

Book Review

Review of the book *Musings of a Common Man: Growing Up in Malaysia*, by Khong Kim Hoong. Pusat Sejarah Rakyat, Kuala Lumpur. xviii + 378 pp. ISBN: 978-967-26834-4-5.

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Despite its self-effacing title, *Musings of a Common Man: Growing Up in Malaysia*, Khong Kim Hoong's life was anything but ordinary. Hence, his book is far more than a collection of casual reflections. Rather, it illuminates key episodes in Malaysia's political past through a life lived at the intersection of education, activism and institutional reform. Part memoir, part political reflection, the volume records a *fin de siècle* effort to understand a world transformed by time, power and ideology.

An Uncommon Beginning

Khong was among the small minority of his generation to obtain tertiary education in the early post-colonial years. More importantly, he chose an unconventional path, emerging as a leading radical student activist at a critical moment in Malaysia's post-independence history.

His story begins with his grandfather's migration from Toi San in Guangdong province, a region also associated with Sun Yat Sen, founder of the Chinese republic. Born into the family of a prominent bespoke couturier, Khong recalls childhood in Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown before a move to the suburbs. The early death from cancer of his elder brother, Kim Tsuan, left a lasting emotional mark on him.

These personal recollections are interwoven with memories of Chinese festivals and of English-language schooling in late colonial Malaya, shaped by the Emergency and martial law between 1948 and 1960.

Student Radicalism and Dissent

The second chapter focuses on Khong's formative years at the University of Malaya, where he was active in the Socialist Club and later became president of the University of Malaya Student Union (UMSU). He situates local student activism within a wider global landscape of protest and dissent.

Particularly striking is his account of UMSU's activism beyond the campus, including its nationwide tour ahead of the May 1969 general election. At a time of rising ethno-populism following the mid-1960s repression of the Left, especially the Socialist Front (SF), UMSU campaigned on broad national issues. These included democratic rights, national unity, education reform, free healthcare for the poor, a minimum wage, agrarian reform and an independent foreign policy.

Khong's academic work on Singapore's separation from Malaysia also departed from dominant narratives on both sides of the Causeway. Ironically, despite close personal ties to figures such as Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Harun Idris, his doctoral supervisor, Professor Karl von Vorys, saw his book *Democracy without Consensus* banned in Malaysia since it appeared in 1975.

Across the Pacific

The narrative then shifts westward to the University of Pittsburgh, where Khong pursued doctoral studies from 1969 on a scholarship. During this period, he married Chooi Peng, who had worked closely with him during his UMSU years.

These were turbulent and exciting times internationally. The United States, under Richard Nixon, soon reshaped the Cold War through the Kissinger-brokered rapprochement with China. Khong reflects on his political engagement while abroad, his travels across North America, and the intellectual and personal challenges of completing a dissertation on Malaya's post-war struggle for independence between 1945 and 1957.

Return and Restriction

On returning to Malaysia, Khong's life became more conventionally "common": academic work at his alma mater, completion of his dissertation, raising children and reconnecting with family. Together with former UMSU colleagues, he remained quietly involved in supporting trade unions and civic organisations. Sabbaticals and overseas travel provided periodic respite from routine.

This relative calm was disrupted by an entry ban imposed by the Singapore authorities. Although his wife took up a post at Nanyang Technological University in 1990, Khong himself was barred from working there on vaguely defined "security" grounds. For years, family life involved inconvenient and time-consuming cross-border arrangements, until the ban was eventually lifted.

Building a Private University

During the 1980s, Khong became deeply involved in a private higher education initiative that later developed into a full-fledged university. After years in senior administration, he retired as deputy vice-chancellor, only to assume new responsibilities again in more recent times.

His account of HELP University highlights the central role of its MBA programme, especially as Malaysians increasingly favoured American-style academic programmes and credentials. This shift paralleled broader policy transitions, as Razak-era state dirigisme gave way to Mahathir's preference for private provisioning.

The chapter also recounts a bizarre episode involving the award of an honorary economics doctorate to North Korea's then-new leader, Kim Jong Un—an episode with disastrous consequences for HELP, long before the assassination of Kim's elder half-brother at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Reflections and Appendices

The final third of the book departs sharply from memoir, comprising a dozen appendices on a range of political themes. The opening sections grapple with differing, and sometimes conflicting, conceptions of what Khong terms the Malaysian political order. Other appendices address the 1999 general election, communist leader Chin Peng, and include two poems.

Most intriguing is a frustratingly brief discussion of the 1946–1947 hartal strikes. This largely neglected episode of mass civil disobedience between the British Military Administration's and the Emergency's martial law episodes still awaits fuller treatment. Ordinary people across the peninsula boldly demanded independence, defying colonial authority well before the repression of Malay Left activists in early 1948 and the declaration of the Emergency later that year.

Remembering Another Malaysia

Khong's memoir evokes a Malaysia that has since receded from view. While it cannot restore that past, it reminds readers that the country's political trajectory was once more open and less constrained by divisive and reactionary ethno-populisms.

In 1947, leaders from across the political spectrum united under PUTERA–AMCJA behind the *Perlembagaan Rakyat* (People's Constitution). PUTERA, led by Dr. Burhanuddin al-Helmy of the Malay Nationalist Party (PKMM), joined forces with the All-Malayan Council for Joint Action (AMCJA), formally headed by Tun Tan Cheng Lock and energised by the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) under Lim Kean Chye, who died in 2023 at the age of 106.

Although British martial law repressed many of these progressive nationalists, some re-emerged after independence under the Socialist Front banner. Subsequent detentions without trial from 1964 onwards—incarcerating Dr. Burhanuddin, Ishak Haji Muhammad, Ahmad Boestamam and Aziz

Ishak among many—hollowed out this alternative political current. The vacuum left behind was soon filled by the rival ethno-populisms that have since dominated Malaysian political life.

Khong Kim Hoong's memoir stands as a timely reminder that this outcome was neither inevitable nor immutable and that, even now, another Malaysia remains possible.

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