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# Conceptualizing Chinese Migration and Chinese Overseas: The Contribution of Wang Gungwu<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The movement of people leaving and returning to China from the second half of the 19th century to the present is of such a phenomenal magnitude and complexity that Wang Gungwu has devoted a lifetime of his scholarship to tracking and explaining the various cycles of Chinese migration and settlement. Through this effort, he has not only contributed to China studies in general but has also pioneered and become the doyen of a new sub-field in the study of Chinese communities located outside of China and scattered all over the world. This has been a long and rewarding engagement for him, but not one without its moments of difficulties, especially at the conceptual level. Centering on Wang's pool of scholarly writings and reminiscences, this article discusses his vigorous examination of the accuracy and appropriateness of various terms of analysis, such as "Nanyang Chinese," "Overseas Chinese," "Huaqiao," "Greater China," "Chinese Diaspora," and "Chinese Overseas." This discussion on terminology will also be used to reflect on Wang's position on larger issues such as the danger of emotive responses to inappropriate labelling, the role of scholars in facilitating a better understanding of the contemporary world, as well as the relationship between scholarship and politics.

## Straddling the Scholarly Domains of China and Chinese Communities Abroad

Wang Gungwu 王赓武 was born in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), grew up in Malaya and went to university in China, Singapore and the United Kingdom. The long years of anchorage in Malaya-Singapore and his cosmopolitan border crossings had influenced his search of academic

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expertise. Today, Wang is recognized as a world authority on both the domains of China studies and Chinese migration and its settlements abroad.

Although his academic journey and achievements can be regarded as fairly evenly balanced in the two realms, there were certain periods of concentration on one at the expense of the other and he had also tended, in his own reminiscences, to place China studies on a higher pedestal. Hence, while he was saluted as “the great doyen of overseas Chinese historical scholarship,” (Ang 2001: 81-82) he declared that his “first love” and “starting point” was the history of China *per se* (Wang 2004b: 160-62; Benton and Liu 2004: 17). He confessed: “I did not set out to study the Chinese overseas. My interest was always in Chinese history. This is partly because I started life as a Chinese sojourner, a *huaqiao* [华侨], someone temporarily resident abroad. If circumstances permitted it, such a person would look foremost to China. I was no exception” (Wang 2004b: 160-62).

Wang’s pursuit of Chinese history began with informal lessons under the close guidance of his mother and his father who was a leading Chinese educator (Benton and Liu 2004: 1, 13; Wang 2003: 151, fn 3). His graduation theses for his Bachelor of Arts (Honours) (1953) and his Master of Arts (1955) from the University of Malaya (at Singapore) were respectively on the anti-Qing activities of Chinese reformists and revolutionaries and on the ancient Nanhai trade between China and its southern oceans from the Qin-Han era to the Tang dynasty. It is significant that the two topics dealt with personalities and their activities which were carried out both inside and outside of China, thus the Malayan/Southeast Asian dimension was sitting neatly next to that of China. It was only at the Ph. D level that Wang made the decision to do his overseas graduate training solely on China: “I turned totally towards Sinology and the history of China. This gave prominence to one of my desires, to be the Chinese scholar that my parents would be proud of” (Wang 2004a: 148-49). His doctoral dissertation (1957) at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, focussed on the fifty years of turmoil following the fall of the Tang dynasty. This thesis won him the professional credential as a Chinese historian and was subsequently published as *The Structure of Power in North China during the Five Dynasties* (Wang 1963).

However, after Wang’s return to Singapore-Malaya in the late 1950s to be “a local university man,” his self-declared “confused desires” were once again stirred by the socio-political environment in the region (Wang 2004a: 147-48). Before long, he succumbed to the pull of the politics of new nationhood in Malaya and joined his university colleagues in encouraging research on Malayan history. Based upon the foundation laid in his earlier work on the

ancient Nanhai trade, he followed up on the story and presented it anew in a series of radio talks in 1958 which was published in the following year as *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese* (Wang 2004a: 148-49; Wang 2004b: 160-62; Wang 1959). To Wang, this piece of work represents “one of my earliest efforts to understand the Chinese of Southeast Asia,” and was in heavy demand and “out of print for a very long time.” It went on to appear in translated versions in Chinese (1969, 1988) and in Japanese (1972). He republished it in English in 1991 in its original form because it had become “something of a historical document representing the point of view of Southeast Asian Chinese over a generation ago, in the 1950s. . . . I have let it stand as a record of an important transitional period in Southeast Asian history” (Wang 1992: vii). In retrospect, this short but incisive account of Chinese abroad may be regarded as the defining moment of a “take-off” when Wang crafted a new sub-field of research and teaching within the broader framework of China studies, one which was centered on Chinese migration and settlements abroad.

