

Reproduced from *The Eurasian Core and Its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*, by Ooi Kee Beng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015). This version was obtained electronically direct from the publisher on condition that copyright is not infringed. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Individual chapters are available at <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

# **THE EURASIAN CORE AND ITS EDGES**

**Dialogues with Wang Gungwu  
on the History of the World**

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies (RES, including ASEAN and APEC), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

**ISEAS Publishing**, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

# **THE EURASIAN CORE AND ITS EDGES**

**Dialogues with Wang Gungwu  
on the History of the World**

**Ooi Kee Beng**



**INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
Singapore**

First published in Singapore in 2015 by ISEAS Publishing  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Pasir Panjang  
Singapore 119614

*E-mail:* [publish@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:publish@iseas.edu.sg)

*Website:* <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

© 2015 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

*The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the author and his interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the publisher or its supporters.*

---

### ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

---

Ooi, Kee Beng, 1955–

The Eurasian core and its edges : dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the history of the world.

1. World history.
2. Southeast Asia—Civilization—Foreign influences.
3. China—Civilization—Foreign influences.

I. Wang, Gungwu, 1930–

II. Title.

III. Title: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World.

D21.3 W24

2015

ISBN 978-981-4519-85-4 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4519-86-1 (e-book, PDF)

---

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

# CONTENTS

Prologue	vii	
Introduction	xiii	
Chapter One	Of Cores and Edges	1
Chapter Two	The Two-Ocean Mediterranean	57
Chapter Three	Southeast Asia and Foreign Empires	94
Chapter Four	China's Struggle with the Western Edge	141
Chapter Five	Combining Continental and Maritime Power	213
Epilogue	228	
List of Publications by Wang Gungwu since 2008	238	
Index	243	
About the author	253	



# PROLOGUE

I should start by telling readers that they will not be enjoying reading this book as much as I have enjoyed producing it. The chance to talk undisturbed for hours with Professor Wang Gungwu in the quiet of his various offices at the National University of Singapore is not a gratification given many mortals.

Over the last decade living in Singapore and working at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) of which Professor Wang is the chairman, I have had opportunities — though never enough, I must quickly add — to listen to him talk on a wide variety of subjects and in many different contexts. Along with everyone else in the audiences, I have always been impressed by how someone like him who gives so many lectures always manages to stay entertaining and interesting, be it in strength of delivery or profundity of content. Often he seems to speak without prepared paper, and always he provides a big picture of the subject at hand, giving new angles his listeners had not thought of.

And so the idea came to me to write a book based on interviews with Professor Wang. Apart from the obvious goal of recording some of his thoughts that his busy schedule does not allow him to put in print, I hoped that listening to him as he formulates his ideas would offer me some crucial insight into how he thinks, thereby delving into the mechanics and the organics of how he connects his thoughts.

Using this approach of having the doyen of Asian and East Asian history talk at length to an amateur historian has certain advantages, the chief of which is that the listener, meaning me, can take on the role of conveying the expert's big picture to the common reader in a non-academic fashion. The major disadvantage also stems from that aspiration, though. An amateur lacks the deep understanding of world history that would allow him to probe certain issues more thoroughly, or to be more critical of what he hears. As it was, I was often overwhelmed by the tightness of Professor Wang's thoughts, and by his ability to present streams of thought in an impressively interwoven form.

But then, my aim is mainly about understanding this great scholar's insights on the historical forces that formed the world we know, and that are of salience to present scholarship about Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Asia at large — and, of course, the world as a whole. What this exciting project also makes me realize is that World History as a subject is only just emerging; and traditional attempts at describing humanity's past, fail for being too localized when not Eurocentric.

Also, there is another — a much more personal — side to this. My present job as deputy director at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies loads me with the responsibility of constructing — with the director's help — the institute's areas of research as comprehensively as possible for the coming decade. To do that properly, I need all the inspiration I can get, and what more efficacious way is there than to get that from the institute's highly respected chairman, and through a series of concentrated interviews? And what better way to present that to the educated public than in dialogue form?

I would therefore advise the reader simply to sit back and enjoy the book as it is written, and treat it as a source of inspiration for

further thought on the many aspects of world history, and how these influence how we think of the connectedness of humanity's many civilizations. Had a more academic version of these ideas been attempted by me based on what Professor Wang shared with me, I fear it might not have been completed and it would in any case have made the work less accessible to the general public.

