met with friends of the Singapore Heritage Society and, as we talked about how little was recorded of the migrant stories around, I told them about what I had done and was encouraged to set an example by publishing it. That book led to my being asked, where then is home? Why end with my nineteenth birthday when I arrived at the new University of Malaya in Singapore. I met Margaret on campus the next year. Did that not make a difference?

I did think about finding a new home. This time, the question was whether the Federation of Malaya could become home, and that

hope stayed with me for at least two decades. It was not until years after we left Kuala Lumpur that I realized I was wrong to believe that home had to be a country and to look for another country to replace the China that had become the People's Republic. So I decided to go on with my home story and recalled how my new beginning as a citizen of Malaya led me to think that I could find the replacement country.

Hence the second part of the story focused on my encounters with fellow students who were similarly curious about this new nation. The eleven states did have some things in common. For us, the most obvious was that we students passed a common examination in English schools. Some knew that they would have nation-building jobs some day and readily joined the debates about the kind of country they wanted as their home.

Sometime during the years 1964 to 1966, events in the region led me to reappraise my professional career. Margaret and I now had three children. I loved the university and we were building our new house in Petaling Jaya. When I decided to accept a research position at the Australian National University, Margaret assured me that it should be all right because 'home is where we are'. That became the title of our book and marked the happy end of my two-volume home story.

Politics and Education

This takes me to a related question: the issue of politics and education that both reviewers address.

Studying at a colonial university at the outset of a drawn-out decolonization process was to engage in the building of a nation yet to be born. That clearly linked our education with a key area of political action. I had no doubt at the time that our student debates about nation building were seen by the authorities as a low form of politics. However, the debates also meant that we were learning to understand what we might be required to do. In any case, they involved different levels of socialization and made our time in university extremely lively. For personal reasons, not least because

FIGURE 1 Here we are back at one of our homes, the National University of Singapore, Bukit Timah campus, after having been away for forty years. Source: Wang Gungwu's personal collection.

of my foreign birth and my time in Nanjing at a university in nationalist (and now communist) China, I thought it best to stay away from political activism. In any case, I was averse to partisan arguments and preferred to learn by trying to understand the other side of every argument. And, when Margaret supported me to seek an academic career, I moved out of the political arena altogether.

When I chose to train to be a historian, my professor had not been prescriptive. He encouraged me to pursue what interested me as long as the scholarship met his standards. I could work on Sun Yat-sen's revolutionaries because I found some archival sources. When I assured him that I could read classical Chinese, I was left alone to go back two thousand years to study the beginnings of China's trade in the South China Sea. It was the same in London. At the University of London, my *Nanhai* thesis led my professor there to assume that I could be a Sinologist-historian, and for my study

of tenth-century North China I was awarded a degree in medieval history—very distant from contemporary politics.

But I was aware that all governments would want to educate a useful and loyal citizenry. Even when consciously taking 'politics' out of their schools and colleges, they knew that what was being taught had political implications. And, for those who inherited a colonial state and were hoping to change it to shape the kind of nation they wanted, this was a sensitive area that required close attention.

When I returned from London in 1957 and re-joined the University of Malaya as a history lecturer, Malaya had just become independent. The business of building the nation was now in the hands of elected leaders. It was a beginning that I welcomed, and I sought to do my bit to give the country the kind of higher education it needed. I took the view that, by serving legitimate authority, whatever was done to enable the nation to flourish was part of my duty.

This turned out to be more complicated than I expected. As a young lecturer, I was prepared to be versatile and teach whatever met the needs of a large history department. When I moved from Singapore to the new campus in Kuala Lumpur, I found that political goals were more explicit in the national capital. Dramatic changes came fast. I had barely settled in my job when it was announced that the country was to be enlarged to become Malaysia in order to admit Singapore. This happened when I was elected dean of the Arts Faculty. No one knew what this might mean. I thought that the right thing to do was to bring my colleagues together to explain what that larger federation stood for. That taught us a lot but turned out in the end to be a thankless task.

While I was doing that, the professor and head of the history department departed for personal reasons. When I succeeded him, I became aware that the department's future should be secured by becoming the centre for new research on Malaysian and Southeast Asian history. I accepted that as my responsibility and, for a few years, focused on planning for such a centre. For myself, I came to

realize that I was now much better prepared as a historian of China and not well equipped to become a historian of Malaysia. Hence, when offered an opportunity to concentrate on China research, I decided to leave for the Australian National University and allow someone else to take on the department's necessary task.

Looking back, I was too optimistic to believe that a university would always be a place where one could serve one's country and, at the same time, be a scholar and teacher who could keep his work totally separate from political affairs. I tried to be consistent in whatever I agreed to do, but with the stakes getting ever higher in the communal confrontations in Malaysia, it was probably a futile hope. I did not recognize this at the time, however, and brought this simple faith to my chairmanship of the Nanyang University Curriculum Committee. I was determined to help the university to become as good as, if not better than, the other universities in Malaysia and Singapore. With improved English language skills and a strong base in both Chinese and the national language, its future graduates would have been well placed to provide the country with the skills it needed. My committee was fully supportive of the report that was done in the context of Malaysian aspirations. But the prevailing political struggles were overwhelming, and the fierce protests against our report taught me a painful lesson.

That did not dissuade me, however, from my opposition to communal politics. Although I had no wish to be a politician, I helped Tan Chee Khoon and Syed Hussein Alatas to establish their non-communal Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Movement Party). This was just before I left the University of Malaya and was the only time I gave my support to any political party, if only to show my commitment to Malaysia even as I was leaving for Canberra. It was also a humble admission that I understood that an academic career could not be totally free from the political currents of its times.

Hui Yew-Foong is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, 10 Wai Tsui Crescent, Braemar Hill, North Point, Hong Kong; email: yfhui@hksyu.edu.

Huang Jianli is Associate Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, AS1-05-14, Singapore 117573; email: huang.jianli@nus.edu.sg.

Wang Gungwu is former Chairman of the East Asian Institute and University Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, AS1-05-27, Singapore 117573; email: eaiwgw@nus.edu.sg.

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