When Wang left the University of Malaya for a new appointment at the Australian National University in 1968, his interest in the “first love, the history of China” was briefly reinvigorated by the open accessibility of Chinese source materials and the liberal intellectual climate of China studies in Canberra. More importantly, President Nixon’s announcement of his China visit in June 1971 and China’s re-admission to the United Nations in October eventually led to Malaysia establishing diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China on 31 May 1974, the Philippines on 9 June 1975, and Thailand on 1 July 1975. Such dramatic developments in turn aroused in him a new scholarly interest in China (Wang 1981a: 249; Wang 1991h: 286-87). Caught up in this rising tide of interest, Wang immediately published a series of articles focussing on China *per se*: “The Inside and Outside of Chinese History” (1972), “The Re-emergence of China” (1973), “Chinese Society and Chinese Foreign Policy” (1973), “Imperial and Modern Bureaucracy” (1973), “New Verdict on Qin Shihuang” (1974) (See collection in Wang 2003k). He went on to publish a 190-page book on *China and the World since 1949* (Wang 1977).

Simultaneously the trauma in international relations revived Wang’s early concerns about China’s ties with the Chinese abroad. Hence, in his early years at Canberra he continued to research and publish works relating to Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia (Wang 1991c: 130-46; Wang 2003j: 111-48). Wang had apparently reached a stage in his academic journey where “one’s point of departure cannot be reduced either to a pure China or to a pure

Southeast Asia.” As he pointed out, “I have feelings for both, but neither gets the upper hand” (Benton and Liu 2004: 17). It seems that by the mid-1970s, he had settled into a strategy of straddling the two domains of China and Southeast Asian Chinese, and was trying to create a synergy out of this combination by focussing on “the interplay between China’s view of those communities and the view of themselves by the Chinese outside.” He professed that “this interplay has guided my main writings till this day” (Wang 2004b: 163). The subsequent ten years of Vice-chancellorship at the University of Hong Kong (1987-1996) situated on the border of China, and his return to Singapore (1996-present) located at the heart of Southeast Asia only served to reinforce the duality and interplay.

To tease out the dynamics of this interplay, Wang spent an enormous amount of time and energy searching for the most appropriate terms and imposing certain standards of scholarly precision on their usage. His long and passionate engagement with terminology may not be as dramatic as that of a Shakespearean play, but is nonetheless colorful and worthy of charting for an understanding of scholarship in academia as well as for a rare insight into the persona of an eminent scholar.

### **What’s in a Name: “Nanyang Chinese,” “Overseas Chinese,” “*Huaqiao*”**

Juliet, in William Shakespeare’s play, *Romeo and Juliet*, utters the famous phrase: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet.” By his own reckoning, Wang’s first love was not history, but English literature. He turned to history almost by chance, with C. N. Parkinson of the History Department at the University of Malaya (and of the Parkinson Law fame) coming across as an exciting model of what a good scholar should be (Benton and Liu 2004: 2, 15). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Wang peppered some of his essays with references to great literary writers such as T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster (Wang 2004a: 140, 150; Wang 2003i: dedication page). However, it is certain that this very line from Shakespeare, elegantly espousing the view that a name is merely an arbitrary convention, is not something which Wang would subscribe to.

On the one hand, this had to do with Wang’s Chinese training and background. Drawing upon Confucian classics, he holds the view that “in the Chinese tradition, there has always been much respect for the idea of *zhengming* [正名], or rectification of names. This is one of the important areas where we should practice *zhengming*.” On the other hand, it stems from his heightened political sensitivity that the usage of wrong terminology could be

“dangerous to the people and countries concerned,” especially in the context of Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia in the 1950s to 1970s (Wang 2003f: 153-54). He notes that extreme views with overtones of chauvinistic pride and regionalist/nationalist alarm casting Chinese abroad in a negative light have been around for the last half century and the situation today is even more acute. Hence, it seems to him that urgent scholarly efforts must be made to clarify the meanings of terms being used in such studies. Similarly, in one of his encyclopaedic entries, he points out that “the poverty of language to convey the richness and complexity of the reality is here to stay” and that “only scholars and those concerned with the niceties of legal and political usage can avoid the misunderstandings” (Wang 1998b: 105).

