

Being Chinese overseas

Wang Gungwu did not set out to study the history of the overseas Chinese, but he is now renowned in this relatively new field



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Professor Wang Gungwu is the quintessential overseas Chinese.

He was born in Surabaya, Indonesia, in 1930. He grew up in Ipoh in what is now Malaysia and went to university in Nanjing, Singapore and London.

He then lived and worked in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Canberra and Hong Kong, with short stints in the United States and Britain.

It is not surprising, then, that as a historian, he should choose to study the history of the overseas Chinese, even though he did not initially set out to do so. His interest at the beginning was focused on happenings inside China, and that interest remains.

Last month, Prof Wang, 89, who is now a professor at the National University of Singapore and emeritus professor at the Australian National University, won the Tang Prize for Sinology, mainly for his work on overseas Chinese.

He has received many accolades for his work on Chinese history, including an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Cambridge University in 2009.

But the Tang prize, conferred by the Tang Prize Foundation of Taiwan, is special in that it was awarded in recognition of his work on overseas Chinese.

Sinology, said Prof Wang, had always been focused on China and never included the study of Chinese communities abroad.

The field of sinology was developed in the West as an extension of oriental studies, and concentrated on the study of the Chinese civilisation, especially its languages, history and philosophy over four millennia.

It was only recently that the history of Chinese communities outside China was formally accepted in academia as a subject, and very few universities offer courses on it.

"So you can imagine how happy I am that my work in this area has now been acknowledged," said Prof Wang in an e-mail interview.

TWISTS AND TURNS

He had wanted to study modern Chinese history at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

But partly by force of circumstance and partly due to his father's influence, he began studying ancient Chinese history.

Questions about China interested him as they pertained to his own

past, he told Mr Asad Latif in conversations published in the book *Wang Gungwu: Junzi: Scholar- Gentleman*.

He wanted to know why Confucian officials, who were products of families like his own, failed to respond to the challenges of the 19th century after having kept the imperial system going for hundreds of years. Why had they been completely overthrown and supplanted by young people who rejected Confucianism and instead embraced Western ideas, from liberalism to communism?

But after the communist victory in China in 1949, and with Singapore battling its own leftists at the time, anything to do with modern China was politically suspect. Books published in China were banned, and that limited his research material.

So he turned to ancient history instead, another of his interests, having been taught the Chinese classics by his father.

After obtaining his doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, he began teaching in Singapore in 1957. That was when he started researching overseas Chinese communities, after being asked to give public talks.

No one was interested in the work he had just completed on 10th-century Chinese history, he recalled in his interview with *The Sunday Times*. What was of interest then was the worrying idea that the overseas Chinese – or *huaqiao*, as they were known – could be a fifth column for the People's Republic of China.

At the time, both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party vied for the support of the local Chinese.

His book, *A Short History Of The Nanyang Chinese*, grew out of these talks and "gained attention because I demonstrated that the different local groups of Chinese in the region varied a great deal, and to treat them as a single political *huaqiao* community was misleading", Prof Wang remembered.

He had to learn about the overseas Chinese quickly, because he was seen as *huaqiao* and was expected to know everything about the subject.

"That put a lot of pressure on me to learn fast so that I could answer some of their questions without making many mistakes," he said.

He studied the works of several experts from the Nanyang Xuehui – or South Seas Society – who had been working on the subject, especially the work of Hsu Yun-Ts'iao.

But it was through the talks that his interest in South-east Asian Chinese was aroused.

"It was clear that a new era had come for them when I saw the new pressures they faced at a very tense



Professor Wang Gungwu's considerable body of work on the overseas Chinese was recognised last month by the Tang Prize Foundation of Taiwan, which conferred on him the Tang Prize for Sinology. ST FILE PHOTO

period of nation-building," he said. "And this led me back to the history of their migration and settlement."

He would go on to do a lot more, and his body of work on the subject is now considerable.

WHO ARE THE OVERSEAS CHINESE?

The Chinese had been travelling and settling in South-east Asia for at least 10 centuries before the end of the 19th century.

Two points stand out for Prof Wang in his study of their migration and settlement.

The first is that the Chinese did not come from a country called China, but from the Ming and then the Manchu Qing empires.

