

# DIASPORIC CHINESE VENTURES

The life and work of Wang Gungwu

Edited by Gregor Benton and Hong Liu

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## DIASPORIC CHINESE VENTURES

Wang Gungwu is an eminent and prolific writer whose work spans a great number of themes and approaches. Over the past 50 years he has made an outstanding contribution to the scholarly and political debate in several disciplines, bringing his unparalleled knowledge of the histories of East and Southeast Asia to bear on urgent contemporary social, political and cultural issues. As doyen of studies on the Chinese diaspora and China's relations with Southeast Asia, for the last half-century he has been at the very heart of this emerging field of scholarship.

This collection of essays by and about Wang Gungwu brings together some of Wang's most recent and representative writings about ethnic Chinese outside China. It illuminates key issues in Asia's modern transformation, including migration, identity, nationalism and cultural reconfigurations. In addition to providing an intriguing assessment of Wang's own political and scholarly influences, the book collects interviews, speeches and essays that illustrate the development and direction of his scholarship on the diasporic Chinese.

*Diasporic Chinese Ventures* is an ideal introduction to the often complex field of ethnic Chinese studies and essential reading for students embarking on it. Readers already familiar with Wang Gungwu's writing will find in this collection a useful map of the evolution of his opinions over time and a mirror onto the political and scholarly influences that shaped his thinking.

**Gregor Benton** is Professorial Fellow in Chinese History in the School of History and Archaeology at Cardiff University. **Hong Liu** is Associate Professor in the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore.

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The texts are as they originally appeared, except that we added references (marked as ours) on terms and names that might not be familiar to the non-specialist reader.

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Wang Gungwu at Hong Kong University, 1987



Wang Gungwu with his mother, 1951



# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	1
HONG LIU AND GREGOR BENTON	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Encounters</b>	11
1 Looking forward, looking back: an interview with Wang Gungwu	13
HONG LIU	
2 How reading the <i>Historical Records (Shiji)</i> helped set Wang Gungwu on the road to becoming a historian	22
XIAO LI	
3 A momentous duty imposed by heaven	25
TE-KONG TONG	
4 Wang Gungwu on the Nantah incident: an interview	31
YUAN YAOQING ET AL.	
5 Wang Gungwu in Australia	43
STEPHEN FITZGERALD	
6 The problems with (Chinese) diaspora: an interview with Wang Gungwu	49
LAURENT MALVEZIN	

## CONTENTS

### PART II

<b>Reflections: Section 1. Cultural concerns</b>	<b>61</b>
7 Confucius the Sage	63
WANG GUNGWU	
8 Local and national: a dialogue between tradition and modernity	66
WANG GUNGWU	
9 Reflections on networks and structures in Asia	74
WANG GUNGWU	
10 Chinese political culture and scholarship about the Malay world	88
WANG GUNGWU	
11 State and faith: secular values in Asia and the West	103
WANG GUNGWU	
12 Secular China	124
WANG GUNGWU	
13 Mixing memory and desire: tracking the migrant cycles	140
WANG GUNGWU	

### PART III

<b>Reflections: Section 2. Chinese overseas in historical and comparative perspective</b>	<b>155</b>
14 A single Chinese diaspora?	157
WANG GUNGWU	
15 Ethnic Chinese: the past in their future	178
WANG GUNGWU	
16 The Chinese Revolution and the overseas Chinese	196
WANG GUNGWU	
17 Cultural centres for the Chinese overseas	210
WANG GUNGWU	
18 New migrants: How new? Why new?	227
WANG GUNGWU	
<i>Index</i>	239

# INTRODUCTION

*Hong Liu and Gregor Benton*

This collection of essays by and about Professor Wang Gungwu serves two main ends, biographical and conceptual. By bringing together in one volume some of Wang's most recent writings concerning ethnic Chinese outside China, we hope to provide readers with a deeper understanding of Wang's views on an abiding element in Asia's modern transformation, migration. Most of the essays by Wang collected here were originally given as keynote speeches at meetings and conferences in Asia, Europe and North America. By grouping them under a pair of focused themes, we aim to highlight the historical and geographical settings in which Wang developed his ideas and to illustrate their evolution over the past 50 to 60 years, years that witnessed not only the political transformation of colonies into nation-states but the emergence of regionalism and globalization. In that sense, Wang's biography reflects the turbulent times through which he has lived. His observations, based largely on active participation in the events he comments on, form an historical commentary in their own right on the postwar and postcolonial world.

