Wang Gungwu
EDUCATOR & SCHOLAR

Editors
Zheng Yongnian | Phua Kok Khoo
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It is hard for us to find the right words to describe Wang Gungwu, an eminent individual with many interesting facets and stellar achievements. He is best known to all as an established academic or scholar. Yet, he has also distinguished himself as a leader in various institutions that he has led or continues to head. He has further been recognised for his exemplary public service. Many individuals, organisations and even governments have sought his wise counsel and insights on not only issues related to Asia but also developments in other parts of the world. To those who have interacted with him, they are struck by not only his breadth and depth of knowledge but also his utmost humility and gentlemanly manners, akin to that of a scholar-gentleman or “junzi” in Mandarin. On a lighter and no less important note, Margaret, his wife of 57 years and who is the pillar in his life, has described their life together as rich and fulfilling in an earlier interview with the East Asian Institute. She further added that they have a very good marriage and they both enjoy each other’s company.

Thus, in preparing a commemorative book on Wang Gungwu, we run the risk of failing to adequately account for his contributions. This task is even more difficult as Wang continues to make an impact on matters relating to the various appointments he presently holds as well as the numerous lectures and presentations that he still commits himself to.
In Singapore, Wang is concurrently the chairman of three institutions, namely the East Asian Institute, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. In addition, he is a member of 11 other boards and institutions in Singapore and over 30 boards of overseas institutions and international journals. Given his global presence and influence as an educator and scholar, a book on Wang and his extensive contributions in education, especially higher education, is long overdue. We would rather subject ourselves to being criticised for not doing enough than for not doing anything at all.

History, as historians would like to describe it, is full of unexpected twists and turns. Wang himself has reminisced that he never expected himself to be a historian. He was more interested in literature in his youth. His father was a literary type and he grew up with a fondness for literary things. And to him, history in school was never very interesting. It was all about the British Empire. This did not quite inspire him because it was someone else’s history. Even his choice of history at university was really quite accidental. The English professor, whom he admired, had returned to England. The Economics professor was not very interesting. Fortunately, the History professor was a lively fellow called C N Parkinson whom Wang signed up for in his honours year. The rest we could say is history.

But this historical twist did not just affect Wang’s choice of subject in his honours year. Other unexpected developments permeated the life of Wang, especially his formative years. He was born in Surabaya, Indonesia in 1930. The Great Depression soon forced Wang’s family to leave Surabaya and move to Ipoh, Perak by the end of 1931. Just as he completed Standard 5 (the equivalent of primary 5 in Singapore) in 1941, World War II disrupted his studies. After the war, his family moved to Nanjing, China. He was accepted into the National Central University of Nanjing in 1947 where he studied foreign languages. Not long after, the Civil War forced the closure of the university and he returned to Ipoh at the end of 1948. Malaya was then under a state of emergency declared by the British government against the Malayan Communist Party.

In 1949, Wang enrolled at the University of Malaya to study English literature, history and economics. He obtained his honours in 1953 and master’s a year later. He applied for graduate study at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1954 and graduated with a PhD in mediaeval history in 1957. Thereafter, he returned to the University of Malaya where in a short span of time he became lecturer (in 1959), senior lecturer (in 1961), dean of the Faculty of Arts (in 1962), and then professor of History and head of department (in 1963). From 1968 to 1986, he was
professor and head of the Department of Far Eastern History, and director of Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra. He was appointed vice-chancellor (president) of the University of Hong Kong from 1986 to 1995. In 1995, former Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee wrote to him and invited him to Singapore to take over the chairmanship of the Institute of East Asian Political Economy, the predecessor of the East Asian Institute. When the East Asian Institute was formed, Wang was appointed director and also faculty professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) from 1997 to 2007. He became chairman of the East Asian Institute in 2007.

Wang’s resilience could be seen in the face of sudden and big adjustments, demonstrating at the same time an uncanny ability to seize opportunities that presented themselves. More importantly, he created opportunities to excel through his sheer intellect and unflinching commitment to academic research and writing. Most inspiring of all, his love for research, writing and history is contagious; unknowingly, he has converted several aspiring research scholars in disciplines like economics and politics to history and he seems to derive boundless energy from these tasks. He is an excellent role model.

This book focusses on Wang as an educator and scholar. It is organised into three parts. The first section highlights the writings of Wang in the field of higher education. There are 24 selected articles written by him from 1971 during his stint with the Australian National University, to 2008 when he was with the East Asian Institute. In these articles, Wang shares his perspectives on a range of topics from the relationship between the university and community (both of which are not monolithic); the issue of funding for universities; the role of universities in Asia as global institutions; the idea of universal standards of excellence in education in the Asia-Pacific region; the need for national education to take into account the value of the scientific tradition; the state of social science study in Asia; the shifting paradigms and their impact on research and writing; the role of university in shaping modernity in Asia; to the efforts of the Chinese in pursuing higher education in China. Many of the points and ideas in his essays have a particular resonance today as universities grapple with the multidimensional and complex issues of change, modernity, relevance, sustainability, creativity and innovation.

Closer to home, and of immediate interest to those at NUS is Wang’s commemorative essay on the centennial celebrations of NUS in 2005 and
his address on the occasion of the East Asian Institute’s move from the Kent Ridge campus to the Bukit Timah campus of NUS in 2007. In these two papers, Wang shares his personal experiences and insights on the two institutions which he has been and is an integral part of. In addition, readers will find Wang’s several shorter articles which he wrote for *Times Higher Education Supplement* (known today as the *Times Higher Education* that focusses on issues related to higher education) equally illuminating and interesting.

