

HO PENG YOKE

1926–2014

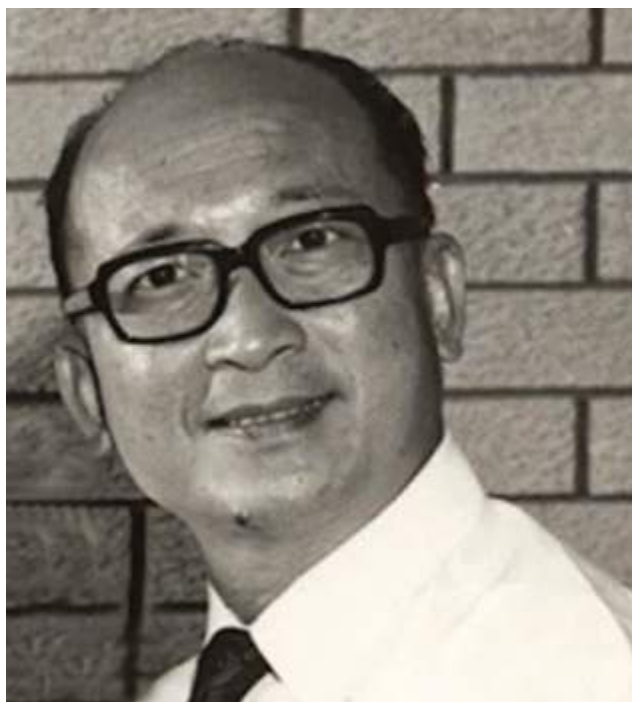


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Ho Peng Yoke, the noted historian of Chinese science, passed away on 18 October 2014. A Chinese of Malaysian background, he contributed immensely to Australian academia, especially in the field of China studies. He was the first Foundation Professor in the School of Modern Asian Studies at Griffith University and was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1976.

Professor Ho was born in the Kinta Valley, a tin-mining area in Malaysia. In the 1920s his father Ho Tih Ann had, in one of the numerous wars that afflicted China at the time, fought on the side of the Guangdong warlord Chen Jiongming against the main founding father of the Chinese Republic Sun Yat-sen. Sick of the interminable conflict in China, Ho Tih Ann left the army for Malaysia in 1925. That was how this highly traditional Chinese family, which had been in Guangdong Province in south China for several generations, came to settle in Malaysia.

Professor Ho attended an English, Christian school. His contacts with the Japanese during their occupation of Malaysia during the Second World War were mainly with intellectuals, as a result of which he learned Japanese. This was to help his work greatly later in life since Japan

has produced much scholarship on the history of Chinese science, and he enjoyed and benefited from contacts with Japanese scholars. After the War he studied science at Raffles College in Singapore and the new University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

Professor Ho took up a job in physics at the University of Malaya, but soon changed his field to the history of Chinese science, completing a PhD in that area in 1957. This led to contact with the great British sinologist and scientist Professor Joseph Needham (1900–95) of the University of Cambridge. Needham was an external examiner of his PhD thesis and in 1958 Ho Peng Yoke went to Cambridge to meet and work with the great British scholar. Although he returned to Southeast Asia the next year to take up a readership in Singapore, the contact with Needham proved essential for his work and career.

In 1963, Professor Ho became the first head of the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Malaya, offering a rare combination of a specialist both in science and the humanities. While at the University, he not only appointed some very senior world sinologists but also occupied very senior positions within the University. He travelled extensively, including revisiting Cambridge and Joseph Needham.

During this time, Ho Peng Yoke also became involved in Malaysian politics, showing the considerable trust he enjoyed in various sectors of the community. When serious race riots erupted in Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere in 1969, he was appointed to a Goodwill Committee within the government's National Consultative Council, which replaced the Houses of Parliament during the state of emergency declared because of the riots. His job was nothing less than to help ameliorate the tense race relations. He used his academic expertise to push the interdependence of Chinese, Hindu and Islamic cultures and philosophies: Malaysia is, after all, one of the world's most important meeting places of Chinese, Indians and Muslims. When the state of emergency was lifted in 1971, Professor Ho was even offered a cabinet position. As he himself notes in his autobiography, *Reminiscence of a Roving Scholar: Science, Humanities and Joseph Needham* (2005), 'I declined politely, saying that I had neither interest nor expertise in politics, preferring to remain an academic'.

In 1972, Professor Ho was an Asian Fellow for six months at the Australian National University. However, his main Australian involvement was at Griffith University in Queensland. Although this new university did not begin teaching until 1975, it had already decided on four foundation schools, including the School of Modern Asian Studies. Professor Ho was the first Chairman and Foundation Professor in the School, remaining Chairman from 1973 until 1978. He contributed greatly to setting up the first courses offered by the School, at that time still unusual in Australia as a unit dedicated only to Asian studies, and was thus one of the pioneers of the University and of Australian Asian studies.