Like his multi-faceted and wide-ranging publications, Wang Gungwu's life can be observed from several different angles. He has been, variously or at once, a Chinese overseas, a scholar, an administrator, and a political activist. He was born in Surabaya in the Netherlands East Indies (today's Indonesia) in 1930. His father, Wang Fo-wen (1903–1972), one of a small minority of first-generation Chinese immigrants to receive a college education, was a respected educator well versed in traditional Chinese culture. He taught in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, and Surabaya before serving as an inspector of Chinese schools in the Malay State of Perak.<sup>1</sup> The son attended Anderson School in Ipoh, a mining town in British Malaya, where he was taught in English and studied the history of the British Empire and Commonwealth. At home, starting at the age of three, he received an education in Chinese from his father and his mother Ting Yen (1905–1993). In addition to this basic training in the mother tongue, "they also imparted to their only son a love for China and things Chinese".<sup>2</sup> Later, he learned

Malay and picked up some other European languages besides English, as well as Japanese.

As a Chinese living outside China, he personally – in common with the great majority of Chinese in Southeast Asia after World War II – experienced the transition from sojourner (before 1945) to settler, and is therefore a prime example of one of his own main research topics. This passage is summed up in the Chinese phrase *luodi shenggen*, “falling to the ground and striking root”, a description of the accommodationist project, which includes permanent settlement abroad, the renunciation of Chinese citizenship, and public adjustment to the majority way of life, while privately preserving a Chinese lifestyle and cultural values. He has lived and worked not only in Asia but in Europe and Australia. (Delivering the Commonwealth Lecture at Cambridge in 2002, Wang remarked that he has lived all but 3 years of his life “in countries that are, or were, parts of the British Empire and Commonwealth”).<sup>3</sup> He therefore has first-hand experience of migration and settlement in several contexts and historical periods, an experience his scholarship reflects. It is hardly surprising that he should have demonstrated an enduring interest in the fate of Chinese outside China and their political and existential choices (which, more recently, have included remigrating from Southeast Asia to North America, Australia, and Western Europe).

Wang’s training in different cultures in various parts of the world helps explain the range of his scholarly interests and his remarkable achievements in numerous fields. Before the war, under the influence of his father but also by personal inclination, he described his infant self as “a Chinese, who intends to return to China”. He spent a year at the National Central University in Nanjing between 1947 and 1948, at the height of the Chinese civil war. This visit gave him first-hand experience of Chinese migration and of the background to China’s social and political transformation under the then impending People’s Republic. In making this journey to China, Wang followed in the footsteps of many young ethnic Chinese males of his generation. This act of “homegoing” is encapsulated in another well-known phrase, *luoye guigen*, “fallen leaves return to their roots”, a reference to those Chinese who remain loyal to their native places and wish (usually in vain) to return to them. Even so, he had no difficulty in understanding his father’s decision, taken sorrowfully in the 1950s, to give up his Chinese nationality and become Malayan, a step that he himself found less painful.<sup>4</sup>

Upon completing his three-year undergraduate studies at the University of Malaya in 1952, Wang Gungwu had the choice of pursuing his degree at honours level in any one of the three fields he had studied – economics, English literature, and history. He opted for history, under the influence of his history professor, C. N. Parkinson,<sup>5</sup> and embarked on a career that led him to probe deeply the vicissitudes of the time. From

1954 to 1957, he studied at London's School of Oriental and African Studies under D. G. E. Hall (1891–1979), a pioneer in the then young field of Southeast Asian history, and the Tang historian Denis Twitchett. He wrote his PhD on a topic in Chinese imperial history, the Five Dynasties, which he later published in Malaysia and the United States.<sup>6</sup> His sinological training lent a new and rare dimension to his work on Chinese migration and settlement overseas, and is among its greatest strengths.

