

The Story of Onn Huann Jan



Abundance at the Margins

Chapter One

Child Of The Rubber Groves (1968–1980)



1968, An Huanran (Onn Huann Jan) was born in Johor, Malaysia. His father was a “very leftist” man, and the family home displayed Lu Xun’s famous lines: “With knitted brows, I coldly face a thousand accusing fingers; bowing my head, I willingly serve as a child’s ox.” At a time when the Chinese community in Malaysia was deeply influenced by the Neo

Confucian discourse of “when flowers and fruits drift away, the spiritual roots must take root on their own,” his father did not hesitate to send all three of his children to Chinese language schools, in the hope of passing on Chinese culture.

In 1979, eleven year old An Huanran sat for the entrance examination to Foon Yew High School in Johor Bahru. That year, Foon Yew High School conducted an entrance examination for selective admission for the first time. On the day the results were announced, he experienced the taste of failure for the first time in his life. He had not been admitted. Yet he did not give up. In 1980, he sat for the examination again and finally walked through the gates of Foon Yew High School. He could not have known then that he would spend a full seven years on that campus, including a period of “repeating a year” that many would rather not mention.

Chapter 2

Seven Years at Foon Yew: The Awakening of a Repeat Student (1980–1987)

From 1980 to 1987, An Huanran spent seven years studying at Foon Yew High School. “I was a repeat student,” he later wrote candidly. “Whenever I am invited back to my alma mater to give motivational talks to current students, I always have to say this.” In his second year of senior high school, he was required to repeat the year because of poor academic performance. For a young student, this was a heavy blow. Yet it was precisely during this year that a remarkable transformation took place. In the year he repeated and again in his final year of senior high school, he ranked first in his class.

“On the journey of learning, it is not whether you repeat a year or not,” he later reflected. “What matters is how you find your way out of rebellion, mistakes and confusion.”

During his years at Foon Yew, he actively participated in extracurricular activities and often remained at school until after eight in the evening because of them before returning home. Foon Yew’s educational philosophy, which “upholds a pragmatic tradition in education, insists on a multilingual teaching policy, and advocates that secondary education should be a form of broad based education,” deeply influenced his educational outlook in later years.

Chapter 3

The “Wild Landscape” of Southern Taiwan (1988–1995)

In 1988, twenty year old An Huanran left Foon Yew and travelled to Taiwan to pursue his studies at National Cheng Kung University. His first three choices on the application form were all Chinese Language and Literature, while he “stumbled into” History as his fourth choice, and was admitted to that department instead.

His seven years at National Cheng Kung University marked the true beginning of his academic life. Taiwan in the late 1980s was in the midst of a surging democratisation movement. An Huanran later recalled that Taiwan’s political development during his years there had a “very profound and unforgettable impact” on him. While Taipei was still engaged in extensive discussions about “Greater China,” the academic environment in southern Taiwan had already placed considerable emphasis on local studies. “In the History Department, one could ‘openly and legitimately’ offer courses on Taiwanese literature and culture, whereas in the relatively conservative Chinese Department, it was not easy to offer courses on Taiwanese literature,” he later wrote. “Do not think that I wrote the four characters ‘openly and legitimately’ so casually. The reason I put them in quotation marks was that, in those days, studying Taiwan’s history and culture still carried the risk of being politically labelled.”

In 1990, during his third year, he took Professor Ho Pei Fu's course on the conservation of historic sites and cultural artefacts. He joined the team conducting rubbing work on inscriptions across southern Taiwan, becoming "one of the first generation members of Professor Ho's Southern Taiwan Inscription Rubbing Project." As he set foot on the green land of southern Taiwan, the growing sense of local identity prompted him to make a firm decision: to return to Malaysia.

In 1992, he obtained a Bachelor's degree in History from National Cheng Kung University. In 1995, he received a Master's degree from the Graduate Institute of History and Philology, with his master's thesis examining "The Relationship between Ryukyu, Melaka and the Ming Dynasty Tributary System."

Chapter 4

The Call of the South: 26 Years in a Border Town (1995–2021)

In 1995, at the age of 27, An Huanran returned to Malaysia and joined Southern College, later upgraded to Southern University College, as a lecturer. He would remain there for a full 26 years.

At Southern University College, he successively served as a lecturer in the Department of Chinese Studies, Director of the Academic Research Division (1995–2014), Head of the Department of Chinese Studies (2006–2014), Director of the Institute of Chinese Ethnicity and Culture (2015–2020), Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese Studies (2013–2017), and Professor (2017–2021). From October 2018 to December 2019, he also served as Deputy Vice Chancellor. In 2013, he received the inaugural Southern University College Award for Teaching Excellence.

