Source: *The Sunday Times,* pB4-B5
Date: 30 April 2017



ST FILE PHOTO

A challenge to test loyalty

Pre-eminent scholar Wang Gungwu (left) says the best way for the Chinese overseas to reassure their birth countries of their loyalty is to assert it.

China's recent embracing of every foreigner of Chinese descent as one of its own is particularly problematic for Singapore, says Professor Wang Gungwu.

In 2000, Beijing apparently abandoned its long-entrenched policy of distancing itself from the ethnic Chinese born – or those long settled – overseas. That abandonment became particularly pronounced from 2011. In fact, in 1955, he notes that China's then Premier Zhou Enlai urged such Chinese to integrate fully with the societies and cultures of the countries in which they had chosen to settle.

This current change in policy means that Beijing considers every ethnic Chinese outside China – which, for this purpose, includes Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan – just about on a par with mainland Chinese.

Prof Wang, 86, is a pre-eminent scholar on the Chinese communities of South-east Asia. He chairs the East Asian Institute and the board of trustees of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, among other things.

The reason for this policy U-turn, Prof Wang says, is so that Beijing can tap the non-mainland ethnic Chinese outside China for support in its bid to realise its potential as a new superpower.

The special problem for Singapore, he points out, is an old one: that some from mainland China still think Singapore is part of China, and not the sovereign country that it is.

POTENTIAL FOR MISUNDERSTANDING

"The thing is," he says, "Singaporeans are more like the Chinese in China than any other Chinese in South-east Asia, and so that can give the China-born Chinese the impression that they're exactly the same as in China.

"The similarities and differences between them are subtler, and that can lead to misunderstandings between Singaporeans and those from the People's Republic of China."

That, he adds, might put Singapore in an awkward position when, say, China looks to the Republic to advance its interests. Take the One Belt, One Road initiative, which is meant to connect China to business and other opportunities in at least 60 countries in Central and South-east Asia.

"Everyone in China is caught up in this, but the vast majority of people don't have a clue as to what it is all about. And China may think that Singapore can be a great help to it in this, as Singapore has invested so much in China, has so much knowledge about it and seems to understand its goals."

He shares these insights in the light of Singaporean historian and international relations scholar Leo Suryadinata's new book, The Rise Of China And The Chinese Overseas.

In it, Dr Suryadinata argues that Beijing's blurring of the distinction between its mainlanders who have migrated overseas and ethnic Chinese who have long settled overseas is a big worry, especially in South-east Asia, whose indigenous peoples still resent the Chinese among them for their enterprise, wealth and economic clout.

CORE INTERESTS COME FIRST

In fact, Dr Suryadinata asserts, China will protect the Chinese overseas, as it were, only if and when the latter's interests coincide with, and do not contradict in any way, what he calls China's "core national interests", such as national security, territorial integrity, social and economic development, and survival of the Communist Party of China.

Prof Wang, who like many calls Dr Suryadinata Pak Leo, says: "Pak Leo is perfectly correct to say that, ultimately, the Chinese in China operate for their own interests; they are thinking of themselves."

To his mind, Beijing's current charm offensive towards Chinese who are overseas seems more like an attempt to reverse its brain drain. That is because in the past 20 years or so, there has been a surge in mainland Chinese migrating for educational, work and business opportunities. In his book, Dr Suryadinata notes that some studies have put the number of such migrants, or *xin yimin*, at six million in the late 1990s, and between seven million and eight million in 2007.

OVER-EAGER POLICY PUSHERS

Because of Beijing's widened interest in the Chinese overseas, every major department of the government is pushing its own envelope on this. They are very eager, perhaps over-eager, doing things fast and pushing for this policy very aggressively.

PROF WANG GUNGWU on how there are far more over-eager bureaucrats than experts on overseas Chinese in Beijing these days.

These "new migrants", Prof Wang says, are the ones Beijing really wants to woo, to rev up its innovations and creativity. As he sees it, the Chinese of South-east Asia are not quite on Beijing's radar; South-east Asia is, in fact, "peripheral" to Beijing's interests.

So, he says with his characteristic vigour: "I'm not convinced that there is a Chinese policy now to woo everyone of Chinese blood."

For that reason, he does not think that Beijing has actually had a change of heart towards those who have settled for generations outside China. "So the Chinese overseas have to ask, 'That's of interest to them, but is it of interest to me? And how might China's interest affect my community and the other people in my country?'"

The Chinese overseas, he adds, would do well indeed to be aware of how exactly Beijing's new policy towards them would likely affect them.

As it is, he notes, such considerations are not top of the mind for Beijing because, as he puts it, "that is not their prime purpose".

That is because the professionals and policymakers in Beijing who specialise in understanding and tracking the affairs of foreigners of Chinese descent are few and far between these days, he says.

In their place is a veritable scrum of over-eager bureaucrats, he notes. "Now, because of Beijing's widened interest in the Chinese overseas, every major department of the government is pushing its own envelope on this. They are very eager, perhaps over-eager, doing things fast and pushing for this policy very aggressively."

"But," he cautions, "they are not the professionals (of yore) or experts on the Chinese overseas. Everyone has a very different idea about 'How do I get so-and-so to come back?' They are coming from very different departments, and they're not coordinated because each of them has his department's own objectives, how to get somebody to come back and work, or advise on China's finances or scientific research, and so on."

Be that as it may, he says the ethnic Chinese who have long settled outside China should "be clear as to where their sense of belonging is". In a way, he says, Beijing's apparent charm offensive towards them is a "challenge" to them "not to be confused... but to be clear and steadfast about what they believe in and who they are".

ROLE FOR CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

In this, he adds, Chinese chambers of commerce and similar associations in their countries could help them overcome that challenge by being "alert" to what is happening and understanding that China is not asking the Chinese overseas "to abandon all their previous allegiances".

Might it help defuse tensions between the ethnic Chinese and the sometimes-resentful non-Chinese communities among whom they live – say, in Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam – if these Chinese took them along on business trips, or shared other similar opportunities with them?

"They will have to think very hard how to do it," he says. "I can also see why some among these Chinese might be tempted to take advantage of these policy changes in China to gain personal advantage. And they would just break ranks and do things just to benefit themselves, no matter what the consequences to the others are. This is a human thing and one can't rule it out."

To his mind, there is no question among the younger Chinese in such countries as to where their loyalties are. "They belong where they are now and they have no intention of changing that," he notes.

The really delicate issue is whether the governments and non-Chinese communities in such countries misunderstand China's move to woo Chinese talent to help it develop well.

He says: "They might actually be reacting for local reasons of disputations, debates and dissatisfaction, or rivalry and envy, which are quite normal in every society.

"But the point is that they may take this as a reason why they should adopt a different policy towards their people of Chinese origins. That will be a pity, and that's what is worrying."

Cheong Suk-Wai

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Permission required for reproduction.