Wang’s earliest engagement with terminology can be traced to his landmark work on *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese*. Here, he tackled the term “Nanyang” 南洋 which in the English language world had been commonly used as a rough equivalent of the post-World War II coinage of “Southeast Asia.” He stressed that its usage should come with the awareness that it originally implied territories which were reached by Chinese traders through the South China Sea and included only the key coastal strips of mainland Southeast Asia and most of the islands of the Philippines, British Borneo and Indonesia. Therefore, those Chinese who at various stages of history entered Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Siam by land were merely a plank of the southwest overland expansion of the Chinese imperial polity and should technically not be considered as “going to the Nanyang” and be counted as part of Nanyang Chinese (Wang 1959; Wang 1992: 11; A variation of the concept in Wang 2003h: 298-99).

A much more extensive discussion was mounted by Wang on the nomenclature of “Overseas Chinese” and its conflation with the closely-associated, commonly-translated counterpart, “*huaqiao*.”<sup>2</sup> From the mid-1970s onward, Wang examined the term from several angles. It was a tedious exercise, slicing through and untangling a thicket of ideas in the process. One could say that this is Wang’s most important contribution to scholarship in general; in particular, it puts his personal stamp on the study of Chinese migration and overseas settlements.

In 1976, Wang put forward his iconic viewpoint on the two terms: “It became more imperative to question the use of the term ‘Overseas Chinese.’” It

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<sup>2</sup> There is inconsistency in the Romanization of terms in this field of study. For instance, there are variations in *huaqiao* (such as Hua-ch’iao) and differences over the use of italicization and capitalization. Following the convention in scholarly citation, all such variations in cited passages have been left unchanged.

had been used in its broadest sense to cover all [the] people of Chinese descent resident abroad and it roughly translated the Chinese term ‘Huaqiao’ (Chinese sojourners). For Southeast Asia, the more specialized ‘Nanyang Huaqiao’ [南洋华侨] or Nanyang Chinese was widely used until the 1960s. This is a term which has implied a single community with a considerable solidarity” (Wang 1991h: 288-89). In a 1983 report on his field trip to China, he noted:

The subject of Overseas Chinese is clearly still bedevilled by many factors. . . . One common problem . . . is the confusion over the use of the term Huaqiao and the understandable reluctance on the part of many Chinese concerned to face up to the need to define the term accurately. Popular usage has blurred the term so much that there is a case for accepting, as modern linguists are wont to do, the current wide variations in its meaning. But that is precisely where the problem lies. . . . [T]his fudging of the term may not be so minor and merely academic. The confusion and sentimentality about the term is so great that, if they persist, they will prevent the Chinese from ever becoming clear about its meaning. This in turn will produce misunderstanding and suspicion, if not bewilderment. . . . (Wang 1991g: 242-43).

In the following year, Wang repeated his warning: “There has been a lot of exaggeration and propaganda about the Huaqiao phenomenon, both from the Chinese and from the local governments, and it is not always easy to know whom to believe, especially when many writers and journalists wrote emotionally about the subject at the time. What we now need is careful, independent research by scholars who really want to get at the truth” (Wang 1991a: 18). During the mid-1990s, he maintained this view: “We must be very careful about its exact meaning and the proper context when it can be correctly used. In particular, we should try to make sure that the political content of the term is not misused, abused and misunderstood” (Wang 2003g: 241).

To Wang, the current common usage of the Chinese word *yimin* 移民 for migration is not a helpful entry point to untangle the terminological mess. This is because, in the historical context, it usually referred to a state-sponsored act of moving people either to strengthen defences on the border or to respond to natural calamities, and “*yimin* had always taken place *within* China” (Wang 2003b: 38). Instead he chose to detach *huaqiao* from the term Overseas Chinese and designate it as a sub-category under the latter with special meanings, particularly its linkage with the concept of “sojourning.”