After completing his PhD in London, he returned home to the University of Malaya (then located in Singapore), where he became Dean of the Arts Faculty in 1962. He was promoted to a full professorship in 1963, a remarkable achievement in the highly racialized political climate of post-independence Malaya. In his research and teaching, he set about exploring contemporary issues of nationhood and ethnicity in the newly independent and ethnically complex Federation of Malaya. This tack towards the social and political sciences was no temporary excursion but the start of a lifelong engagement with issues relevant to community and the body politic. He rejected the communalist project, popular in some Malay and ethnic Chinese circles, and strove instead to help create a society based on the idea of liberal pluralism and cultural tolerance. Even so, he continued to take the longer view, by embedding his analysis of the present day in its historical context.

He subsequently extended his research interests to the new nation states of Southeast Asia. Again, this switch of focus supplemented rather than supplanted his commitment to writing history, his first and in many ways best love. In particular, he turned his attention to the historical evolution of Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese communities. His solid grounding in Chinese history and his first-hand acquaintance with China gave him a strong angle from which to view Sino-Southeast Asian interactions. In his work on the dynastic period, he concluded that China's relationship with Southeast Asia was overwhelmingly commercial in nature and only marginally political or "imperial". Chinese traders adapted of necessity to the regimes of their Southeast Asian hosts, a practice followed by subsequent generations of Chinese migrants and their descendants and a good example of how (in the contemporary period) to accommodate asserting ethnic Chinese identity with postcolonial nation building. Where Chinese dealt successfully with indigenous elites, "intermarriage and assimilation were common".<sup>7</sup> Interventionist campaigns by mainland Chinese state representatives and political campaigners to harness the Chinese in Southeast Asia to the cause of China's self-strengthening and modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries awakened fears among Malay political leaders that a Chinese Fifth Column would form in the region. Wang's historical studies helped weaken the indigenous perception of ethnic Chinese as clannish and potentially disloyal.<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1960s, John Fairbank, doyen of Chinese studies in North America, invited him to contribute to a volume on the Chinese world order alongside Yang Lien-sheng and Benjamin Schwartz, leading China scholars of the day. Fairbank called Wang Gungwu's "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia: A Background Essay" a "masterly study" and "the broadest survey of the evidence concerning pre-Ch'ing [Qing] tribute relations that has yet been made". Together with a couple of other essays on similar topics,<sup>9</sup> this study on early Sino-Southeast Asian interactions is one of Wang's favourites, since it "gave me a valuable perspective that has helped me look back to the formative centuries of Southeast Asia as well as forward to the centuries of dynamic transformations, and that has helped me better understand history".<sup>10</sup>

In later studies, Wang emphasized ethnic Chinese accommodation to local circumstance and drew a distinction between Chinese ethnic pride and Chinese national identity in Southeast Asia. Calls from the north for loyalty to China were damaging from the point of view of ethnic Chinese relations with other peoples in their Southeast Asian homelands; and usually unworkable in the long term, given the distinctive evolution and deepening local roots of Chinese communities across the region. Ethnic Chinese resisted China's patriotic efforts to resinicize them, but they also resisted local assimilation. Some adopted new identities, which often incorporated versions of Chineseness that did not necessarily depend on a knowledge of the Chinese language. In so doing, they stretched the definition of Chineseness in unpredictable ways, by creating new niches and cultural amalgams. Wang's exploration of the variety and autonomy of Chinese communities overseas and the multiplicity of their identities again helped to demonstrate that they are no menace or liability but an enrichment of the societies they inhabit.<sup>11</sup> Thus his scholarship is characterized by a high-minded sense of social responsibility.

