

Biographical Notes

Wang Gungwu (9 October 1930¹ –) – Historian, university administrator

Wang Gungwu is a notable historian and he is closely associated with the study of the Chinese diaspora.

The only child of Chinese classic scholar Wang Fo Wen and Ding Yan,² Wang was born in Surabaya, Indonesia in 1930. His father was the headmaster of the Huaqiao High School, the first Chinese high school there.³ When Wang was a year old, the family moved to Ipoh, Malaya as Wang's father had found employment as an Assistant Inspector of Chinese schools there.⁴

In Ipoh, Wang studied at Anderson School while his father tutored him in Chinese classics and history at home.⁵ In 1946, after the end of the Japanese Occupation, the Wang family returned to China. The following year, Wang enrolled in the National Central University in Nanjing.⁶ His parents returned to Ipoh in March 1948 because his father could not take the harsh winter, and Wang followed suit in 1948 because of the political chaos in China.⁷ He did not complete his studies.

In 1949, Wang re-started his tertiary education at the University of Malaya (Singapore campus), where he earned his Bachelor of Arts (1953) and Master of Arts (1955) degrees.⁸ Wang was active in student affairs during his university days. He was the editor of the student newspaper,⁹ president of the Students' Union¹⁰ and the first president of the Socialist Club which he helped establish.¹¹ While in university, Wang also published a collection of his poetry.¹²

At the university, Wang met Margaret Lim Ping Ting whom he married in 1955 and had three children.¹³

In his third year at University, Wang chose to major in history.¹⁴ He went on to receive a British Council Scholarship¹⁵ for his PhD studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.¹⁶

After he obtained his PhD in 1957, Wang returned to the University of Malaya where he worked as a lecturer in the History department. He moved to the Kuala Lumpur campus in 1959. He became the Dean of the Arts Faculty in 1962 but stepped down the following year to serve as Head of the History department (1963-1968).¹⁷

¹ "Professor Wang returns to his roots, after 40 years", *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1996.

² Wang Gungwu. *Home is not here*, Singapore: NUS Press (2018), pp. 4, 5, 8.

³ Wang, *Home is not here*, pp. 13, 19.

⁴ Wang, *Home is not here*, pp. 19, 21.

⁵ "Wang feels most at home in South-east Asia", *The Straits Times*, 29 March 1998.

⁶ Wang, *Home is not here*, p. 137.

⁷ Wang, *Home is not here*, pp. 149, 189.

⁸ Wang Gungwu with Margaret Wang, *Home is where we are*, Singapore: NUS Press (2021), p. 10; Suriyadinata, Leo (Ed.), *Southeast Asian personalities of Chinese descent: a biographical dictionary*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2012), p. 1250.

⁹ Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 54.

¹¹ Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 59.

¹² Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 20.

¹³ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1252; Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 63, 84; "Professor Wang returns to his roots, after 40 years", *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1996.

¹⁴ Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 94.

¹⁵ "On scholarship", *Sunday Standard*, 29 August 1954.

¹⁶ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1251.

¹⁷ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1251.

In 1968, Wang left for Australia, where he spent the next 15 years as Head of Department of Far Eastern History at the Research School of Pacific Studies (1968-1975, 1980-1986) and as Director of the Research School (1975-1980).¹⁸ He became an Australian citizen in 1977.¹⁹ In 1986, Wang left Australia to become the Vice Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong. He stayed in Hong Kong till 1995.²⁰

In 1996, Wang returned to Singapore to head the East Asia Institute²¹ then known as Institute of East Asian Political Economy.²² He stepped down as director in 2007 but remained Chairman of the Institute²³

Wang had generally stayed away from politics although he played a role in the founding of Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan) political party in 1968.²⁴ Wang had said that he was not interested in getting into politics but was helping his friend, Tan Chee Khoo, one of the co-founders of the party, to help draft the party constitution.²⁵

Wang is considered a pioneer in overseas Chinese studies and a prominent historian of China. He has earned many accolades for his work. He was a recipient of the Fukoka Asian Cultural Prize in 1994 and was awarded the Outstanding Service Award from NUS in 2005.²⁶ In 2009, Wang was conferred an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University.²⁷ In 2020, Wang was awarded the biennial Tang Prize for Sinology by the Taiwan-based Tang Prize Foundation for his work.²⁸

Two years later, in 2007, he was made University Professor of NUS, an honour bestowed to a small number of NUS tenured faculty for their outstanding leadership to the University and community.²⁹ Between 2010 and 2013, Wang was rector for a residential college in uTown that catered solely to NUS University Scholars Programme.³⁰

In 2010, the Wang Gungwu Library was officially opened at the Chinese Heritage Centre at the Nanyang Technological University.³¹ That year, Wang also donated his collection of Southeast Asian Books and private archives to ISEAS.³² He also gave \$150,000 to NUS to set up an academic award which bears his name.³³

In 2013, Wang received Singapore's Meritorious Service Medal.³⁴ He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 2020.³⁵

¹⁸ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1251.

¹⁹ "At home with books", *The Straits Times*, 10 June 2000.

²⁰ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1251.

²¹ Suriyadinata, *Southeast Asian personalities*, p. 1251.

²² "Wang Gungwu wins top NUS honour", *The Straits Times*, 9 April 2005.

²³ "The accidental – but masterly – historian", *The Straits Times*, 10 June 2009.

²⁴ Ngui, Clarence Y K, "Withstanding the test of time", *Malaysian Business*. 1 July 2002.

²⁵ "Professor Wang returns to his roots, after 40 years", *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1996; Ngui, "Withstanding the test of time", p. 55; Wang, *Home is where we are*, p. 265.

²⁶ "Wang Gungwu wins top NUS honour", *The Straits Times*, 9 April 2005.

²⁷ "The accidental – but masterly – historian", *The Straits Times*, 10 June 2009.

²⁸ Wang Gungwu honoured for work on Chinese overseas. *The Straits Times*, 22 June 2020.

²⁹ "Top NUS academic title for China expert", *The Straits Times*, 20 April 2007.

³⁰ "Rectors appointed for NUS UTown colleges", *Straits Times*, 10 September 2010.

³¹ "All about the Chinese diaspora", TODAY (Singapore), 15 September 2010.

³² "Three honoured with Meritorious Service Medal", *Straits Times*, 9 August 2013.

³³ "Three honoured with Meritorious Service Medal", *Straits Times*, 9 August 2013.

³⁴ "Three honoured with Meritorious Service Medal", *Straits Times*, 9 August 2013. 6

³⁵ Nation's top civilian honour for Jayakumar. *The Straits Times*, 9 August 2020.



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