Wang’s recommended new approach to understanding Chinese migration is to begin with the crucial viewpoint that the “*qiao* 侨 (‘sojourner’) or *qiaojū* 侨居 (‘sojourning’) phenomenon was a product of Confucian rhetoric, of the exhortations to be filial and loyal to heads of family and the clan-based village so prevalent in southern China. This was a powerful value system that enjoined

everyone never to move away from *his* ancestral home.... Migration was simply not an option; only sojourning on official duty or as a trader was permissible.... Leaving home was feared, and seeking settlement elsewhere was an unwelcome prospect” (Wang 2003a: 8). The word *qiao* is “a journey, a temporary stay” and especially used with *ju* to mean “temporary residence.” Therefore, *qiaoju* has the embedded notions of “enforced migration,” “temporariness,” “a degree of official approval,” “duty to return,” and “nostalgia for home.” To him, the term *huaqiao* which is normally translated as “Overseas Chinese” should thus, strictly speaking, refer to “Chinese sojourners.” (Wang 1981b: 119-20). He suggested that sojourning should be a powerful conceptual tool for migration studies and one ought to take the view that “sojourning was a prelude to eventual migration” and that it “might be called experimental migration over long periods of time or migration with extended options” (Wang 2003c: 55, 68).

In the context of Chinese migration history, Wang painstakingly traced the genealogy of the term *huaqiao* and pointed out that it “has been so widely and loosely used that very few people today are aware that it has such a short history and that it was developed under very special historical conditions.” In fact, it emerged only in the late 1890s, came into widespread use in the years before and after the 1911 Chinese revolution, acquired a notion of colonization in the 1920s and 1930s, and soon after came to replace all other terms and was then used carelessly in a retrospective manner to cover even the Ming and Qing periods (Wang 1981b: 118, 121-25; Wang 1991b: 26-31). Its emergence was fore-grounded by the Qing government’s 1893 lifting of an overseas travel ban which had been ineffectual and only intermittently enforced since the beginning of the Ming dynasty. It was not long after this lifting of the ban that “came for the first time the official politicization of the concept of sojourner, with the elegant name of *huaqiao*, thus confirming that the political leaders in China expected the Chinese abroad to play a role in China’s future development” (Wang 2003c: 59). In other words, within a very short time, the term which “had begun as official recognition and approval of Chinese residing abroad had been transformed into a militant commitment to remaining Chinese or to restoring one’s ‘Chineseness’” (Wang 1981b: 124). In tracing the beginning and end point of the applicability of the term, he argued:

The period when it was politically significant to call all Chinese *Huaqiao* ended in the middle of the 1950s [with the 1955 Bandung Conference as marker]. That period may well be called the five decades of the *Huaqiao*. It should be stressed that the *Huaqiao* decades should not be extended backwards in time. To use the term *Huaqiao* for earlier periods would be ahistorical.... To be casual, even

cavalier, in applying *Huaqiao* to every Chinese throughout history who ever went abroad for several years or more would make a mockery of the efforts so far to understand some key changes in modern Chinese history and put them in correct historical perspective (Wang 1991g: 246).

Wang was particularly concerned that “throughout the 1960s and 1970s, China-born historians still used *Huaqiao* freely for all periods” and they suggested wrongly that “*huaqiao* living abroad have had a history of two thousand years.” To him, there must be “recognition, support, or protection” offered by the Chinese authorities before the term could be applied. Otherwise, it would “seem to be a distortion of history to imply China’s appreciation of these Chinese and their communities abroad long before it happened. The fact that *Huaqiao* would be a convenient single word to describe an unusual phenomenon should not, I think, lead us to give a false and anachronistic impression of China’s concern for *Huaqiao* before it became true” (Wang 1991b: 35-36).

Wang also tried to bring his analysis of the terms to a higher conceptual level by developing a typology of three categories of overseas Chinese and four patterns of Chinese migration (of which *huaqiao* represented only one stage), as well as attributing to them multiple identities in the contemporary era. It began with his 1972 essay arguing that there were three major groups of Chinese “at all times among the Overseas Chinese,” as distinguished by their political interests and activities: Group A which is “predominantly concerned with Chinese national politics and its international ramifications”; Group B which is “principally concerned with community politics wherever it may be”; and Group C which is “drawn into the politics of non-Chinese hierarchies, whether indigenous or colonial or nationalist” (Wang 1991c: 130-32). At this stage, he was exploring only along the line of political orientation.

