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IN MEMORIAM PROFESSOR WONG LIN KEN (1931–1983)

The most striking thing about Wong Lin Ken the man was his willingness to throw himself wholeheartedly into anything he believed in. When I first met him, when we were both students at the University of Malaya (Singapore), he believed in academic achievement. And he backed that belief by sweeping all away, with scholarships every year until he took the University Prize for a First Class in History. His research work for his next two degrees made his international reputation. Although not published until 1960 ("The Trade of Singapore, 1819–69", *Journal, Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, XXXIII: 4) and 1965 (*The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press), those who had read them as theses were surprised by the maturity and thoroughness of the work he had done when he was 24 and before he was 28. By 1959, he was tipped to be the first economic historian in Southeast Asia, a region that was waiting to be explained and understood.

That was not to be because he found a new faith and as before, when he believed in something, he gave it all he had. His new faith was Singapore as an integral part of the Malaya in which he was born, a Singapore brought to independence by a new generation of inspired leaders. As he saw it, they were leaders worthy of his faith and he grew to believe that the teaching and research at a university should be subordinated to the greater interests of a new and struggling nation. For the sake of the Republic of Singapore, he left the campus for the world of diplomacy, almost at the very moment he was offered the Raffles Chair of History. He was Singapore's first Ambassador to the United States and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, probably the two most important positions of any Singaporean outside his country. He returned in 1968 to become a Member of Parliament and not long afterwards Minister for Home Affairs, a position he held for two years until September 1972.

What is thought about his political work I do not know. What I know is that many of us who knew how good he was as a scholar warmly welcomed his return to academia. He was still a young man, only just turned 41, and he still had a lifetime to consolidate the reputation he had made for himself nearly ten years earlier.

Again, he threw himself into research and teaching. He was more ambitious now, not content with mere economic history. He had been in the world of politics and international affairs and certainly his wide experience of both prepared him for a broader view. Thus he wrote on the recent political history of Singapore and started on a large-scale study of the place of Singapore in the region and ultimately the place of Southeast Asia in global strategic thinking during the past century and a half. This is an exciting fresh start and, once again, he set himself a hectic pace. When I visited his department for three months in November 1981, I found him deeply immersed in the most erudite works on his subject. He was intense in his enquiry, rigorous in his thinking and extremely demanding of himself as he was of his colleagues and students. I found him a new man, determined to tell a story that had never been properly told. His death when he was about to set off to complete his writing in Washington and then Canberra, therefore, was a great shock to all of us and a tremendous loss to the field of Southeast Asian history. He left some of us with the feeling that he had asked one thing too many of himself — driving himself fiercely once again, and paid the highest price.

His last work is incomplete. But what he had completed at an earlier stage of his academic life will survive. It will be a long time before his studies of Singapore's trade and the Malayan tin industry will stop being the authoritative books that they have been for the past two decades.

Wang Gungwu

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