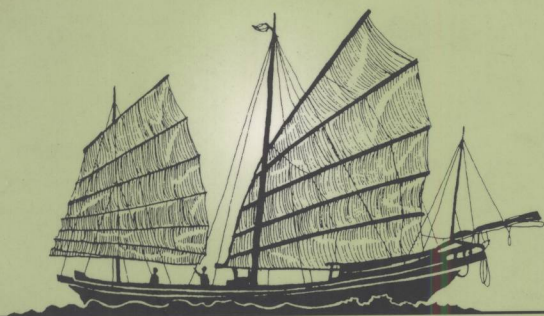


WANG GUNGWU

THE CHINESE OVERSEAS



*From Earthbound China to the
Quest for Autonomy*

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WANG GUNGWU

Harvard University Press

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

LONDON, ENGLAND / 2000

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wang, Gungwu.

The Chinese overseas : from earthbound China to the quest
for autonomy / Wang Gungwu.

p. cm.

“Edwin O. Reischauer lectures.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00234-2 (alk. paper)

1. Chinese—Foreign countries—History. I. Title: From earthbound
China to the quest for autonomy. II. Title.

DS732.W346 2000 99-053438



THE CHINESE OVERSEAS

The Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures, 1997



To Margaret



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*Seaward Sweep:
The Chinese in Southeast Asia*

When I first studied the early trade of the South China Sea, I was struck both by China's contacts in the region as early as the third century B.C. and by the range of possibilities for a growing commercial relationship between China and what looked like a smaller Mediterranean Sea. There were major differences, of course. The sea was more open and more dangerous. The southern and eastern sides were archipelagos rather than another continent. And one empire, China, was dominant, and unchallenged by any maritime power for at least two millennia. Nevertheless the early trade of the first millennium A.D. looked most promising, especially from the Three Kingdoms period (220–280), when the southern kingdom of Wu sought out the Southeast Asian kingdoms and ports for a closer relationship, to the diplomatic and trading relations established during the Tang dynasty (618–906).

The relationship sought by the kingdom of Wu continued to grow. Following the rapid population growth in South China during the second millennium, trade and diplomatic relations gradually became more intense and profitable for both Chinese and various groups of Asian merchants before the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century. But the numbers of Chinese involved in that trade remained relatively small, and few Chinese actually went abroad to live for any length of time. Even more interesting is the fact that, by the time the Chinese did move into the region in large numbers, most of the area had come under Western control.

Why didn't the Chinese take advantage of their early links with the trading ports of Asia? There are many historical questions to examine. They include those concerning the nature of the Chinese imperial state and its policies toward trade, migration, and foreign affairs, and the region's attitudes toward China, but they also touch on specific events, certain cultural values, and the individual's relationship with his family and home. The questions are far-ranging and cover a great variety of issues, large and small. I have chosen here to look at only a few of them.

There are countless clichés about China, and most of them carry a measure of truth. One of the best-known is relevant to the questions asked here; it is the phrase “earthbound China.” I shall expand on it a little and put it in historical perspective by saying that “land-bound and agrarian” defines China as much as “maritime enterprise” underlines the development of Europe. It is a good place to begin to try to understand the way Chinese people have dealt with maritime Asia and why it took so long for the relationship to overcome its initial constraints and finally prosper. In this chapter, I focus on Southeast Asia, which is where most Chinese who traveled outside China went, eventually living and making their homes there.

The story of China’s relations with Southeast Asia has many layers. The phrase earthbound China suggests that the Chinese who went overseas may be seen as atypical, if not downright un-Chinese. It is less well known how the Chinese in Southeast Asia have chafed at that stereotype and striven to prove it wrong. Pre-modern history helps us to understand the complexity of what occurred.

ORIGINS OF THE CONTINENTAL MIND-SET

For a people whose heartland, when they appeared in history as “Chinese,” was the north-central plains of the Yellow River, the maritime world of Southeast Asia was a long way away. In addition, the formation of the Chinese core population required people to move in different directions. During the first and second millennia B.C., various tribal peoples from the north and northwest moved toward the religious and political center located around the bend of the Yellow River and its lower reaches. This area represented the greatest wealth and culture in their known world. The result was the establishment of an ever more powerful polity that thereafter set out to expand outward. By the middle of the first millennium B.C., the center had acquired the intellectual vigor and administrative sophistication that made its power irresistible to the agricultural neighbors to its southeast and southwest. Before the end of that millennium, China had reached the southern coasts and dominated the Yangzi Valley from its delta to the Tibetan foothills.

In sharp contrast, this same polity made little headway toward the lands to the north and west, where the steppes nurtured nomadic tribes that were part of great

confederations.¹ Those tribes that migrated inward, however, eventually became Chinese. But for much of three millennia, few Chinese migrated northward or westward. Instead, the rural and trading Chinese moved readily among their eastern and southern neighbors, ultimately filling the wild spaces and deep valleys of their hilly terrains. The progress of these Chinese was stopped only by the East and South China Seas. Along the coasts, over a period of centuries, they met and intermingled with, and then dominated and absorbed, most of the indigenous so-called Hundred Yue peoples.² All of the Yue peoples, unlike the north-central families who later moved south to live among them, were native to the wetlands and tropical and subtropical climate, and they developed coastal shipping and traveled inland by the many navigable waterways. The Yue fisher folk by the sea sailed up and down the coasts, most notably between the Shandong peninsula and the Yangzi regions of modern Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and the Pearl and Red River deltas of modern Guangdong and northern Vietnam. But they did not venture further.