In 1984, he adopted a new system of classification by identifying four patterns in the Chinese migratory waves. The first was the “*huashang* [华商]/trader” pattern which he considered to be of the greatest importance, “the most resilient pattern,” and the one which was comprised of merchants and artisans (inclusive of miners and other skilled workers). The second was the “*huagong* [华工]/coolie” pattern, characterized by the flood of peasants, landless laborers and urban poor who left China between the 1850s and 1920s. The third was the “*huaqiao*/sojourner” pattern whose major feature was that it was “primarily determined by nationalism” and “enhanced by a close association with revolution” as espoused by Sun Yat-sen [孙中山], the Guomindang [国民党] and the Chinese Communist Party [中国共产党]. Last but not least was the “*huayi* [华裔]/descent or re-migrant” pattern which was con-



fined to the post-1950s movement of people of Chinese descent from one foreign country to another foreign country (Wang 1991a: 4-10, 21). This typology of migratory patterns was later used by Wang in analyzing the Singapore Chinese migrant community but with only three patterns, the fourth, *huayi*, being dropped, in consideration of its problematic nature (Wang 1989; Wang 1991d).

In the following year, Wang extended his probing into the realm of identities which “are difficult to define, and despite many efforts to refine them, are often dependent on nothing more than self-identification.” He argued that “historical identity” and “Chinese nationalist identity” were dominant in the period before 1950 and this gave way to “national (local) identity, communal identity, and cultural identity in the 1950s and 1960s” as well as “ethnic identity and class identity in the 1970s.” He argued that “modern Southeast Asian Chinese, like most other peoples today, do not have a single identity but tend to assume multiple identities.” The way to “conceptualize the process of acquiring and maintaining multiple identities” was to see how the Chinese respond to and identify with a set of norms in the four areas: physical, political, economic and cultural. He believed that “through the idea of norms and the concepts of normative identity, we can depict the pressures that determine multiple identities” and hope to be taken “a step closer to understanding the nature of Chinese identities in Southeast Asia” (Wang 1991e: 198-99, 210, 216).

Not all of his ideas proved to be appealing. For instance, with regard to the 1984 four-pattern paradigm, Leo Suryadinata expressed discomfort and suggested that it “often stresses continuity rather than change,” the *huashang* category being “too liberal and inclusive, and that the boundaries between trade and non-trade become blurred. . . .” Also, “the first three patterns . . . tended to overlap and hence became less useful as an analytical tool” (Suryadinata 2007: 65-68). Adam McKeown called for “a reformulation of the division of Chinese migration into the trader, coolie, sojourner, and descent patterns by Wang Gungwu” as it was “very unclear if Wang’s idea of ‘patterns’ is meant to depict social structures or the orientation of individual migrants” (McKeown 1999: 312-13). For all its shortcomings, Wang’s typology represented an important step in his attempt to define, classify and conceptualize with a view to attaining greater intellectual sophistication.

Wang’s final lap in dissecting the two terms of Overseas Chinese and *huaqiao* may be seen in his effort to look into their usage in the contemporary era, viz. after the post-war decolonization and emergence of nation-states in Southeast Asia, and in relation to the post-Bandung and post-1980 policies of the PRC which upheld citizenship laws on the basis of *jus soli*. Here, he noted that, in the past, “Overseas Chinese” was the English term used loosely to

translate the popular Chinese word *huaqiao*, but “in recent years, various governments (including the People’s Republic of China) have narrowed down the meaning of *Huaqiao* to refer to Chinese nationals who are living in a foreign country. For those of Chinese descent who are of foreign nationality, there are now other terms: more generally, *waiji huaren* [外籍华人].” The term “Overseas Chinese” has now tended to be “translated back into Chinese literally as *haiwai huaren* [海外华人]. This is a way of avoiding the political and legal connotations in the term *Huaqiao*, and the English term is used here in the ethnic and neutral sense of ‘anyone identifiably Chinese who is outside China’” (Wang 1991g: 253-54; Wang 1991f: 236, fn. 3). Indeed, the scholar’s task to categorize and label has been further complicated by the presence of a wide spectrum of alternative terms other than Overseas Chinese and *huaqiao*. Wang too had to ponder over them.