Wang is not a historian in the traditional definition, despite his training in and affinity for history. Partly because of his own approach to scholarship and partly because of the very nature of ethnic Chinese studies, which cover many fields and regions, his work straddles disciplines and perspectives. He is keenly aware of paradigm shifts in the social sciences and their ramifications. He suggests that unlike universities in the West where such shifts come from "academic and intellectual activity", in Asia they are "more situational, much more influenced by contemporary political and economic developments".<sup>12</sup> In terms of spatial concerns, his simultaneous engagement with China and Southeast Asia equips him to stand above isolated events and processes and glimpse their interconnections. His methods prompt an analogy with Chinese painting, which strives to depict objects and landscapes from several different angles and thus to convey a sense of the wholeness of things, unlike Western perspective drawing, with its fixed "scientific" viewpoint. His work reflects

many of the strengths of traditional Chinese historiography, including its attention to texts and sources, but ultimately it shatters the sinocentric (and the colonial) view of Asian history and has created the conditions for ethnic Chinese studies to emerge as a field of scholarship in its own right.

In 1968, Wang was appointed Professor and Head of Department of Far Eastern History at the Australian National University (ANU), the first person of non-European origin elected to that position. Since then, he has published a great many articles and books on various aspects of Asian and Chinese history and on Chinese migration. His scholarly achievements are reflected in his membership of a number of prestigious scholarly institutions worldwide, including the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Taiwan's Academia Sinica, the American Academy of Arts and Science (of which he is a Foreign Honorary Member), and Beijing's Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

His impact on the scholarly fields whose directions he helped shape has been profound. He is universally acknowledged to be the most influential scholar in the study of Chinese outside China and the Chinese migratory experience. His commitment to ethnic Chinese studies, a sub-field at the interface between the humanities and social sciences, has been lifelong. In 1955 he wrote *The Nanhai Trade*, which deals with early Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, part of a general switch in pre-independent Malaya in the 1950s away from a colonial and metropolitan focus and towards Asian history. A recent example of his intellectual leadership of the field is his keynote speech to the 4th International Convention on the Chinese Overseas (organized by the International Society for the Studies of the Chinese Overseas, of which he is chairman, held in the Academia Sinica in April 2001), in which he called for a historical and comparative understanding of the recent phenomenon of Chinese new migrants (see Chapter 18 in this book).

He has often spoken of his passionate objection to the terms "overseas Chinese" (*huaqiao*) and "Chinese diaspora", which he believes have invidious political connotations. Instead, he favours the more neutral "Chinese overseas". His objection is partly that these words suggest transnational cohesion and homogeneity, whereas Chinese overseas commonly adapt to local environments. More importantly, he is aware of the terms' emotive power in Southeast Asia, where unconscionable politicians draw attention to them in order to scapegoat ethnic Chinese and raise doubts about their loyalty. His call has been positively received. It is echoed in several recent major works on ethnic Chinese, including the *Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*<sup>13</sup> and *The Last Half Century of the Chinese Overseas*.<sup>14</sup> China scholars such as Philip Kuhn and Prasenjit Duara and Southeast Asia scholars such as Anthony Reid have also paid close attention in their writings on ethnic Chinese to Wang Gungwu's conceptual formulation. Wang's studies on

Sino-Southeast Asian historical relations and the Chinese overseas are classics in their field.

Although he has paid less attention of late to Chinese dynastic history, his book on the Five Dynasties continues to be cited as a crucial reference work, nearly 40 years after its publication.<sup>15</sup> In a review of Wang's *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (1981), G. William Skinner wrote:

Professor Wang Gungwu enjoyed a solid reputation as a political historian of medieval China and has made important contributions to Chinese history of more recent centuries. The volume under review, however, displays only those of his wide-ranging concerns that touch on Southeast Asia. Even within this restricted scope, three scholarly personae are evident: the sinological historian, the pundit of Malaysian affairs, and the expert on the Nanyang Chinese.<sup>16</sup>