What Professor Wang gave me — and for this I am eternally grateful to him — is an extensive understanding of world history. These interviews gave me nutritious food for thought that will sustain my curiosity on historical matters for quite a while. The tapestry that Professor Wang revealed to me is so multifaceted and yet so comprehensible that it has already enriched my own understanding of historical forces still at work in the world.

His generosity and kindness to me have been tremendous. I remember how often some old gentleman would proudly state to me in passing whenever the name Wang Gungwu was mentioned, "Oh, he was my lecturer at Universiti Malaya". Since I never went to any Malaysian university, and I would not have been wise enough to have chosen History as my subject in any case, that common boast always managed to unsettle me. I inevitably felt envious of those who actually did study under Professor Wang. These people do not boast in vain. That could be the real reason I thought up this project — I wouldn't put such slyness beyond me. At some deep level I must have seen a chance to be his private student for a while and to listen to him discuss brilliant ideas just for me — ideas that, by the way, once understood, seem so obvious.

We all have had that experience every now and then on hearing a novel idea, of wondering, "Why didn't I think of that?" Well, I had lots of these during the interviews with Professor Wang, and I am convinced any reader of this book will too. The implications of Professor Wang's rendition of world history are

extensive indeed and I am very happy to have been instrumental in making it popularly available.

Professor Wang wished me already at the first interview to consider this book to be my book, not his. I gratefully accept that generosity and also full responsibility for the final product. This is my book then, I am proud to say. There are bound to be instances in this conversation where I missed some subtle point that Professor Wang was making, and which in the process of transcription and editing may have ended up as a misleading opinion. For these, I apologize and I am more than willing to take responsibility — it is a small sacrifice worth making for the purpose of achieving what I think is an exciting piece of work that will enthrall readers of all ages from any part of the world. That I dare say.

Given Professor Wang's illustrious career as an academician, the richness of this book's content should not surprise the reader. Famed for his groundbreaking work on the overseas Chinese and many other subjects, he has left a deep imprint on the intellectual world throughout the region — and the world. For the very few who do not know of him, let me provide a quick introduction. Born in 1930 in Surabaya in Indonesia, Professor Wang grew up in the town of Ipoh in the northern Malaysian state of Perak. He gained his Bachelor and Master's degrees in history at the University of Malaya in Singapore before obtaining his PhD in 1957 from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. In 1968 he moved to the Australian National University after several years teaching at the University of Malaya (in Singapore and Malaya), after which he became the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong (1986–95). He has since been based in Singapore, holding key academic and administrative positions.

Deliberations on Chinese philosophy concerning politics, ethics and social cohesion are also included in this book. This is not strange, since both of us are of Chinese origin (brought up in Malaysia), and deeply interested in Chinese culture. This fact should act as a good reminder of the disruption to the internal dynamics of civilizations, polities and peoples that the sudden arrival of modernity — be it in the form of settlers, guns, germs or ideas — meant. *Cultural unsettlement* and *philosophical amnesia* are the unavoidable legacy for many throughout the world, no matter how well they have survived the intrusion of Western powers; and even with economic success, finding a natural place in the modern scheme of things remains a primary objective for them. China's case is poignant and illuminative. This unsettlement is certainly exacerbated by the ceaselessly changing nature of modern life, which affects everyone. But perhaps it is this climate of overwhelming change that will allow for old grievances and ancient quarrels to dissipate.

The five conversations on which the chapters of this book are based were each about three hours long. They took place in 2013, on the mornings of 7, 14 and 21 January, 25 March and 14 October, at the East Asia Institute and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, both at the National University of Singapore. I would like to thank ISEAS Director Mr Tan Chin Tiong for the support he gave this project, Ms Li Shufen and Ms Ten Leu-Jiun for transcribing the interviews, and my lovely wife Ms Laotse Sacker for acting so graciously and ably as test reader for the final draft.

One final technical note: Chinese pinyin terms in this book are all written in italics except for those I subjectively feel have become common usage in the West. Those written in other transcription forms are not italicized.



