

Mr President

Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

Friends & Colleagues

Thank you all for coming to the launch of Living with Civilisations – a collection of Professor Wang Gungwu's lectures as the 12th S R Nathan Fellow.

We are honoured by your presence, Mr President, and Ms Jane Ittogi. That you should grace this occasion is a fitting tribute to Prof Wang.

He is, quite simply, the greatest, most significant scholar in the humanities living in Singapore today. There is no more distinguished scholar. His peers — his equals — are the among the most distinguished historians of the last century. Like the giraffe, there ain't no such animal as Wang Gungwu.

His S R Nathan lectures were a tour de force — a journey through the corridors of history, exploring the intricate dance of cultures, creeds, and civilisations that constitute Southeast Asia. The resulting book — Living with Civilisations (which is a typically Gungwu title) — is not just an academic exercise. Indeed, no book by Prof Wang, even the most weighty of his academic tome, is a mere monograph.

Yes, Living with Civilisations is a guide to understanding the forces that have shaped our region and continue to influence our present and future. Yes, it challenges us to reflect on our past, to better navigate the present and future. Yes, one can say of this book what we say of excellent works of history in general. But like all of Prof Wang's writings — indeed like all his talks, his ordinary conversation — it doesn't persuade merely logically. That is not his way.

I learnt this not by reading him but by editing him — in my other life, when I was a journalist and editing op-ed pieces. I understood every sentence Prof Wang wrote — each in its own terms, isolated — but not how one sentence led to another. He seemed to be saying many things — at once, simultaneously. Trained as I was in a particular tradition — the classical expository style — which emphasises the clear unfolding of a singular argument — like a flow chart or a macadamised road -- I found it difficult to process Prof Wang. I assumed this was because he had a subtle oriental mind, and I didn't.

Slowly, as sometimes happens when you get out of the way and allow an insight to occur to you, I realised what matters when you read or hear Prof Wang is not only what he says, sentence by sentence, but the spaces between them. Yes, he is a historian — and deeply informed by the traditions of an ancient discipline. But he is also an artist. Not just a writer; an artist.

You can only say one thing normally at a time in writing. The greatest of writers try to say many things at once by distorting ordinary language using various literary devices — metaphor, simple allusion, myths, metre and rhythm and so on. In music, it is possible to say many things at once, structurally — as in polyphonic, contrapuntal or harmonic music. Reading Professor Wang's works, hearing his lectures, is not simply an intellectual exercise. It is an experience not unlike hearing polyphonic music — say a mass in four or five voices; or looking at a Chinese painting or Japanese garden, where significance lies in the spaces between objects. It is a logical as well as a deeply aesthetic experience. We are honouring a rare mind, a rare distinction, a rare human being.

IPS-Nathan Lecture Series | Mr Janadas Devan | 5th December 2023
Living with Civilisations: Reflections on Southeast Asia's Local and National Cultures

The S.R. Nathan Fellowship was named in honour of our 6th President, Mr S R Nathan. Professor Joseph Liow, our 13th S R Nathan Fellow, recently completed his lectures. Mr Tan Chong Meng will be the S R Nathan Fellow next semester, followed by Professor Lily Kong the semester after. The S R Nathan Fellowship has grown in distinction with each fellow. None has added to its lustre as much as Professor Wang. We are deeply grateful to him — and not only for this series of lectures. We are fortunate that Professor Wang Gungwu has spent the last 20 or so years in the country where he began his scholarship at the old University of Malaya — which physically is here in fact (as you reminded me just now). This launch is a token of our appreciation — and I am so glad President Tharman agreed to be present.

Thank you.