Tongue-in-cheek offer to Proton of £1 (RM6.50) for Lotus cars sold must have little remote to do with sinologist Professor Wang Gungwu giving a public talk at Sunway University College. Sitting in at the talk on a visit home, an unlikely connection struck me.

As the stream of people filled auditorium at the university and the organisers had to keep shifting the portable chairs to fit in more, my mind drifted to the news report I'd read the previous day — and back 20 years and more.

The New Straits Times of the previous day had Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tengku Tan Sri Mahaleel Tengku Ariff, former chief executive officer of Proton, going public with their £1 offer to the national car maker. If Proton could sell the motorcycle maker MV Augusta for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars for £1, why not sell the Lotus cars...

The import of the moment was that it appears to be starting to be the case in KL.

The public spat took me back to that time in my other incarnation as writer of a motoring column. Dr Mahathir, fresh into his job as Prime Minister, was floating the audacious idea of Malaysia making its own car.

Where was the infrastructure to make that happen, the sceptics scoffed. Where was the economies of scale to make it worthwhile to build the infrastructure and the car right from the ground up?

Five years into its gestation, it was with enormous expectations that day in September 1985 when we motoring journalists were given the keys to the first test Proton Saga. With a faded jacket that today remains in useful function in my wardrobe.

Malaysian industry has expanded into upstream steelworks, and downstream into small and medium enterprises, producing everything from tyres, batteries, radiators and lighting assembly and wire harnesses to plastic moulds, consoles, seats and seat belts.

Few people, when the idea of the national car was first mooted up, saw in Proton what the Model T Ford did to American industry. Proton went on to bring technological gains for the country.

So what has that got to do with Professor Wang Gungwu speaking at Sunway University College?

I was drawn to the Press announcement on Wang speaking on the topic: "Understanding China's present economic transformation". Wang, in my books, is a luminary on China. He was required reading in my undergraduate study.

The talk was open to the public. And it was going to be free.

Free public lectures are regular events where I write from in Melbourne. I was impressed that it appears to be starting to be the case in KL.

The import of the moment for me went beyond Wang's subject matter as the evening wore on. And as I was to discover later, for the organisers.

The venue was to be a 140-capacity lecture theatre. Overwhelming response caused it to be switched to an auditorium capable of holding more than twice that many people.

Still it wasn't enough, as people came drifting in unannounced. They filled the auditorium to the rafters, spilling over to the steps.

Filling an auditorium for a public lecture would have meant the least of the concerns of the founding fathers of Sunway University College. Yet, casting his sight behind him towards the audience, founder Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah might have afforded himself a touch of pride.

Wang was speaking in the university college's Distinguished Speakers' Series. That's a recent innovation to lectures that have been going on since 1997. Most of the speakers have hitherto been international scholars, brought in mainly for the benefit of Sunway's students.

Cheah had established Sunway as a trust in 1997, to benefit the public as a non-profit organisation, with proceeds reinvested in the college.

The broadening of subject matter of the lecture series is an unconscious manifestation of the public interest.

"It's just evolved over the years," Elizabeth Lee, executive director of Sunway University College says. "It is in line with the lifelong learning that the Government is encouraging."

It is perhaps no accident that ancora imparo (I am still learning) is the motto of Monash University, the Melbourne tertiary institution that Sunway picked to work in partnership to establish the campus of the first foreign university in Malaysia, back in 1998.

There were students at the Wang lecture. But most were people past their university days. It's a spin-off worth reflecting on, in the way one car inspired a vision towards developed-nation status by 2020.

Down Under, many people are happy to pay for continuing learning. This past week, people were paying A$2,400 (RM6,700) each to listen to former Prime Minister Bill Clinton and former business chiefs Michael Eisner (Disney) and Carly Fiorina (Hewlett Packard) at a Global Business Forum in Sydney and Melbourne.

"Often there is more in the big picture than meets the eye."