# INTRODUCTION

## **HUMAN HISTORY WAS CONTINENTAL HISTORY**

To my mind, World History is an emergent subject made possible by the recent passing of the unipolar political world of colonial times and by the even more recent closing of the bipolarizing Cold War. The ideas found in this book should be taken as a cogent contribution towards the development of global perspectives that are at once inclusive of and sympathetic to the endless struggles of civilizations, against themselves and against each other.

Allow me here to simplify the content of this book, whose basic aim is to recognize and acknowledge a forgotten key actor in world history. With the traditional fetish for dividing the world into East and West — where for the West, the East started at its very doorstep; and for the East, the West was a much vaguer concept — the most important factor connecting these was often ignored, or was treated as a supplementary story. This is Central Asia.

The human dynamics exploding out of the Eurasian geographic core throughout the centuries did indeed configure the nature of the many civilizations settled around its edges. This is obvious to anyone knowledgeable about Chinese history, where the importance of Central Asia was testified to by the occasional successful conquest of imperial lands by nomadic groupings. For India, endless streams of conquerors would flow in from the north through the narrow passes of Afghanistan. It is undeniable

that the history of Western civilization is strongly coloured by struggles against Eastern invaders, be they Persian troops, Arab horsemen, Turkish armies, or the hordes of the Huns and the Mongols.

The imperative for civilizations at the edges of the Euroasian landmass to resist military threats from within the depths of the continent has left dramatic legacies for modern man to observe. On physical landscapes, the elements, given enough time, clearly distinguish major terrestrial fault lines from minor ones. And so, rift valleys, volcanic cracks, grand canyons and growing mountain ranges reveal to us the persistent pressures that the Earth has to suffer. Human history does the same, conjuring over time political and cultural fault lines that express the tensions between peoples and reiterate the obstinacy of these conditions. The basic thrust of this book not only draws attention to major fault lines, but also reveals their related nature. In doing this, the rise of maritime powers in Europe and their ability to circumvent continental besiegement can be seen as the commencement of global politics and economics. As Professor Wang Gungwu reiterates ever so often, “The Global is Maritime”.

One such major fault line cuts from east to west across the Mediterranean Sea, where battle after battle and war after war have over the centuries edged a deep divide between the Muslim lands in northern Africa and the Christian lands of Europe. The crusades, lasting from 1096 and 1291, did not decide things for good.<sup>1</sup> Far from it. In fact, the final fault lines between Europe and its historical nemesis to the east were decided through the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and in battles fought in the Mediterranean between the Roman Christians and the Ottoman Empire between 1521 and 1580.<sup>2</sup> The independence of Greece from the Ottoman Empire was achieved only in 1832, following a sea battle that saw

combined British, French and Russian ships defeat the Ottoman-Egyptian navy.

On the other side of the continental landmass stands the formidable Great Wall of China. Its many sections may be standing in ruins today, but together they express most poignantly the fear of the marauding hordes of Central Asia, which dictated imperial policies for millennia, and in all probability historically reined in the maritime impulse of Chinese officialdom. The First Emperor, *Qinshihuang*, was already putting vast and ill-afforded resources into constructing walls to keep marauding horsemen out of his newly conquered agrarian lands; and we see the emperors of the *Ming* Dynasty sixteen centuries later doing the same, and with better technology. All was, however, to be in vain for the *Ming*, who fell in 1644 to the Manchus. Thus, the long-lived Chinese Empire entered modern times under the reign of invaders who originated from within the continental landmass.

At the northwestern end of the Indian subcontinent lies another region given to war and conflict. Through the passes here have flowed invaders from the north, such as the Mongols and the Moghuls, and from the west, Persian kings and Alexander the Great's Greek army.<sup>3</sup>

Other deep fault lines include the Palestinian corridor joining the Nile lands to the fertile fields of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and perhaps those within Europe, such as that between the Slavic and the Teutonic peoples, another between the Teutonic and the Latin peoples, and yet another between the British Isles and the continent.

For Europe, where the impetus for civilization and commerce had come from the Mediterranean lands, the loss of the southern coasts and the Holy Land signaled besiegement by a mortal foe and isolation from the riches of the rest of the world.

## BREAKING THE SIEGE

With the advent of maritime technologies and skills that made global travel possible, the possibilities for commercial trade, resource extraction, military conquest and religious contest increased tremendously. The dynamics of global relations changed forever. Indeed, the global as we know it today is realized through maritime power.