Yet those 26 years were far from a smooth journey. On 22 February 2021, he submitted his resignation and left a sentence on Facebook: “Leaving the South, drifting towards the North.” Chen Ming Chen, Chairman of the Board of Southern University College, candidly acknowledged, “Professor An’s departure is certainly a great loss to us.” Vice Chairman Cheng Hui Zhen said, “His departure is a loss to Southern University College.”

Chapter 5

The Two Wings of His Scholarship: Ming Maritime History and Malaysian Chinese Local History

An Huanran's academic research spans two fields that appear distant from each other, yet are intrinsically connected.

The first wing is Ming maritime history and the history of ancient Sino Malaysian relations. He conducted extensive textual cross examination of the interactions between ancient China and the Malacca Sultanate (Melaka), moving beyond the traditional China centred perspective of the tributary system to explore interactions within a multilateral geopolitical context. His 2019 book, *The Rise of a Small Country: Melaka and the Ming Dynasty Tributary System*, was included in the National Key Publishing Projects under the Thirteenth Five Year Plan.

The second wing is Malaysian Chinese local history. Using Johor and Johor Bahru as the principal sites of his field research, he filled many gaps in the social and cultural history of local Chinese communities in postwar Malaysia. Published in 2017, *Cultural Johor Bahru: Studies of Chinese Society and Culture* is one of his representative works. It examines how Johor Bahru developed from a border town once described as a “cultural desert” into what is today a “Cultural Johor Bahru” of which Malaysia takes pride. He also provided a detailed analysis of the distinctive operating model known as “Five

Associations in Harmony,” involving the Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese and Hainanese communities, which emerged after the dissolution of the Ngee Heng Kongsì in Johor Bahru.

In 2024, his *Collected Essays on the History of Ancient Sino Malaysian Cultural Exchange* was published simultaneously in English and Malay translations. He also published *The Ocean and Nanyang: The History and Culture of the Hainanese* (2024) and *Homeland, Food and Memory: Field Notes across Nanyang* (2025), among other works.

DRAFT

Chapter 6

Columns and Lectures: One Hand on Academic Papers, the Other on Columns

In 1996, not long after returning to Malaysia following the completion of his master's degree, An Huanran received a telephone call from Xiao Yi Zhao, the former editor in chief of *Sin Chew Daily*. Although they had never met before, Editor Xiao invited him to write a cultural commentary column at Sin Chew Square. At first, he declined. "Writing commentary does not earn many points in academic evaluations." But Editor Xiao did not give up. After making "three visits to the thatched cottage," he finally persuaded An Huanran, who "gritted his teeth and took the plunge," to launch the "Marginal Commentary" column in 1996. Its very first article was titled "From 'Private Subjects' to 'Citizens.'"

From then on, he developed a distinctive mode of writing, with one hand on academic papers and the other on newspaper columns. "Historical research should be like Sima Qian's writing of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, embracing the spirit that 'literature and history cannot be separated.' One should place equal importance on reliable historical sources while not neglecting clear, readable writing, or even literary quality," he said. His academic research and column writing "complemented each other," giving him a breadth of reading that was "wide ranging and well connected."

Chapter 7

A New Direction for Chinese Education

As an adviser on History and Science to the Unified Curriculum Committee of the Dong Jiao Zong Committee for Chinese Independent High Schools, An Huanran was deeply involved in shaping the discourse surrounding Chinese education in Malaysia. In 2022, at a lecture introducing the *General Outline of Discourse on Chinese Education*, he stated frankly: “Chinese education in our country should not become a breeding ground for narrow racialism. Instead, it should promote a cultural education and humanistic spirit that encourages people towards self improvement and goodness.”

He criticised the utilitarian attitudes of some Chinese towards learning Jawi and Malay, arguing that “this is actually filled with prejudice, and makes our fellow ethnic communities very uncomfortable.” He stressed: “Chinese education is also not merely about treating the ability to speak Mandarin as a totem to be worshipped and cared about... Rather, it requires reflection and internalisation, so that the essence of Chinese culture can be carried forward.”

Chapter 8

The Warmth of the Field

An Huanran's scholarship has never been confined to the study. For nearly 20 years, he has persisted in conducting field research, from collecting historical materials on the Teochew community in Johor to investigating what the “tea” in bak kut teh actually refers to, from temple processions to Mazu worship in Hainanese associations. His footsteps have taken him across towns and villages throughout Malaysia.

