



Professor Wang Gungwu speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2019 conference on Monday. Also on the panel were former foreign minister George Yeo (left) and Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh. Prof Wang says mere regular meetings between Asean and its partner states may not be enough if either China or the US insists that Asean has to decide which side it supports. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

The tension between north and south in China's history

This is an edited excerpt of a speech by Professor Wang Gungwu at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2019 conference on Monday. Prof Wang chairs the board of trustees at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

As a focal point in the US reaction to China's rise, Asean members know that it is more crucial than ever to be united. When the Americans redefined their strategic concerns by moving the goal posts from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, the decision made South-east Asia more central to the competing powers.

Singapore's place in the world depends so much on its place in the region. It's a region that is gaining in importance, in part because there has been a general shift and recognition that it is in the heart of a new dynamic economic region called the Indo-Pacific region.

This is of course nothing new. The Indo-Pacific has always been there, two oceans, in which Singapore's region has been at the heart of it.

In the days when the region's major players were on the Indian Ocean side, centred on India, on the Western Pacific side, centred on China, this region we now call South-east Asia (it didn't have a name before) was central to that region for thousands of years.

That is not new; in other words, there's something very fundamental about the regional position of Singapore in the region and the region in the larger old world of the Eurasian continent land mass. It is in that context that I want to talk about Singapore's region.

Today, we have a global power – the United States – and a regional power – China. Between a global power and a regional power, we have enough expertise to look at the broader global scene. China at the moment is the focus of attention and I think it is right for us to spend a bit more time on that.

China has been a dominant power in this region from very early on. So how China sees the region seems something that we need to look at very closely.

The original China was far away from this region, namely in the Yellow River delta, and was there for hundreds of years before it looked south, and for a long time its perception of the south was simply of the "Hundred Yue", the southern south-western peoples of the south-west but they had very little to do with each other for a long time.

It was not until about 2,000 years ago that that part of China began to move south and took over some parts of what is now south-eastern China or what we normally call South China, and China began to emerge on the edge of the South China Sea, and that was only 2,000 years ago.

But by that time, the people in South-east Asia had already formulated its own identity and personality relating to the western part of the region in the Indian Ocean, and of course had its very deep commercial links already with

the Western Pacific, including of course the southern coast of China. That's the background.

China moved south largely because the north was being invaded again and again by various tribal peoples from the north, north-eastern, north-western part of the land mass of Eurasia, forcing the people of China originally in the Yellow River area to move south – and they came down gradually over the centuries until southern China became also China in the south.

In that context, China had moved southwards to what is now called South China. But it was not until the 10th century that there was such a thing as China in the south. By that time the north had been basically taken over by northern peoples from the steppes of the northern Central Asian land mass.

The Han Chinese moved more and more to the south and intermingled with the original indigenous inhabitants of the Yue people in the south to form a new kind of society.

And because they were isolated and there were divisions, the south was mainly defending itself from being conquered from the north for a long time. For about 200 years, during which time a little kingdom – today we would normally associate it with the Song empire but actually it was a Song kingdom. The southern Song for about 150 years was all that was left of the original China because much of north China had already been taken over by other peoples.

But even then the story did not end. What was intriguing is that China was eventually integrated into one China again, from the north by the Mongols. We often forget the Mongols were active everywhere. We noticed that they spread right across into Europe and the Middle East and the Mediterranean, but of course its most important and most successful empire was under Kublai Khan in Yuan China.

But what is significant about Yuan China, Mongol China was that it integrated all of China again for the first time in hundreds of years and by that integration it pulled the southern Chinese back into the northern ambit, so to speak.

The north became the dominant feature of China's history for the next 600 or 700 years.

SOUTH CHINA'S TRADING LINKS WITH THE REGION

Where Singapore is concerned, it's probably not entirely a coincidence

that we first heard of Temasek at a time when the Mongol empire was at its peak in China.

It was when Kublai Khan in fact had conquered all of China that we first heard of the island called Temasek. Mongol power drew the northern Chinese back into the southern Chinese back into the northern ambit and from that time onwards to the 19th century, the southern peoples in China, in the China of the south, were struggling to keep up their economic and other relations with the region in the south – that is South-east Asia – by trading, often against imperial edicts.

Nevertheless, the trading went on, actively involving numerous peoples – the Arabs, the Indians, the South-east Asians and eventually the Europeans, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and, eventually, the French and the Americans. So that was a period where the south in China, China's south, was deeply involved in the commercial relations of South-east Asia and the rest of the region.

And that was a time, however, where the political authority, the centre was always up in the north and the south was constrained by the north not to be too active.

THE TWO REVOLUTIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

And in the 20th century, we saw two revolutions that totally transformed that China. But that transformation itself deserves our special attention because those two revolutions changed the nature, the structure of Chinese society in some very profound ways.