In contrast, the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia and Egypt, during their formative years, had easy access to

the eastern Mediterranean. Their civilizations stimulated others, which became even more dependent on maritime activity, notably the Phoenicians and the various Greek states. It is inconceivable that the West could have developed as it did without the region's geographical and economic underpinnings that produced the people who appreciated Homer's Trojans and Greeks. In China, there simply was no comparable figure to that of Ulysses in the whole of ancient Chinese folklore, literature, or history. And no ruler of China ever had to cross the sea to save his empire as Julius Caesar had to do. There was no need; the other shore was never where the enemy was.

It is also important to note that Southeast Asia did not develop in a way that attracted much attention from China. State formation in the region was not discernible until the beginning of the first millennium A.D. There were no trading cities or ports that had much to offer their counterparts in Guangzhou and Hanoi (which China controlled for more than a thousand years before the middle of the tenth century A.D.). Not surprisingly, the earliest records of trade with China concern merchants who had come from South Asia and the Middle

East across the Indian Ocean. When northern Chinese migrant families moved south, especially from the fourth century A.D. onward, they adapted to the wetlands and to coastal living, and grew accustomed to many alterations in the elite Huaxia (Chinese) culture they had brought with them. But one elite concern made all the difference for the development of eastern and southern China throughout history: elite dependence on the cultural center in the north, which was characterized by an “earthbound,” continental mind-set regarding the nature of imperial Chinese civilization. This perspective served as the fundamental precondition of agrarian power for all Chinese emperors. The centripetal force that tied all parts of China to the successive capitals in the north, whether located in the northwest like Changan, the north-center like Loyang and Kaifeng, or the northeast like Beijing, was enormously powerful. The capital’s demands, and the opportunities it had to offer, pulled toward the center the best talents, the richest trade, and indeed all the wealth and resources that the center wanted. It was also this force that was to deny the need for adventures across the seas and inhibited the development of trading and diplomatic relations even

after the ports and capitals of Japan and Southeast Asia became increasingly prosperous and attractive to Chinese merchants.

Opportunities for China to expand its relationship with Southeast Asia existed from very early times. We might begin with the record of Xu Fu, sent to the eastern islands (he was thought to have reached Japan) when Qin Shihuangdi was emperor (221–209 B.C.) in search of materials to prolong life. It is astonishing how active the Xu Fu societies in Japan are today in commemorating that first connection. If they are right, the first overseas Chinese settled in Japan late in the third century B.C., and their descendants remain proud to identify with that past.³

Later, during the first millennium A.D., from the first century onward, the Han empire and its successors conducted its overseas trade, and the necessary “tributary” diplomacy, from ports much further south, out of Guangzhou (now the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan) and Jiaozhou (now northern Vietnam). Chinese records reveal numerous kingdoms trading with China, but, except for Funan, Linyi, and Zhenla on the mainland (now Vietnam and Cambodia) and Sri Vijaya and Heling in Java-Sumatra, they were

small polities or port cities, which were incapable of challenging China's power. Precise identification of these places has been tenuous. That in itself suggests why the unified central empire of China did not take them very seriously at the time.⁴

Coastal ships had long been available to the Chinese, but the volume of trade did not stimulate an industry for oceangoing vessels. Nor did the state feel the need for an imperial fleet. For several centuries, the majority of the Chinese traders and Buddhist pilgrims heading for, and returning from, India and West Asia via Southeast Asian ports traveled in foreign ships. There were the ships of the *bosi* and *kunlun* peoples from the region itself,⁵ and there were also Indian and Persian, and later Arab, vessels.

China certainly had the technology to build ocean-going ships. The evidence of the Zhu Ying and Kang Tai expeditions to Southeast Asia in the third century A.D. shows that the skills were there. These skills were simply not encouraged, however, and therefore remained unexploited.

The many official contacts throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, especially between Buddhist Chinese rulers and their counterparts in Southeast and South

Asia, testify to steady religious, trading, and diplomatic relationships in which many coastal Chinese were involved. These led to a major expansion during the Tang dynasty in the trade in spices and medicinal products, which had repercussions in the island economies of the Malay Archipelago.⁶

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), some officials and court eunuchs were sent abroad on the emperor's, or the provincial governor's, business, including to southern kingdoms on the Korean peninsula and to Japan, but I shall confine myself to those who went to Southeast Asia. It was well known, even taken for granted, that the trade at China's ports, especially that of Guangzhou, provided a profitable business for the officials themselves. At another level, private travel was also known. Many Buddhist priests and scholars left China for India, some never to return, including those who chose to reside at religious centers in Southeast Asia itself. I am tempted to compare some of them to modern Chinese students who travel to the West in search of the Truth and do not return, but must note that the scale was much smaller then, and that the imperial state at the time obviously took little interest in their transfers of technology.⁷