

Remembering Mae Wan Ho

Martin Khor 13.6.2017

Mae Wan was one of the most brilliant, most committed and warmest persons I have ever met.

We first met for a few hours only at or near Schumacher College in the early 1990s. Then in 1994 the Third World Network of which I was then the Director organised a seminar in Penang on Rethinking the Life Sciences, which gathered together scientists and NGO leaders and activists to discuss the impact of the rapidly emerging genetic engineering industry. It was touted as a kind of magic bullet that would increase agricultural production manifold, solve world hunger and medical problems. The NGOs wanted to know if there were dangers lying behind the hype being promoted about the wonders of GE, and if so what these were. Mae Wan was one of the several wonderful scientists who analysed GE for us. Her presentations were simply brilliant in terms of their content and the manner in which she conveyed complex concepts in a straightforward way that the non-scientist could understand and then feel excited about.

The discussions went on long after the sessions were over, at the beach and in the coffee house of the hotel. She told us that the reductionist view, that genes determine the way organisms function and behave, had already been debunked, and that the behaviour of genes depends to a large extent on the context in which they exist and operate, so that the whole influences the parts rather than the parts determining the whole. Removing a gene and transplanting it into another organism would not enable the replication of the behaviour of that gene that operated in another organism, and may also cause unknown side effects to the organism. She explained horizontal gene transfer and its hazards in the context of genetic engineering; in those days this was a little known phenomenon; years later many scientists I spoke to for example on food safety were still denying that horizontal gene transfer takes place in human beings. I told her that very few people outside the holistic science community know about all this and I encouraged her to put all the main points down in writing. We even worked out the chapter headings.

Mae Wan was an unbelievably very fast worker. Within a few months she had written the manuscript for Genetic Engineering: Dream or Nightmare? That book which TWN co-published had a phenomenal impact on many people, including the global NGO community as well as policy makers. In the mid-1990s when we held that first conference on Rethinking the Life Sciences, the major NGOs including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth as well as TWN had not yet made GE a priority issue and did not have campaigns or educational programmes on it. Mae Wan's book, written in such a straightforward yet profound way, was to change all that. It had a major impact in helping to galvanise interest, excitement and activism worldwide on the hazards of genetic engineering.

Within a few months of the 1994 seminar, a network of scientists and NGOs had developed. We held a workshop in New York on the eve of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development which had been formed as the main institutional follow-up mechanism for the

UN Earth Summit of Rio 1992. The Chairman of the Commission was the German Environment Minister Klaus Topfler, who later became the head of UNEP; he came to our workshop and heard the conclusions. He invited us to present the workshop's findings the next day to the Commission at its opening session. It was a fantastic opportunity to disseminate our views, that GE had many risks attached to it and that regulations must be put in place to control the technology. Needless to say, Mae Wan played a crucial role in the Commission meeting. The declaration of that year's session of the Commission contained good references on the potential risks of GE and the need for regulation.

As the movement developed, Mae Wan continued to play a leadership role in research, training and education on the science underlying genetic engineering and its effects, taking part in many workshops, training programmes and educating activists and policy makers alike. She came to many world conferences where policy makers and civil society meet and sometimes dialogue. Her voice in such meetings was always clear, with the clarity mixed with passion for her subject and for promoting the human interest and saving the Earth. She then established the Institute for Science and Society, in the hope of inspiring young scientists to embrace a holistic view of science with responsibility to the community and the world.

I had the privilege to visit Mae Wan and Peter in their home in London a number of times and it was always a time of joy, with always so many things to talk about and to plan but also to reflect on Life and the role that we mere humans play in the larger scheme of things.

Perhaps if we had not held that meeting in Penang on Rethinking the Life Sciences, and if we had not diverted Mae Wan from her other pioneering work --- I remember she was then advancing the cause of marrying traditional Chinese medicine and its meridian points with modern Western science and its measurement of energy flows, with the help of her invention, the non-invasive X-Ray --- she would have managed to do much more work in these other areas. So I sometimes feel guilty. But I am glad she contributed so much and so brilliantly and with so much human passion, to our understanding and our campaigns on genetic engineering, on holistic science, and on promoting the beauty and excitement of human life and Nature in the midst of so much environmental destruction and human suffering. I think Mae Wan had a wonderful phrase to describe the cosmos and the many ways in which all the components are linked in it: The Dance of Mutual Entanglement. Or something like that, so please correct me if I got that slightly wrong.

Mae Wan, wherever you are, I am sure you are still engaged in that Dance and in more creative ways than we are able to do it here. Thank you for your work, your brilliance, for the excitement you always generated and the inspiration you gave to those around you and beyond, and thank you for the many years of true friendship.

Martin Khor

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