For most of the 1980s, Professor Ho was seconded by Griffith University to the University of Hong Kong, where he was professor in the Department of Chinese as well as Master of Robert Black College. He returned to Griffith University in 1987. Both his autobiography and my own recollection suggest that he was somewhat disappointed by life at Griffith then, finding it too parochial and not connected enough with the academic life of Asia. He retired from the University in 1989, and was shortly after appointed an Emeritus Professor.

Soon after leaving Griffith he became honorary director of the Needham Research Institute, remaining in the position until 2001. Needham was already 90 when Ho got to Cambridge to take over the project. According to Ho's autobiography, Needham 'could barely stand without the help of a walking stick, and was generally confined to his wheelchair', in addition to which he was suffering from a variety of diseases. Ho's autobiography suggests that he found conditions in Cambridge quite difficult, and Needham died during Ho's tenure of office. However, despite the difficulties, Ho Peng Yoke was able, through his post as director, to contribute even more significantly to this great project than he had already done earlier.

Needham was the inaugurator and guiding hand behind *Science and Civilisation in China*, published by Cambridge University Press. Since the Second World War this has been the largest-scale English-language work of Sinology to come basically from one guiding mind. Originally planned in seven volumes, it has grown enormously; as of early 2015 there are 24 volumes, and three are still incomplete. In 1999 it was on the Modern Library Board's *100 Best Nonfiction* books of the twentieth century. This gigantic work revealed to the West how extensive Chinese scientific discoveries have been over the centuries, but also raised the crucial question why it was the West and not China that developed 'modern', universally recognised and applied science. Professor Ho Peng Yoke's involvement in this highly significant and on-going project testifies to his contributions to scholarship and to the regard in which the international scholarly community holds him.

Professor Ho was extremely widely published. His monographs included several on Chinese astronomy, astrology and medicine, such as *Chinese Mathematical Astrology: Reaching Out for the Stars* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) and, together with Peter Lisowski, *A Brief History of Chinese Medicine and Its Influence* (World Scientific, 1999). He also wrote innumerable articles and scholarly items on an astonishing range of topics connected with Chinese science. His autobiography, *Reminiscence of a Roving Scholar: Science, Humanities and Joseph Needham* was published by World Scientific in Singapore in 2005. The inclusion of Needham's name in the title of his autobiography testifies to the importance for Ho of his participation in this scholar's great project.

I believe that Professor Ho's main scholarly idea and contribution were two types of integration. One was that between science and humanities. This was demonstrated amply in his career, since he was so able both as a scientist and as a historian. There is no coincidence in the fact that both areas are mentioned in the title of his autobiography.

The second type of integration is perhaps even more important. It is that which links the scientific endeavours of various civilisations. Of his home continent he wrote in *Personal Encounters of Islamic Links with Chinese Studies* (2005):

Asia has produced three great cultures that influenced the development of science in Europe in the past, namely Chinese, Hindu and Islamic, in alphabetical order. The consciousness of its own heritage has greatly stimulated the Chinese to participate as a full member of the global community of scientists and technologists of today, and we all witness the remarkable economic growth of China in the past decade. Similarly, we can now see the same to be happening in India ... Malaysia is a country where all three great cultures meet ... Perhaps some attention given to the study of science and technology aspects of its heritage would stimulate more interest among its people in science and technology leading to a greater economic growth – at the very least the sharing of common heritage would go a long way to promote harmony and goodwill among people of the three different cultures that would be fundamentally even more important than economic growth itself.

Here he mentions Europe in passing as having once been influenced by Asia. Of course, his involvement in the Needham project indicates his deep awareness of more modern trends, which show European science as being immensely more influential than Asian. After all, the 'Needham question' asks why it was that, despite earlier

Chinese preeminence, it was in Europe that the scientific revolution took place, not in China. But it is arguable that the theme of interconnection is still both visible and significant.

Professor Ho knew standard Chinese, Cantonese, Japanese and basic Malay. He gained numerous awards, both in Australia and overseas. As well as being elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, he was elected to Academia Sinica in Taipei in 1988.

Ho Peng Yoke continued to have a home in Brisbane, even after he left Australia for Cambridge to become director of the Needham Research Institute. He is survived by his widow Lucy and five children, four daughters (two of them twins) and one son, all of whom have done very well in medical professional life in Queensland and elsewhere. His son became a professor at the James Cook University of Northern Queensland.

Professor Wang Gungwu, distinguished scholar and former President of the Academy, still works at the East Asia Institute of the National University of Singapore and was a long-time colleague and friend of Ho Peng Yoke's.

When I wrote asking for a brief comment about Professor Ho, he responded: 'Peng Yoke was always willing to go out of his way to help his history colleagues or students with particular classical Chinese texts by offering a scientific perspective that is always fresh and illuminating.'

The comment adds to my own general observation that Ho Peng Yoke was an excellent teacher and researcher. He was also a very kind and humane man, a real gentleman (*junzi*) in the Confucian tradition. As an observer of his work style over several years at Griffith, I suggest he was very conscious of the many benefits of international interrelationships and exchanges. He was also skilled in winning financial benefits from overseas not for himself but for the University. I can testify also that he was an excellent mentor, never hesitating to foster younger scholars and help them in their work.

His contribution was immense and he will be deeply missed.

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