
In reviewing Wang Gungwu’s 18 years in Australia and forecasting his busy stewardship of Hong Kong University during a period of politically sensitive preparations for the transfer of power from Hong Kong’s British colonial masters to the Chinese Communist leadership, Stephen FitzGerald commented that “Wang Gungwu has not contributed a great book .... His ideas are already mapped out. Whether they [will be] brought together in one historical blockbuster remains to be seen after he has finished his stint at Hong Kong University” (p. 46). Indeed, since Wang’s subsequent departure from Hong Kong and his assumption of the directorship of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore in 1997, he has had more time and energy to review his previous intellectual output and compile into consolidated volumes a wide range of articles, chapters-in-books, seminar papers, keynote lectures and interviews. The effort required in the selection, organization, polishing, condensation, and addition of some new pieces to provide fluency and coherence in a particular volume is not to be underestimated, even if it is achieved with the assistance of a number of editors. As a result, an impressive flow of publications of Wang’s writings and lectures has appeared in recent years. There have been, for example, the five-volume series published by Times Academic Press (later reprinted by the Eastern Universities Press) from 2001 to 2002 and the two Chinese-language collections put out by Global Publishing in 2000 and 2002.

This latest publication should be seen as a part of that energetic venture. Gregor Benton and Liu Hong have succeeded in putting together such a volume by Routledge Curzon partly because of Wang’s assistance in “track[ing] down elusive texts and solving some enigmas that arose along the way” and his willingness “to answer our questions and to help sort out issues of copyright and bibliographic citation” (p. ix). Producing such a work necessarily involves a fairly high degree of reprinting old as well as more recent publications (in some cases with amendments) and translation works. A large number of the 18 chapters in this book are certainly repeated publications, even though the precise proportion is difficult to ascertain given the brief editorial notations. Borrowing a phrase from the subtitle of chapter 18, “How new? Why new?,” the reader may well point out that the book is not exactly breaking new ground. However, even for scholars, originality should not be the sole criterion in their assessment of a book. By putting together a collection of works pertaining specifically to the spread of Chinese communities overseas, the book has arguably succeeded in providing
greater accessibility to the writings of Wang for both the specialists and the general readers, and in bridging the two different worlds of the English and Chinese languages.

More significantly, true to its chosen theme of “the life and work of Wang Gungwu,” the book provides useful insights into the man and his craft. Although Wang has been regarded as a doyen of Southeast Asian studies, and he has on occasion contended that eventually “neither [Chinese nor Southeast Asian history] gets the upper hand,” it comes across in this volume that he has regarded the “starting point,” the “point of departure,” and the “main field” of his study as Chinese history (p. 17). It is in this discipline that he has honed his skill in interpreting Chinese sources, understanding the nuances of Chinese cultural values in both the Chinese and non-Chinese environments, and exploring the shifting identities among Chinese communities overseas especially vis-à-vis a rapidly changing China. Chapter 10 on “Chinese political culture and scholarship about the Malay world” captures the essence of Wang’s reflections on understanding the world from the vantage point of Chinese perspectives and Chinese sources. Needless to say, this China-based, yet not Sino-centric, grounding would not have been as convincing if Wang had not embodied in his own life the migratory experiences of a Chinese sojourner and settler in Southeast Asia (p. 15).

The collection also makes clear Wang’s scholarly contribution in the realm of terminology, where his careful use of language and choice of words have added depth and complexity to the field of Chinese overseas studies. Elsewhere, he has attempted to define the elements embedded within the term “Nanyang” and raised his objections to the use of “Greater China.” Here, in this volume, he registers his dissatisfaction with the phrase “Overseas Chinese,” preferring instead “Chinese overseas” and “Chinese descendants” (pp. 5, 158), and objects to the use of the term “Chinese diaspora” on the ground that it is inapt, as it draws a wrong parallel with the Jewish experience which has the dimensions of wealth and influence as well as of cohesion (chapter 6 on “The problems with [Chinese] diaspora” and chapter 14 on “A single Chinese diaspora?”). It is a little ironic as well as indicative of the fact that the editors themselves do not share all of these concerns that this volume of Wang’s life and work is entitled *Diasporic Chinese Ventures*. Indeed, judging by the even more widespread use of the term “diaspora” in recent years in academic gatherings and publications, this seems to be one terminology battle that Wang Gungwu has lost.

Apart from his concern with academic accuracy, Wang’s meticulousness in issues involving terminology stems from his awareness that certain terms have acquired an emotive power which can be easily abused by unconscionable politicians or misread by the general public, leading to a situation in which the ethnic Chinese are made the scapegoats and/or an emerging market-reformed China is portrayed as an evil empire (chapter 6). Wang hides neither his sensibility