

REMEMBERING IR. WONG KIN HONG, IEM PRESIDENT 1979–1981

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Ir. Wong Kin Hong passed away 15 June 2004.

The Second World War interrupted his medical studies in Singapore. Immediately after the war, Kin Hong went to the University of Melbourne and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. He worked with the National Electricity Board until his retirement in 1980. Kin Hong was one of the few senior Malayan N.E.B. engineers at the time of Merdeka. On the sturdy shoulders of the few rested the tremendous challenge and burden of building up the electric power system of Peninsular Malaysia. Against tremendous odds, they succeeded. Their achievement drives the Malaysian economy by day and brightens the Malaysian skyline at night.

Notwithstanding the great official responsibility, they cared deeply for the growth and development of the Malaysian engineering profession. They worked hard to build up IEM. In fact, four rose to the exalted position of IEM president. They were the late Allahyarham Tan Sri Raja Ir. Zainal bin Raja Sulaiman, Allahyarham Y. Bhg. Tan Sri Dato' Ir. Abu Zarim bin Haji Omar, the late Ir. Chan Khue Poh and the late Ir. Wong Kin Hong.

Kin Hong had very sound technical knowledge of power engineering. This was not surprising as he had a quick

mind and was an extremely well read engineer. In later life, his reading became extensive, even covering every major religion on earth. His understanding of electric power system, utility management practice, power system hardware and software was comprehensive. This enabled him to be firm and decisive. This admirable attribute was widely acknowledged by his colleagues, both expatriate and local, as well as World Bank experts and consultant specialists from abroad.

Kin Hong was my mentor in my twenty-odd years with N.E.B. I owed my career development in N.E.B. largely to him. Of more significance was his pivotal decision to ask me to be the honorary secretary when he assumed the IEM presidency in 1979. In those friendly days, the honorary secretary was the choice of the president. Other IEM members would defer to his wish by having the honorary secretary elected unopposed. It is absolutely true that without Kin Hong, I would not have been so closely associated with IEM, leading to such subsequent highlights of my career as IEM president, chairman of the Commonwealth Engineers Council (CEC) and currently, president of the World Federation of Engineering Organisations (WFEO).

Whilst Kin Hong was working his



way up the ladder of IEM leadership, he was fortunate to be amongst the dedicated group of Malaysian engineers and pioneers who together built up IEM with such notable achievements as owning its own building and establishing the Board of Engineers Malaysia (BEM) to safeguard the practice of engineering in Malaysia and to nurture the Malaysian engineering consultancy profession by protecting it from foreign dominance.

Kin Hong was a great internationalist as well. He was one of the founders of the ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organisations (AFEO) drafting the AFEO Constitution in Manila in early 1980. He was a strong supporter of the Federation of Engineering Institutions in South East Asia and the Pacific (FEISEAP). He encouraged his deputy president T.T. Chiam to spearhead IEM involvement in FEISEAP and the associated engagement with the UNESCO South East Asian Regional Office for Science and Technology in Jakarta. As a result, many UNESCO/FEISEAP engineering workshops were held in Malaysia. Kin Hong was tireless in representing IEM in our region. In fact, my very first exposure to WFEO was with Kin Hong in the WFEO General Assembly in Jakarta in 1979. He travelled on behalf of IEM even further afar, for example,

to Caracas, Venezuela to attend the WFEO Executive Council meeting in 1980, suffering the frustration and uncertainty of several days of visa application in Los Angeles. Kin Hong helped to establish the IEM tradition of global outreach and the IEM reputation amongst the global professional engineering community as a proactive and collaborative national institution.

In 1980, Kin Hong set up the power engineering practice, Tenaga Ewbank Preece (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd with the Ewbank Preece Group of Brighton, England. I left N.E.B. to join him. I was thus fortunate to continue my professional and business association with him for another decade. Under his leadership, we built up the first electric

power consultancy practice with genuine indigenous design, engineering and project management capability. We also travelled extensively to promote Group business in this region.

Kin Hong was a frugal person in everything, except food and travel. He used to explain that his father, who came barehanded to Malaya from a very poor village in Guangzhou, China, instilled frugality in him. I was with Kin Hong ten years ago when we visited his ancestral village of Wong Thong near Guangzhou. It was still a poor village off the beaten track when rising prosperity was already very evident in the Pearl River Delta. Kin Hong was a man of habit. He had the same golf

group and the same dinner group in Kuala Lumpur for decades. He valued friendship and was valued by his friends in return. Behind the rather stern exterior lived a warm-hearted man who would go out of his way to help friends in need. Those of us who were privileged to be his close friends celebrated his 80th birthday October last year. He was still hale and hardy, enjoying his drink and cigar with his usual sense of humour. It was with a great sense of shock and loss to learn of his passing in June. ■