For one thing, what South China represented, for all those centuries of northern dominance, was a group of people who were primarily entrepreneurial, commercial, technically oriented, who were very enterprising and trying to create a new economic environment for themselves; while at the same time being politically dominated by the forces in the north.

But this tension between northern political and military power and southern entrepreneurial and technical expertise remained throughout that whole period down to the end of the 19th century.

But the 19th century, the opening of China gave the southern Chinese, the southern Chinese entrepreneurs in particular, but also their technical and scientific talents down in the south, an opportunity to rise above their positions, the low positions that they were allocated through the centuries.

That fundamental transformation in Chinese society has now created a new China and the two revolutions that occurred, the ones in 1911 and 1949, totally transformed their structure.

It was a structure in which the literati together with the military and the peasantry formed the basis of that society. But after the two revolutions, the technologists, scientists and entrepreneurs rose in their positions in the society, became invaluable to the economic development and progress of the country.

And the literati took another form in the form of the party, a new concept, a new kind of organisation drawn from the Western experience and Western political structures, a party in which a new literati together with the military formed the ruling elite. But balancing that was an emerging power of the scientific, technological and enterprising entrepreneurial sections of society forming a balance in the structure.

This is new to China. It really took shape under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. When Deng reformed China, he basically created a new balance in which the party elite and military are balanced by the scientific, technological entrepreneurs of southern origins.

That balance remains I think, when we look today at China's relations with our region in the south.

South-east Asia, of course, also underwent fantastic changes. After the imperial period, the period of decolonisation, (we have) a group of sovereign states that are now united together in their effort to defend the region against the rivalries of major powers outside the region – a task still very much a work in progress.

In that context, let me just look at China's position vis-a-vis the region in which Singapore is at the heart of.

China's south is more open than ever before and Beijing's leaders remain in strict control, but they have discovered new ways to move forward. This has led to one of the

country's biggest ideas, the One Belt, One Road initiative that seeks to create more opportunities for future economic growth.

Its key feature is that it covers both the overland and maritime potentials across the whole stretch of the old Eurasian world, where a balanced approach is essential to advance China's long-term interests. The overland Silk Road and the growing dependence on access to maritime ports are two sides of the same vision whereby China safeguards its national goals in both directions at the same time.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the overland belt and the maritime road is important and the Chinese expect that the challenges facing each half would be different.

The overland Belt across Eurasia to reach markets in Europe has not been attractive for centuries. What distinguishes China's new approach is that this Belt is also reaching southwards to the Indian Ocean. Here, geopolitical advantage is obviously more important and that has induced neighbouring states to join the organisation with that in mind.

China's south, the maritime "Silk Road" is a different story. It is now central to future economic development. Keeping the waters secure for China's maritime linkages has never been so vital.

For the first time in its history, the south is an existential problem for its national interests. There are at least three dimensions to their changing condition.

First, the dynamism in globalisation depends a great deal on entrepreneurs and inventive industrialists who are always more active and better appreciated in southern China. Chinese northern leaders claim to understand the need to give them fuller rein to devise the best methods for the initiative to grow, but they are still too prone to impose tight controls on the slightest provocation.

Second, the countries to China's south are now sovereign states in an overarching international system and have organised themselves to protect the region. This is not to say that Asean is united in everything. It is obvious that its members are seeking unity in several key areas. But the association has come a long way and its members understand how important it is for them to do things together and not allow outside forces to create dangerous and unnecessary divisions.

Third, the South China Sea has become a source of tension between the United States and China. The subject now involves countries not bordering the South China Sea, including United States allies like Japan and Australia and some countries of the European Union.

As a focal point in the US reaction to China's rise, Asean members know that it is more crucial than ever to be united. When the Americans redefined their strategic concerns by moving the goal posts from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, the decision made South-east Asia more central to the competing powers. No one is certain how the threats to peace and prosperity can be eliminated. Mere regular meetings between Asean and its partner states may not be enough if either China or the United States insists that Asean has to decide which side it supports.

China's entrepreneurial classes have to face these factors confronting the Silk Road in China's south. They know the region and are unlikely to take the unity of Asean for granted.

They also have to ensure that their northern leaders understand the demands of coastal and maritime outreach as well as the different demands of the economies across Asean's land borders.

The proposals to connect China's southern provinces to the South China Sea and as well as the Bay of Bengal through Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, point to the importance of the land-sea dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative and the measures needed to ensure that both parts of the initiative support each other. Furthermore, there are now millions of settlers of Chinese descent in South-east Asia who are loyal to their respective nation-states.

Most people in south China are able to relate to these communities and know how to deal with them with care. But those responsible among the central elites, especially those of northern origins, have not found these localised communities easy to understand.

If China hopes that these nationals of Chinese descent would play a positive role in their countries' relations with China, it would have to exercise sensitivity to their local interests as well as the interests of the countries where they have made their homes.