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Being at home with multiple identities

Home to historian Wang Gungwu has evolved into a many-layered concept over the years

Professor Wang Gungwu reveals in a recently published memoir, Home Is Not Here, that he had once felt at odds with his identity in the years of his childhood and adolescence straddling Indonesia, Malaysia and China. ST PHOTO: SYAMIL SAPARI

Yuen Sin

Growing up in Ipoh, Perak, Professor Wang Gungwu had always seen home as a country.

After all, the Mandarin phrase for "country" – *guo jia* – places the Chinese character for "nation" right next to "home".

And the home that his parents had always spoken to him about in the 1930s was in China, which had only recently developed a sense of consciousness as a nation when Dr Sun Yat Sen overthrew the imperial system and established the Republic of China with the Xinhai Revolution of 1911.

Speak to the eminent historian now, however, and you will find that home, to him, has evolved into a many-layered concept over the course of his 87 years.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) professor and former chairman of the NUS East Asian Institute, who was born in Dutch-ruled Surabaya in 1930, has lived in Singapore for more than two decades and feels at home here with his network of friends and colleagues.

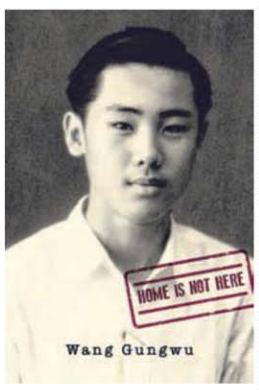
But at the same time, home can be in Australia, where he holds citizenship and where his grandchildren and children reside.

It can also be in the state of Perak, where he spent his boyhood in the colonial quarters of Green Town in Ipoh when his father accepted a job as a school inspector and moved there from Surabaya in 1931. There, he lived in a black-and-white house with two bedrooms that was rented from the government.

Or show him a photograph of himself with his grandfather in China in his grandfather's hometown of Taizhou in Zhejiang province, eastern China, and he will also identify that as home, he told The Sunday Times in an interview recently.

This easy cosmopolitanism may be expected of Prof Wang, an authority on the history and civilisation of China, who is widely regarded for his firm grasp of both Eastern and Western cultural perspectives.

But he, too, had once felt at odds with his identity in the years of his childhood and adolescence straddling Indonesia, Malaysia and China, he reveals in a recently published memoir, titled Home Is Not Here, which will be launched by NUS Press next month.



The book is available in Singapore at Kinokuniya and other leading bookshops for $25.68, inclusive of GST.

The 219-page book chronicles, in glimmering detail, the years between the early 1930s and 1949 after he was forced to return to Malaya from Nanjing, where he had been a student at the National Central University.

It was only after expanding his knowledge of geography, history and culture in colonial schools and in his Chinese university, and reflecting on his experiences during the turbulent periods of the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and the Chinese civil war in Nanjing, that he later came to realise that there was no conflict between his Malayan heritage and the cultural attraction of China, and began to be at home with the co-existence of these identities, he shares in his memoir.

He also feels that it is difficult to define one's identity in purely political terms. "There are many shades of grey (in this world), and we need to be sensitive to the varieties of human experience," said Prof Wang, who had been encouraged by some members of the Singapore Heritage Society to publish this memoir as a way of unpicking and recording the personal dimensions of the past.

"As historians, we look at all sorts of official records, but we don't get many personal stories, and have to somehow imagine (the past)."

Of late, there have been growing concerns here that as China rises in strength, it may seek to bank on cultural affinities to China among Singaporean Chinese and convert this into loyalty to China.

Prof Wang had written an essay about this issue in 2015, when he said that some segments of Singapore's Chinese population may sympathise with China if a conflict involving China and a non-Asean power should break out.

Retired diplomat Bilahari Kausikan also highlighted this in June, when he warned at a diplomacy conference that Singapore has not been spared China's covert "influence operations", and urged Singaporeans to resist the imposition of a "Chinese identity on Singapore" by the rising power.

Some experts believe this may be done, for instance, when China appeals to sentimental ties to China via people-to-people exchanges, or when it blurs the distinction between *huaqiao* (mainland Chinese living overseas) and *huaren* (those of Chinese origin who were born or settled overseas).

To this, Prof Wang said that a multi-layered approach is again needed to navigate the tensions between the Chinese Singaporean identity and the larger Chinese cultural identity.

At the highest levels – between the governments and top civil servants of both countries – Prof Wang believes that both sides understand each other's position clearly.

While China may see its relationship with Singapore as a special one, due to the cultural affinities that it shares with its Chinese majority, said Prof Wang, it also respects Singapore's status as a sovereign state and its multiracial ethnic make-up, and its achievements in maintaining racial and religious harmony.

However, it is at the lower levels of everyday interactions between the citizens of both countries that some tension or confusions over one's political loyalties and ethnic identity could exist, said Prof Wang, as people tend to see these issues in simple black and white terms.

A Chinese Singaporean businessman in China, for instance, may face pressure from his Chinese counterparts who see him as being no different from other mainland Chinese, expecting him to think like them and, therefore, understand how things are done in China.

On the other hand, Chinese Singaporeans may also turn their noses up at mainland Chinese living in Singapore, and question why they do not speak English in a plural society, fuelling mistrust and tension.

Some of these misunderstandings and tensions can be resolved quite easily when Singaporeans who are faced with such pressures are clear about asserting the fact that their loyalties and identity indeed lie with their own country, said Prof Wang.

He also believes that educating the citizenry of both countries, and filling in the gaps in terms of their understanding of each other's political and cultural background, can help address some of these tensions.

"As human beings, we have biases or predispositions which may be wrong, that is very common. A society can find civil ways to deal with that."

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Prof Wang studying at home in Green Town (left) in Ipoh after the end of the war, and (right) at age seven or eight in Ipoh. He spent his boyhood in the colonial quarters of Green Town when his father accepted a job as a school inspector and moved there from Surabaya in 1931. COURTESY OF WANG GUNGWU

Excerpts from Home is Not Here

ON HIS SENSE OF IDENTITY WHEN HE WAS GROWING UP IN IPOH

"I did believe that China was our real home and loved the music and films that China produced. I was therefore keen to master everything I could to prepare myself to return. Yet I was also drawn to the images of England in my books at school, especially those that dovetailed with those in English writings...

A temporary resolution came when I was 10 years old. This was when my father bought me a beautiful world atlas as a birthday present. I had seen such books in school but never thought they would be exciting to read. But when I had my own copy and began to pore through each map, I was overwhelmed by the sense of discovery and wanted to examine every corner of the globe."

ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON OCT 1, 1949

"I was sure I would always be Chinese at heart and admiring of the China that my parents and my Nanjing teachers and fellow students had taught me to love. I also wanted the best for the new China that the people in China have longed for during the past half-century. I had lived nearly 17 years in a Malay state and 18 months in China. Yet it seemed sometimes that I cared for both in equal parts.

The pull of a plural society was great, but the cultural attraction of China in all its dimensions was deep and irresistible. I was not to appreciate until much later that there was no conflict there and that the co-existence of the two had become normal for me."