"They were mostly traders, sailors and workers from the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong, and both the imperial houses and their ruling elites did not care about them," he noted.

They shared some religious practices and bonded together through common ideas about honour, group loyalty, enterprise and hard work.

They most naturally identified with their villages, home towns and speech groups, and some identified with the secret societies that were in part organised for their protection.

"If they were attacked, they would fight together, but they would normally (rather) compete

with one another than cooperate," said Prof Wang.

They had no concept of belonging to a Chinese nation until the 19th century, he noted.

The second point of importance to Prof Wang is that some of the early Chinese settlers who traded with the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch and the English began to understand the idea of national identity by observing how these European imperial nations became rich and powerful.

Later, others were inspired by Sun Yat Sen's revolutionaries to reject monarchy and establish a republic, said Prof Wang. Sun had travelled to Singapore and Malaya in the early 1900s to drum up support among the Nanyang Chinese for his goal to overthrow the Qing dynasty.

Japanese incursions into China since the end of World War I and the 1937 to 1945 Sino-Japanese War further narrowed the overseas Chinese sense of national identity.

Their new-found sense of patriotism was later tested by decolonisation and the rise of local nationalists who would only accept them if they stopped identifying with the new China.

"What they had experienced that had led them to adapt to European colonial rule now forced them to make very difficult choices about

becoming local nationals," said Prof Wang.

Some returned to China, and the majority remained behind.

For the Chinese who have long settled in the South-east Asian region, the rapid rise of China in the last few decades has meant that how their respective countries relate to this China would determine what they might do whenever issues with China arise.

Furthermore, there is now a new and large wave of Chinese migrants to other parts of the world who are different from the earlier migrants in almost every way, said Prof Wang.

Most of them do not come from the southern coasts of China, and they are better educated – but in ways that are unfamiliar to the original overseas Chinese.

"The culture of these new migrants, *xinyimin*, has been changed, sometimes radically, by the 40 years of Maoist revolution and now further changed by recent contacts with the capitalist West," he said.

"They have a much more complex relationship with their family and friends and, not least, the state authorities," he added.

Their expectations are also different.

Much is therefore in a state of flux for Chinese communities overseas. With nationalist and populist developments everywhere, a great deal

about their future has become unpredictable.

"This is a time of great uncertainty, and the Chinese overseas have to learn a lot more about themselves and be alert to what is happening in each of their own countries," he said.

WHERE IS HOME?

For Prof Wang himself, an overseas Chinese who has lived in several countries, China has loomed large since he was young.

His parents had left home for better economic prospects in South-east Asia, but there was never a question that they would return to China one day.

He was prepared from a young age for that eventuality, so although he went to an English school, his father taught him the Chinese classics and his mother told him stories about China and about herself.

"She did so to make me conscious of my family in China and thus prepare me for our return to China," wrote Prof Wang in his memoir.

When asked by *The Sunday Times* where home was for him, he replied: "My quest started with China as a country I never knew."

This quest continued "with Malaya as a country yet to be born", a place where he grew up and for which he has great affection.

After he completed his doctorate in London, he and his wife Margaret returned to Singapore, where he taught at his alma mater, the University of Malaya.

But then the university started a campus in Kuala Lumpur, and he decided to move there.

"It was my idea that home was the Malaya that had just become independent, and working in the country's capital was a good way to identify with the country's beginnings," he said.

"Having grown up in the Malay state of Perak, for which I still have great affection, that seemed the natural thing to do."

He added: "It was exciting to be part of a generation that would build the new nation and teach on the new campus in order to support its development."

Many things happened in the region during Prof Wang's tenure at the university from 1959 to 1968: the creation of Malaysia and the unexpected separation of Singapore, the Vietnam War and the Maoist upheavals that led to the Cultural Revolution, among other events.

He was torn between doing more to study Malayan and South-east Asian history and continuing with his work on Chinese history that was becoming known in the scholarly world.

Then, "out of the blue", came three offers to teach Chinese history in Britain, the US and Australia, where he would have access to excellent libraries and documentary collections that were unavailable or prohibited in Malaysia.

He and his young family left Malaysia for Australia in 1968.

Home, for Prof Wang, would be "campuses where I enjoy the freedom I wanted to teach and learn, and wherever I could do the work that could stir my spirits".