As an academic administrator, Wang Gungwu has been deeply committed to improving the scholarly environment in the Asia-Pacific region. His administrative appointments, including Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies at ANU (1975–1980), Vice Chancellor of Hong Kong University (1986–1995), and Chairman and Director of the East Asian Institute in Singapore (1996–present), provided him with a rare opportunity to influence the course of educational development in the region. While at Hong Kong University, he pushed for greater research funding from the government in both the humanities and social sciences and the natural sciences and succeeded in creating a healthy research culture, reinforced by a graduate student population that shot up during his period of tenure. For his administrative accomplishments (while serving, for example, as Executive Councillor to the Hong Kong Government, as Chairman of Hong Kong's Advisory Council on the Environment, and as Chairman of the Council for the Performing Arts in Hong Kong), he received a CBE.

Wang's administrative activities have been largely mainstream and conventional, but at various times he has played an active role as an oppositionist to established authority. As part of his political work, he strove to popularize scholarship that he felt threw light on current issues of concern to ordinary citizens. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, he gave radio and television talks on a wide range of topics about the new Malaysian nation and the role of ethnic Chinese in the region.<sup>17</sup> In early 1968, at a time of great political change in Malaysia, he was one of the six founding members of the Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Solidarity Movement, popularly known as Gerakan). The Gerakan, which represented one of three major approaches to Malaysian



Chinese politics, pledged support in its formative years for “multi-racialism, moderate socialism and parliamentary democracy”.<sup>18</sup> But Gerakan was unable to turn back the communalist tide and made little headway. In the 1970s in Australia, he supported the protest movement against the Vietnam War and joined demonstrations. He has not only sought to give Asian people a voice by recording their thoughts and feelings but has fought hard to improve their everyday living. His campaign to upgrade Hong Kong’s university system and promote its bilingual status can also be seen as a political act, intended to protect and strengthen the territory while at the same time preparing it to play a useful role after its return to Chinese rule in 1997. As a scholar-administrator of Chinese descent living outside China, he has participated in processes of change at all levels.

Wang’s persona embodies the seemingly contradictory ideals of “intellectual” in both the Chinese and the Western senses. He himself points out that “the intellectuals in imperial China, for about two thousand years until the beginning of the 20th century, were distinguished by their identification with the Confucian state which they had a key part in shaping and developing”.<sup>19</sup> In the Western tradition, on the other hand, intellectuals are mainly seen as “the critics of power” who stand outside the establishment, ever vigilant and sceptical.<sup>20</sup> They are often regarded as “social critics”, “political intellectuals”, or (to borrow Foucault’s phrase) “thinker[s] with a public voice”.<sup>21</sup> The journey between these two traditions is not easy, and the complexity of the non-Chinese environment has made it even more challenging.<sup>22</sup> Yet with his multi-cultural upbringing and sensibilities as well as his training in the Chinese and Western traditions, Wang Gungwu has been in a position to create a remarkable new synthesis. He has been aided in this endeavour by his personal philosophy. As Philip Kuhn has shown, at the heart of Wang’s academic and social concerns is “a liberal idealism” that forcefully rejects narrow communalism in any shape or form.<sup>23</sup>

Although by no means a complete record of Wang Gungwu’s life and scholarly contribution, this collection of essays reflects not only his multi-dimensional career as viewed by his colleagues and students but many of his recent scholarly concerns in various fields. The first part, “Encounters”, comprises six interviews and profiles. They touch on his family background, his youthful days in colonial Southeast Asia and war-torn China, the impact of the Chinese tradition (and its classic genre of historical writing) on his thinking, his involvement with Nanyang University, the only tertiary institution outside China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan that used Chinese as the main instructional language, his experiences in Australia, and his recent reflections on the controversial concept of “diaspora”. Collectively, they tell us much about the profound impact that this past half century has had on his life and career as well as his intellectual evolution. The second part, “Reflections”, is devoted to his recent writings. (Some,