



## THE BIG READ

### FIVE QUESTIONS THIS BOOK ANSWERS

1. Why and how did the East and West develop in different directions?
2. Why exactly is the United States concerned about China's rise?
3. Why are the Chinese disdainful of Western ideas and policies?
4. What is the difference between being Confucian and Confucianism?
5. Why did South-east Asia evolve from being important economically to being important politically?

# A history of the world in five chapters

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is just its way of playing catch-up with the maritime powers of the United States and Britain today, argues East and South-east Asia expert Wang Gungwu in a new book with his colleague Ooi Kee Beng

**The Eurasian Core And Its Edges: Dialogues With Wang Gungwu On The History Of The World**  
By Ooi Kee Beng  
254 pages/Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Singapore/\$45.90 with GST from Books Kinokuniya or on loan from the National Library Board under the call number 909.098 WAN



By CHEONG SUK-WAI  
SENIOR WRITER

AT THE Asean Summit earlier this week, leaders of the regional grouping's 10-member countries decided against giving China an ultimatum to stop its avid reclamation works in the South China Sea.

Instead, these leaders stated that they would "much appreciate" it if their large neighbour would honour the Declaration of Conduct between them regarding activity in this sea, which is one of the world's busiest and thus most lucrative shipping routes.

This was after an Asean member, the Philippines, warned that China had reclaimed two reefs in the sea so extensively that it now virtually controls the sea, thus eroding the Philippines' rights over the area. The Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam have competing claims to areas within the sea.

To the general reader, these developments might be as exciting as watching waves rush to shore.

However, this bracing new book – comprising three dialogues between Asian academics Ooi Kee Beng and Wang Gungwu – will show you, among other things, why the Asean-China tussle over the South China Sea will define the 21st century. Also, in many ways, this territorial dispute is a good starting point for assessing afresh how the world as we know it came about.

Wang, a Surabaya-born Australian academic, is the pre-eminent expert on China as well as the Chinese overseas. He also chairs the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, its East Asia Institute and the board of trustees of its Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas).

Ooi is Iseas' deputy director and a scholar of nation-building in Asia, particularly in Malaysia.

He and Wang sat down for five separate chats, lasting about 15 hours in total, on why there is an East and a West in history, why the West colonised the East, why China-bashing is such a sport and why South-east Asia came in from the cold fairly recently.

Thanks to Wang's supple imagination, solid common sense and stiletto-sharp eye for nuance, the result is a series of invigorating epiphanies in five short chapters about Asia's place in the world, then and now.

For a long time, conventional theory held that civilisation sprang from around the Mediterranean Sea, with the Babylonians and Egyptians building the earliest cities along rivers.

Now, Wang asks in the book, what if that was not actually the case? What if, instead, civilisation actually spread out from agrarian-based Eurasia, or Central Asia, meaning that every other territory – West and East – would be on the fringes. Thus, Eurasia is the "core" in the book's title, and everywhere else its "edges", including big powers such as China, Europe and North America.

Then, the Mediterranean-based nomadic Egyptians, Persians and Romans ate into Eurasia, as one would munch an apple, to establish their empires, thus eroding agrarian-based civilisations.

With this world view, Wang argues, it cannot easily be said that the West was, and is, superior to the East, or that the East was, and is, subordinate to the West. In other words, China has never been lower in the geopolitical pecking order.

More significantly for South-east Asia, Eurasia was predominantly Muslim and Europe, predominantly Christian. These two continental, or land-based, territories were bisected by the Mediterranean Sea. This meant that Christian Europe was cut off from the bounty of Asia's Spice Islands until the Portuguese, Dutch, Spaniards and British mastered long sailing and colonised South-east Asia as well as North and South America.

But how is any of it relevant to the future?

Well, the following insights from Wang might answer that.

■ The world as we know it today, Wang says, came about in the last 250 years, and is based on the idea of controlling small islands linked to a mainland.

Using small islands to seat one's power is effective, he argues,



A painting of 15th-century mariner Zheng He. Wang Gungwu says the admiral's failure to expand China's might at sea hampered its development as a naval power, which explains its assertive stance in the South China Sea today. PHOTO: CHUNG CHEE KIT

because it is easy to defend something small. "All you need to do," he says, "is place one well-armed ship there, and nobody would be able to cross."

The British, he notes, built an empire with this strategy. For example, it chose Singapore over the larger Penang or Malacca as its governing base; so too Tulagi, the tiniest atoll in the Solomon Islands, and Gulangyu island off Xiamen in China.

■ China is navally weak today, Wang argues, because 500 years ago, its fleet admiral Zheng He refrained from expanding its sea

power, despite his celebrated voyages around Asia. He was content to accept tributes from South-east Asian rulers for having China protect them from Thailand's marauding fleets.

Today, however, China knows the world revolves around maritime power and, thus, Wang argues, it is trying to strengthen its navy by having a foothold in the South China Sea.

■ The United States feels threatened by China because it is the only country today that offers a credible, if contentious, alternative way to govern.

For example, Wang points out, China's power structure is based on collective leadership. Anyone who wants to become president must do so by age 60. He and his premier can then serve only 10 years at most, to keep them from being all too powerful, as Mao Zedong was. In turn, their five right-hand men can serve only five years at most, after which they are replaced by five more people already waiting in line.

Such succession planning, Wang notes, avoids fallout from partisan politics like the deadlock that resulted in a fiscal cliff and shut down the US government in 2013.

■ Wang says the South China Sea could be seen as a second Mediterranean, with an arc from Japan down to the Malay archipelago and back up to India.

This would put South-east Asia front and centre in geopolitics – a welcome change from its insignificance in Western eyes until the 1950s. Then, stern fears that communist Russia would control the region led the US and Britain to help shape regional groupings such as Asean to unite states in the region, keep it peaceful... and keep out the then Soviet Union.