After nearly 20 years at the Australian National University, he became vice-chancellor of The University of Hong Kong in 1986.

He lived in Hong Kong till his retirement in 1995 and moved to Singapore the following year to head the Institute of East Asian Political Economy, which is now the East Asian Institute. He has lived here since then.

Where is home now, after decades of a near-nomadic life?

The answers, said Prof Wang, could perhaps be found in the soon-to-be-published second volume of his memoir, co-written with his wife.

In 1968, as they prepared to leave the new house that they had built in Kuala Lumpur, in a country that they had considered to be home, to start their new life in Canberra, Margaret said "home is where we are".

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The Singapore chapter

Professor Wang Gungwu came back to Singapore in January 1996, after an absence of 37 years.

He had left in 1959 for Kuala Lumpur to teach at the University of Malaya's new campus, and had subsequently retired as vice-chancellor of The University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1995.

At the time, he was planning to return to Australia, where he is a citizen.

But Professor Chan Heng Chee, then director of the Institute of South-east Asian Studies (ISEAS, now the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute), heard that Prof Wang was retiring from HKU and invited him to join the institute as a visiting professorial fellow.

After accepting this offer, Prof Wang received a letter from former deputy prime minister Goh

Keng Swee. He was asked to take over the running of the Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE), which in 1997 became the East Asian Institute (EAI) under the National University of Singapore (NUS).

IEAS agreed to his taking up the position at IEAPE while retaining his title of distinguished professorial fellow at the former.

This began Prof Wang's third and ongoing sojourn in the city-state 24 years ago. The first was from 1949 to 1954 as a student at the University of Malaya; the second from 1957 to 1959 as a teacher at his alma mater.

His work at the EAI, first as director until 2007 and then as chairman till 2018, was absorbing, said Prof Wang. "It taxed my ability to make my historical background useful to help explain what was rapidly changing in the PRC (Peo-

ple's Republic of China)," he said.

"What was really challenging was how to do that without getting caught in current and fashionable social science theories and simply join in debates using their analytical frameworks," he added.

This was at the insistence of Dr Goh, who was sceptical of Western social scientists drawing on theories developed out of studying their own or other countries to analyse what was happening in China.

"Instead, he challenged us at EAI to examine directly and closely all accessible Chinese sources, together with documents from elsewhere, and try to explain what China was doing," said Prof Wang.

Prof Wang also became chairman of ISEAS in 2002 and of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) in 2004, both major institutions of research and learning in Singapore.

He professes to have deep affection for ISEAS, an institution with which he has been involved since it was founded more than 50 years ago.

"It has contributed a great deal to educate the world about our region," he noted in an e-mail interview with *The Sunday Times*.

Now that the world's centre stage seems to be shifting to Asia and the Indo-Pacific, South-east Asia is a more strategic region than ever in its history, he said.

"I see ISEAS becoming ever more valuable to all those who are committed to making the world more peaceful and prosperous."

As for the LKYSPP, Prof Wang said it was the most practical institution he has ever been involved in all of his working life.

"It was an eye-opening experience to see how an institution developed in Harvard might be

adapted for a totally different kind of country and region to serve different ends," he said. The school had its beginnings in NUS' public policy programme that was established in partnership with Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

"The task required imagination and agility, and the founding dean (Kishore Mahbubani) was able to put together a fine team to enable the school to adjust to the many changes our region faced during its first decade and a half," said Prof Wang.

He has now relinquished his leadership roles at all three institutions: EAI (2018), LKYSPP (2017) and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (2019). But he still follows with interest what each institution is doing.

He continues to research and write. His book, *China Reconnects – Joining A Deep-rooted Past To A*

New World Order, was published last year.

Prof Wang is currently working on volume two of his memoir, co-written with his wife Margaret and titled *Home Is Where We Are*, which is coming out this year. The first volume, *Home Is Not Here*, was published in 2018.

He hopes to write an essay on the American turn in China's history.

His interest in China appears all-consuming. As he says: "I am fascinated by how China might find its place in a new world order. Most of all, while (I am) sorry I will not live long enough to see it happen, I am curious to know what will result after the efforts of generations of Chinese finally enabled their country to find the modernity they feel safe and comfortable with."

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