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Lee Kuan Yew, Esq.

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3rd MBRAS Lecture 2013

“Malaya and New Paths to Nationhood” by Professor Wang Gungwu

Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore Bukit Timah Campus

Saturday, 12 October 2013, 5 p.m.

Professor Wang Gungwu presented his arguments about two definitions of “Malaya” underlying the formation of Malaysia and how they continue to influence modern Malaysia and Singapore. He explained that Malaya as a term referring to territories that came under British influence in Southeast Asia was never really understood by the non-Malays and never quite accepted by the Malays. The latter were loyal to their sultans whilst the non-Malays identified themselves according to ethnic lines. After the Japanese Occupation, the term gained popularity amongst the non-Malays who began to define it as a civic nation open to all the races whilst the Malays regarded it as a term derived from the older “Tanah Melayu”, land of the Malays defined according to Malay culture, the royal institution and Islam. Professor Wang’s thesis is that both these ideas about “Malaya” survive in modern Singapore and Malaysia respectively.

Questions from the floor revolved around three key aspects of the thesis. Firstly, how did both governments manage the differences in perspectives? Professor Wang explained that both Malaysia and Singapore dealt with the two “Malayas” by creating a powerful centralized “state”. Debate was curtailed and emphasis on material development took precedence. The second aspect had to do with the role of the Left in politics and why socialism was not a viable option to replace the two “Malayas”. This Professor Wang explained was because at some primordial level, the two “Malayas” appealed to the different ethnic groups and they identified with it more than socialism. The idea of a republic was anathema to the Malays and without their support, socialism could not expand beyond urban centres. Singapore dealt with the problem by creating an efficient and relatively corrupt-free government. There was no reason to support another ideology if the present one continues to deliver a better standard of living.

The third aspect had to do with the relevance of these different definitions of Malaya in the present day. Both the Malaysian and Singaporean governments, despite having delivered on material development have been consistently underperforming in the last two general elections. In the case of Malaysia, the influence of greater democracy through the internet and social networking, have brought the two definitions of Malaya into a head-on collision. In the case of Singapore, over-crowding is leading to lower standards of living. Both countries face the challenges associated with income inequality despite years of development.

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Professor Wang offered a very interesting perspective. He explained that Malaysia is in the midst of evolving with some quarters wanting it to be more a “Malay state” whilst in the cities, the reality on the ground is that it is already a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country. It remains to be seen how the government deals with rising and competing expectations. In the case of Singapore, the recent spike in immigration has created much unhappiness. This was not a problem in the old days when Singaporeans regarded each other as “migrants” and that it is a country of migrants. But today, some Singaporeans think of themselves as “natives” and are reacting to newer migrants rather negatively.

Speaker Biodata

Professor Wang Gungwu was born in Surabaya in what was then the Dutch East Indies in October 1930. He grew up in Ipoh, Malaysia where he attended the town’s Anderson School before going up to the University of Malaya, then in Singapore. Professor Wang received his B.A. (Hons) and M.A. degrees from the University of Malaya in Singapore, and his Ph.D. at the University of London (1957). His teaching career took him from the University of Malaya (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, 1957-1968, Professor of History 1963-68) to the Australian National University (1968-1986), where he was Professor and Head of the Department of Far Eastern History and Director of the Research of Pacific Studies. From here, he went on to become the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong (1986-1995). Returning to Singapore, he became Director of the East Asian Institute of NUS from 1997 to 2007.

Professor Wang is the Chairman of the East Asian Institute and University Professor, National University of Singapore. He is also an Emeritus Professor of the Australian National University. His books since 2000 include *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (2000); *Don’t Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (2001); *Anglo-Chinese Encounters since 1800: War, Trade, Science and Governance* (2003); *Diasporic Chinese Ventures*, edited by Gregor Benton and Liu Hong (2004); *Divided China: Preparing for Reunification, 883-947* (2007).

Professor Wang holds a number of honours, namely an Honorary Commander of the British Empire (CBE); Fellow, and former President, of the Australian Academy of the Humanities; Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Science; Member of Academia Sinica; Honorary Member of the Chinese Academy of Social Science. He was conferred the International Academic Prize, Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prizes. In Singapore, he is Chairman of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS; Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Heritage Centre; Board Member of the Institute of Strategic and Defence Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

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