Some readers will find Ooi and Wang's dialogues disquietingly revisionist. But those reading them with an open mind will find that Wang's arguments provide satisfying answers to perplexing posers such as: "Why are the Chinese wont to bend rules?", "What exactly does the Chinese government fear about freedom?", and "Why do the Chinese not trust the Japanese?"

Lucid, vivid and avid, this book is a welcome addition to the world's bookshelves.

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### Asian century? Share views at May 27 meet

WILL there ever be an Asian century?

Asia's place in a world weaned on Western thinking is the topic of the next Big Read Meet on May 27.

Join senior writer Cheong Suk-Wai to discuss academic Ooi Kee Beng's *The Eurasian Core And Its Edges* from 6.30pm in the Central Public Library at Basement 1, National Library Board headquarters, 100 Victoria Street.

You can sign up for the meet at the e-kiosks in any NLB branch, or click on [www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary](http://www.nlb.gov.sg/golibrary) and follow the steps there.

Many among you enjoyed April's Big Read on the hydra that is social media, that is, Jon Ronson's *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. Reader Kelvin Seah has this to say about the book:

"Ronson's style of writing kept me turning the pages. The real people and real

events he shared were often amazing and hard to fathom in cocoon-safe Singapore. In fact, some of his tales were so incredulous that I Googled them just to satisfy myself that they were fact, not fiction! Ronson's stories have given me much food for thought about the ways of social media today, and these will likely find their way into my lessons for my media students as well as my children."

A father of two, Mr Seah, 45, teaches the Diploma in Communications and Media Management course at Temasek Polytechnic's School of Business.

If you'd like to share your views on any of the books featured in *The Big Read*, e-mail your thoughts in not more than 100 words to [suk@sph.com.sg](mailto:suk@sph.com.sg). We will publish your best contributions in this column.

### Just a minute

## THE GOOD



■ Eminent academic Wang Gungwu, whose long years of learning, particularly on China, is the subject of Ooi Kee Beng's book, is able to connect even the most disparate dots to form a very sharp big picture of how civilisations developed and why East and West find it hard to see eye to eye. He does so by unleashing a series of insights into why and how geography and humanity's deepest-seated needs and wants shaped the world as we know it. He then pulls all these insights together to show how cogent and cohesive his view of the world is. All this adds up to a book whose scope of ambition, elegant articulation and self-deprecating delivery is a class act.

■ He expresses his thoughts so simply and precisely that even a teenager with the loosest grasp of history will be able to follow his compelling arguments. In fact, I would recommend that this primer on world history be on the required reading list for students of the General Paper or its equivalent.

■ In shedding light on China, a land power, and the West, made up mostly of sea powers, Wang gives readers the keys to unlock the seemingly inscrutable Chinese psyche. In doing so, he consistently casts China as a benign giant which is riling its neighbours with its actions in the South China Sea in its bid to boost its naval chops.

■ Wang and Ooi are careful to show how the twists and turns of various countries' histories are relevant to everyone's lives today. For example, in only 250 years, the United States has built up so much naval power that it controls most of the world's coasts. So every time China tries to "get its foot in" sea-wise, Wang says, it gets "scolded" by the West.

## THE BAD



■ Ooi might want to consider changing this book's title to something that better reflects its valuable insights on East meets West. While nobody should judge a book by its cover, Ooi meant to make this book more accessible to the general reader so words such as "Eurasian", "core" and "edges" will throw off even the most curious bookworm, who has no reference points on these terms.

## THE IFFY



■ Ooi presents his and Wang's ruminations as an ongoing dialogue. While that makes the book easier for readers to understand by enabling them to dip in and out of it without drowning in historical deep ends, serious scholars may find their leaping about many regions as unsettling as it is exhilarating. For example, within Chapter 2 alone, Ooi and Wang traverse Africa, Europe, India and Indochina.

### FACT FILE: From cellphone-chip quality controller to respected expert on Asia

FOR 22 years, Ooi Kee Beng says he "never had weekends" as he worked 36 hours straight on Saturdays and Sundays, week after week, at Swedish communications-technology giant Ericsson's quality control department. He spent the rest of the week studying courses ranging from sociology to psychology and, in those 22 years, gained a degree in public

administration and a PhD for his thesis on nation-building.

Ericsson paid its weekend workers lucratively. As Ooi, 63, recalls in an interview with *The Straits Times* on Tuesday: "I switched the machines on, checked from time to time that they were working well, and read."

Born and brought up in Penang, he was a court reporter turned sub-editor for *The Star*

and *The Straits Echo* newspapers there in his early 20s before joining his two elder brothers in Stockholm when he was 23.

He earned his keep by washing dishes, scrubbing floors and flipping hamburgers in restaurants there. Then one of his customers, who worked for Ericsson, suggested that he try for a job in quality control.

Now a Swedish citizen, the

twice-married father of one, who is also a grandfather, grew increasingly discomfited by Western philosophy's "fixation with logic" and, in search of the nature of knowledge and meaning, he secured a scholarship from the government of China in 1989 to immerse himself in Chinese language and culture in Beijing. He returned to Sweden with, among other

things, a silver medal from the world wushu championships and enough Chinese calligraphy to hold two exhibitions in Sweden.

In 2004, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Iseas) here took him on as a visiting fellow focusing on Malaysia studies and, in 2011, he was made Iseas' deputy director.

Since then, he says, he has had more time to listen to Wang

Gungwu talk and was struck by how lucid the latter was. Wanting to share Wang's learning with a wider audience, he broached the idea of doing a book based on chats they would have on world history. Ooi says Wang "agreed immediately". That culminated in *The Eurasian Core And Its Edges*, a book which Ooi says has "changed my thinking the most".