Through his field research, he developed what he called the “three fieldwork rules”: “You must be able to sleep, you must be able to walk...” He firmly believes that local research cannot simply look at Nanyang in isolation. “The movement of people, the circulation of cultural information, and the things we encounter every day all have larger network systems behind them.”

He has also actively participated in community service, serving as a committee member of the Johor Bahru Chinese Heritage Museum under the Johor Bahru Tiong Hua Association, an advisory consultant to the Management Committee of the Xiao Wan Xiang Former Residence Heritage Museum in Johor Bahru, and Head of the Cultural and Educational Affairs Division of the Johor Bahru Hainan Association, among other roles. He has delivered a series of lectures on Hainanese history and culture for the Hainan Federation, met with fellow

Hainanese at the Kuantan Hainan Association, and delivered a lecture on Mazu worship at the Tampin Hainan Association.

DRAFT

Chapter 9

Drifting and Taking Root: A New Era in the North, 2021

In May 2021, An Huanran officially joined New Era University College as a professor in the Department of Chinese Studies. He also served as a visiting researcher at the National Institute of Cultural Development of Wuhan University. In 2021, he stood out from among 160,000 graduates worldwide and received the inaugural “Outstanding Overseas Chinese Alumni” Award in the Academic Achievement category from Taiwan’s Overseas Community Affairs Council.

At New Era, he continued to observe the times through the perspective of “Marginal Commentary,” measure the land through the footsteps of field research, and convey ideas through his columns. In 2026, he was invited to participate in the Beijing Forum on Humanities, where he delivered an academic presentation at Beijing Language and Culture University entitled “From ‘When Rituals Are Lost, Seek Them Among the People’ to the ‘Crisscross Root Seeking Method.’”

Chapter 10

Abundance at the Margins

An Huanran often describes himself as a “marginal person.” At Foon Yew, he had studied in the top stream, but also in the lower classes; the degree programme he had applied for was Chinese Studies, yet he was admitted to the History Department; he had expected to go to Taipei, but ended up in Tainan; he had never imagined staying in the South, yet remained in the border town of Johor Bahru for 26 years.

Yet it was precisely this position at the “margins” that gave him a distinctive academic perspective and humanistic warmth. From Ming maritime history to the social and cultural life of the Chinese community in Johor Bahru, from his column in *Sin Chew Daily* to his field notes, from discourses on Chinese education to the preservation of local heritage museums, he devoted his life to cultivating knowledge at the “margins” and discovering abundance there.

From a son of the rubber groves born in Johor in 1968 to a scholar standing on the stage of the Beijing Forum on Humanities in 2026, An Huanran spent nearly six decades of his life completing a transformation from a “repeat student” to an “Outstanding Overseas Chinese Alumni.” Running through it all was the same conviction he had established when he wrote his first “Marginal Commentary” in 1996: from “private subjects” to “citizens.”

References

1. New Era University College Official Website. Professor An Huanran's Profile
2. CTTI. Beijing Forum on Humanities | From “When Rituals Are Lost, Seek Them Among the People” to the “Crisscross Root Seeking Method”: An Huanran and the Study of Overseas Chinese History. 3 July 2026
3. Baidu Baike. An Huanran
4. Sin Chew Daily. Professor An Huanran: The Original Purpose of “Marginal Commentary.” 29 January 2023
5. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran: Nurtured by the Spring Breeze and Rain | Foon Yew Student. 26 March 2017
6. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran: Love Chinese, Take Chinese. 15 March 2011
7. Sin Chew Daily. Standing Out from 160,000 Graduates, An Huanran Receives Outstanding Overseas Chinese Alumni Award. 18 October 2021
8. Sin Chew Daily. Chen Ming Chen: Southern University College Made Every Effort to Retain Him | “An Huanran Had Made Up His Mind to Leave.” 3 March 2021

9. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran: Reject Narrow Racism, Chinese Education Should Promote the Humanistic Spirit. 5 March 2022
10. Oriental Daily. An Huanran and Pan Yong Qiang Bid Farewell to the South. 23 February 2021
11. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran: The Local and China. 19 February 2017
12. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran's Field Notes: Tracing Nanyang Memories Through Local Food Culture. 25 August 2025
13. China Press. Hainan Federation's July Gathering: An Huanran Gives Lecture on Hainanese History and Culture. 3 July 2022
14. Sin Chew Daily. An Huanran: The Hainanese Goddess Mazu, Who Grants Protection and Turns Peril into Safety for Those Who Pray Before Going to Sea. 25 April 2024
15. New Era University College, Department of Chinese Studies Official Website. Professor An Huanran's Related Works