

Biographical Notes

Wong Pow Nee (7 November 1911 – 31 August 2002) – Malaysian politician

Born the fourth of seven children to Hakka migrant Wong Ee Chin and Foo Nyuke Yin,¹ Wong Pow Nee was best known as the first Chief Minister of Penang. He was born on 7 October 1911 in Bukit Mertajam, Province Wellesley.²

Wong had a Catholic upbringing. His father died when he was 10 years old and his mother passed when he was 15 years old.³ Wong was educated in Penang, receiving his primary education at Jit Sin Primary School and Anglo-Chinese School, and his secondary education at St Xavier's Institution.⁴ He passed the Senior Cambridge examination in 1932 when he was 21 years old.⁵

After graduation, Wong worked as a clerk. His first job was at the Bukit Mertajam Catholic Benevolent Society, which was organised by his brother. Next he worked at the Sin Ban Guan Bus Service Company from 1935 to 1941. When the bus company closed in 1937, Wong entered the teaching profession. He became an English teacher and taught at two schools in Province Wellesley – St. Mary's Primary English School and Kim Sen Primary School.⁶

Wong's teaching career was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (1941-1945). To avoid having to teach Japanese under the occupational forces, Wong did clerical work at a friend's workshop which did repair works for Japanese military vehicles.⁷ Wong returned to teaching after the Occupation, rejoining Kim Sen Primary School as an English teacher.⁸

During the war, Wong met his first wife, Agnes Lim Meng Hong, whom he married on 6 April 1942. She died on 22 July 1945 of beri-beri. They had two children, born in 1943 and 1944.⁹ Wong re-married after the war. His second wife was Elizabeth Law Siew Khim, his former pupil, whom he married on 25 June 1949. They had eight children together.¹⁰

Wong's foray into politics began when he became an active member of the then newly formed Malayan Chinese Association (MCA). He helped the MCA with welfare work, such as assisting villagers apply for grants and financial aid, and in the psychological work against the Communists.¹¹

In 1953, Wong was elected a member of the Bukit Mertajam Town Council on the ticket of the Penang Radical Party. The following year, he was re-elected as an MCA candidate on the newly-formed Alliance Party ticket.¹² He was also a member of Straits Settlement Council and Chairman of the Committee for Commerce and Industry.¹³

¹ Peter Wong Tet Phin and Koay Su Lyn, *Unsung patriot: Wong Pow Nee* (Penang: Bumblogger Connexion, 2014), pp. 19, 25.

² Leo Suriyadinata, ed., *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent: a biographical dictionary* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), p. 1288.

³ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, pp. 25, 31.

⁴ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 33.

⁵ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, pp. 1288-1289; Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 34.

⁶ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 41.

⁷ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 43.

⁸ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 60.

⁹ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 50, 55-56.

¹⁰ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, pp. 63-66.

¹¹ Wong and and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 68.

¹² Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, pp. 82-83.

¹³ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1289.

When Malaya gained independence in 1957, Wong became the first Chief Minister of the state of Penang, a position he held for 12 years until 1969.¹⁴ During his time in office, Wong was involved in Penang's social and economic development, including the building of low-cost housing,¹⁵ and pushing for infrastructure development for the benefit of industry and tourism. The development of the state of Penang was encapsulated in the Penang Master Plan of 1964, which aimed to address the crumbling of Penang, its increased population and the loss of the state's free port status.¹⁶

In the 1969 elections, Wong lost his Bukit Mertajam seat to Ooh Chooi Cheng of the opposition party, Gerakan. Gerakan had campaigned on the grounds that Wong's Penang state government had done little for the state's economy.¹⁷

Following his electoral defeat, Wong resigned from all MCA posts, although he remained a life member of the party.¹⁸ In 1970, Wong was appointed the Malaysian ambassador to Italy, a post he held for five years until 1975.¹⁹

Wong retired from politics in 1975, but he remained active in various Catholic organisations in Penang.²⁰

He died on 31 August 2002 in his home in Penang.²¹

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¹⁴ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1288; Wong and Koay. *Unsung patriot*, pp. 84-88.

¹⁵ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 205.

¹⁶ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, pp. 128, 281-221.

¹⁷ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, pp. 233-236, 278.

¹⁸ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 280.

¹⁹ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 159.

²⁰ Wong and Koay, *Unsung patriot*, p. 309.

²¹ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1290.