The second section introduces a selection of over 50 books written and edited or co-edited by Wang as well as those written in honour of him. Each book is accompanied by a short description of its contents, and where relevant, comments by other renowned scholars on the particular book. The selected books cover a wide array of topics including the Five Dynasties (that is based on Wang’s PhD thesis submitted in 1957); Chinese diaspora and overseas Chinese; Chinese culture, history and civilisation; Chinese trade; maritime China; China’s ideological battles; the Chinese Communist Party; China’s political economy; China’s reform; China’s external relations; China and the new international order; Chinese world order; migration; nation-building; Hong Kong; Malaya; Malaysia; and the Iraq War. The books listed are arranged in alphabetical order from the earliest published to the latest for the easy reference of readers.

The third section provides a detailed chronology of Wang’s life from his birth to the present day. It shows not only the tumultuous and challenging times that Wang has experienced but also historic and memorable moments such as the visit by a delegation of historians, including Wang, and China specialists from the Australian National University to China in 1973 just after Australia and China established diplomatic ties. This was Wang’s first visit to China in 26 years. He last visited China in 1947 when he sat for the entrance examination to the National Central University in Nanjing. Another historic moment was when Wang, as vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), had to steer HKU through the ramifications of its part in the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989. Before the crackdown, Hong Kong students, including those from HKU, marched in the city centre streets to show their solidarity and raise funds for Chinese students in Tiananmen. Some HKU students even travelled to China to show their support.

Beyond his academic achievements, the chronology also showcases Wang’s contribution to public service when he was in Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. As chairman of the Australia-China Council from 1984 to
1986, Wang helped to promote mutual understanding and foster people-to-people relations between Australia and China. As executive councillor of the Executive Council of the Hong Kong government from 1990 to 1992 (before the handover), Wang was involved in an intense period of negotiations between London and Beijing over issues such as electoral timetables and the new airport at Chek Lap Kok. In recognition of his contributions, Wang was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Governor David Wilson in Hong Kong in November 1992. In 2004, Wang was appointed Singapore coordinator for the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks, an organisation that brings together thinkers from ASEAN, China, Japan and Korea to brainstorm ideas to promote closer cooperation among these 13 countries. He was awarded the Public Service Medal by the Singapore government in 2004 and a second medal in 2008.

This book was conceived more than three years ago. Initial preparations focussed on compiling a detailed chronology and list of publications by Wang. Focus then shifted to selecting and editing his articles. The process took longer than expected, a testimony to the voluminous works and wide-ranging achievements of Wang. With Wang’s kind permission, we have timed the publication of this book to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the East Asian Institute. This is to recognise Wang’s instrumental role in establishing and laying a strong foundation for the institute that we see today. As current chairman of the institute, he continues to be a huge source of inspiration for academic excellence and public service.

On a final note, we would like to thank the dedicated staff of EAI for their unstinting involvement in preparing this book. Special mention goes to Jessica Loon and Ho Wei Ling for their painstaking and meticulous editing work, including checking and verifying sources as well as liaising with the publisher World Scientific Publishing. We would also like to thank Lye Liang Fook for lending his drafting expertise to this exercise. In addition, Lim Chee Kia, Catherine Chong Siew Keng, Zhu Jinjing, Courtney Fu Rong and Pan Rongfang have helped to compile the relevant facts and publications. Furthermore, Lam Peng Er and Yew Chiew Ping have assisted in their proofreading efforts. Our thanks also go to the various external publishers for granting us permission to reprint the writings of Wang.

Last but not least, we would like to express our most sincere appreciation to the Lee Foundation for generously sponsoring the production of this book.

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About the Editors

Professor ZHENG Yongnian is director of the East Asian Institute (EAI) at the National University of Singapore. He received his BA and MA degrees from Beijing University, and his PhD from Princeton University. He was a recipient of Social Science Research Council-MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1995–1997) and John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (2003–2004). He was Professor and founding Research Director of the China Policy Institute of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom. Professor Zheng is the editor of Series on Contemporary China (World Scientific Publishing), China Policy Series (Routledge), China: An International Journal and East Asian Policy. His research interests include both China’s domestic transformation and its external relations. His papers have appeared in journals such as Comparative Political Studies, Political Science Quarterly and China Quarterly. He is also the author and editor of numerous books. Besides his research work, Professor Zheng has also been an academic activist. He served as a consultant to United Nations Development Programme on China’s rural development and democracy. In addition, he has been a columnist for Xin Bao (Hong Kong Economic Journal, Hong Kong) and Lianhe Zaobao (Singapore) for many years, writing numerous commentaries on China’s domestic and international affairs.
Professor PHUA Kok Khoo obtained his PhD in Mathematical Physics from the University of Birmingham in 1970. He was awarded the Institute of Physics Singapore (IPS) President’s Award by the IPS Council in 2006. He is a fellow at the American Physical Society, the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Nanyang Technological University, an adjunct professor at the National University of Singapore, and honorary professor in many universities in China. He is also chairman of the World Scientific Publishing Company, chairman of the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, vice-chairman of the Tan Kah Kee International Society, and president of the Singapore China Friendship Association and Singapore China Business Association. Professor Phua’s research interests are in theoretical high energy physics, science education and science policies. He has published many papers on scientific research in internationally refereed journals and comments on scientific research and higher education in Singapore national newspapers Lianhe Zaobao and The Straits Times. For nearly 40 years, Professor Phua has dedicated himself to strengthening scientific research in Asia and promoting physics education, higher education and scholarly exchanges at the international level.
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