The Spanish and the Portuguese took the lead, attaining huge tracts of real estate in the Americas and throughout the world within a few decades. All this took place sadly at the cost of indigenous peoples found in these lands. Their kingdoms were destroyed and their peoples killed, enslaved or infected with diseases by these invaders, who were in effect breaking continental besiegement and seeking religious freedom for themselves and supremacy for their religions. The discovery of the Americas brought new actors into the global fray.

In the meantime, powered by the rise of the middle class, a new force soon emerged in the form of Holland and Britain. Their impact on the political and demographic configuration of South and Southeast Asia has been enormous. In fact, the term “Southeast Asia” was coined for military purposes during the Japanese occupation of East Asia. It went on to serve in the Cold War as well, and now remains with us as a given geopolitical entity.

The Cold War, as argued by Professor Wang, was very much part of the traditional contest between continental power and maritime power; between the core and its edges. The United States of America, the dominant power of our times, is dominant through enjoying a secure continental base as well as unsurpassed maritime power. No other power can imagine attaining anything similar to this immutable advantage.

Today, a century after China was forced to become a republic, we see a new fault line appearing on the surface of the globe. As

with the Mediterranean, this one is maritime, and runs across the East China Sea from north to south, extending into the South China Sea. Within the paradigm advanced in this book, this frontier, which some have recognized to be a maritime encirclement of China by Western powers, looks set to be the major fault line in the global age. The western edge of the Eurasian landmass, breaking out after centuries of besiegement, reached the eastern edge almost two hundred years ago. It took China, the great power on the latter edge, that long to reorientate itself away from its age-old fixation with continental strategy, to embrace modern techniques of public administration and economic production, and to realize that modern influence indeed requires maritime clout.

Japan managed that revolution much more effectively, no doubt. But it was Japanese expansion beyond their islands beginning just at the turn of the twentieth century that dug ever deeper the new boundary of conflict that had begun with the Opium Wars (1839–42; 1856–60). The Pacific War (1941–45) bonded the Americans to the eastern end of the Eurasian landmass, just as the war against Hitler in Europe (1939–45) had done at the western end. China turning communist in 1949 made East Asia a major arena for the Cold War. The Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1954–75) that followed continued to etch a frontier of conflict along China's coast.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, the rationale for this new fault line is better understood through reference to the powerful and persistent dynamics of war which centuries ago encouraged traditional coastal seafarers in Europe to escape religious besiegement and cross the oceans. These found more wealth, power and influence in faraway lands than in their wildest imagination, and globalized the world in the process. To be sure, this globalizing process disrupted the internal dynamics of all the civilizations of the world, bringing chaos to all. But those who survived this

undermining onslaught have taken on new roles in the new maritime-conducted global order.

China's recent rise makes it the power most able to defy the United States in the near future. However, given the fact that its continental base is always vulnerable, the reach of its power is quite limited compared to that of the United States. But in breaking its historical besiegement, the Western world has also changed the game for the other continental edges. The game is no longer about the core and its edges, but about how edges are to get along most constructively. Strategic mindsets relevant to the old scenario are with all probability no longer effective in the new setting.

To me, the conversations I have had with Professor Wang have been extremely stimulating, and the implications of his ideas on how I should view world events of the past are great indeed. But most important of all is how his understanding of the historical dynamics that led to the modern international situation provides new options for how we are to solve — or at least diminish — present tensions between world powers. We are talking about the emergence of a paradigmatic shift in the study of international relations — and not only in the many disciplines more obviously affected by his way of thinking, such as history and area studies.

## Notes

1. For an inspiring study of the Crusades and their profound and lasting effects on global politics and interfaith relations, see Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and their Impact on Today's World*. Incidentally, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “crusade” came into use only retrospectively. It did not appear in English until as late as 1757, about a century after the French term “*croisade*” came to denote a series of military trips to the Holy Land.

2. See Roger Crowley, *Empires of the Sea: The Final Battles for the Mediterranean, 1521–1580* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008).
3. For a good history of this region, see Paddy Docherty, *The Khyber Pass: A History of Empire and Invasion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007).
4. Incidentally, heightened American military engagement in the Middle East and in Afghanistan since the end of the twentieth century reveals further the persistent conflicts between maritime powers and continental ones that mark the last three thousand years of human history, which this book discusses.