### Contemplating a Range of Alternative Nomenclature

Wang was not alone in the terminological search but he was certainly at the forefront and played a major role in framing ideas and ploughing through a range of alternative terms. As early as 1972 when Wang was formulating his typology of the three categories of post-war political Chinese, he already demonstrated an awareness of alternative terms. His Group C Political Chinese are those “drawn into the politics of non-Chinese hierarchies, whether indigenous or colonial or nationalist” and who “are normally prepared to call themselves *Huaren* instead of *Huaqiao*, but see themselves as Malaysian Chinese (*Ma-Hua* 马华), Thai Chinese (*Tai-Hua* 泰华), Indonesian Chinese (*Yin-Hua* 印华) and so on” (Wang 1991c: 142).<sup>3</sup> Wang later noted that other local Southeast Asian scholars were also working on the lexicon: “They have tried to use alternative terms like *Huaren*, *Huatsu* [*huazu* 华族], *Huayi*, and for Singapore and Malaysia, *Hsing-Hua* [*Xinhua* 新华] and *Ma-Hua* (with other prefixes varying with each country), but are not yet agreed which is the most suitable alternative” (Wang 1991b: 34).

“There have been many alternatives suggested” but Wang was not comfortable with a number of them: “*Huatsu* . . . is still new and not familiar in China and Taiwan, although *tsu* [*zu* 族] has long been used for the ethnic minorities in China as well as for Han Chinese. More specific terms by country (as in

<sup>3</sup> An indication of debate in terminology at academic conferences and a useful list of major conferences from 1980 on Chinese communities outside of China are provided in Tan (1992: 3-4, 7).

*Yin-Hua, Ma-Hua, and Fei-Hua* for Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines) would not help if one wished to speak generally of the Chinese abroad; also they would be anachronistic for periods when there were no countries called by such names” (Wang 1991b: 35). On another occasion, he offered the view: “If *huaqiao* are sojourning Chinese, *huaren* would be ethnic Chinese, and *huayi* those ‘descendants of Chinese’ who consider themselves politically integrated with their adopted countries if not culturally assimilated as well. . . . I shall use shorthand references . . . as follows: sojourners for *huaqiao*, ethnic Chinese for *huaren*, and local nationals for *huayi*.” Thus his shorthand reference and criteria for *huayi* appear to be notably unusual in that they go beyond the mere descent line and even impose the requirement of political integration and cultural assimilation (Wang 2004c: 198). This is probably why the Chinese Heritage Centre of Singapore — of which Wang was Deputy Chairman — chose *Huayi Guan* 华裔馆 for its Chinese name when it was officially opened in 1995 by George Yeo, Minister for Information and the Arts, to study and showcase Chinese communities across the world.

Indeed, *huayi* was one term with which Wang had a great deal of difficulties. As discussed earlier, he had even used it for his fourth pattern of Chinese migration (in addition to *huashang*, *huagong* and *huaqiao*) and translated it as “Chinese descent or re-migrant.” He tried arguing that “[b]y this *Huayi* pattern, I am not referring to the earlier and basic kinds of migration that ended with many Chinese becoming foreign nationals. . . . What I am referring to is the more recent development when *Huayi* in one foreign country migrated or re-migrated to another foreign country” (Wang 1991a: 8-10). However, the differences in definition between Chinese descent and re-migration proved too daunting. There was also simply too much confusion in distinguishing the *Huayi* who stayed in their adopted foreign country and the *Huayi* who re-migrated to another foreign country. In the end, Wang’s “*huayi* pattern of migration” was not widely accepted and he had to settle for a more conventional interpretation for that term: “[S]ince 1945, the idea of the Chinese all being sojourners has been challenged, especially in Southeast Asia. Many more have preferred to see themselves as having settled abroad as foreign nationals; if Chinese at all, they see themselves as descendants of Chinese (*huayi*)” (Wang 2003e: 119).

On foreign nationals of Chinese origins, i.e. those Chinese sojourners who had settled down and sought local nationality, the PRC government and scholars offered the term *waiji huaren* which focuses on nationality and this was acceptable to Wang (Wang 1981b: 119; Wang 2003g: 243). But Wang objected when they put forward the hybrid notion of a *huaqiao-huaren* 华侨华人 continuum. With apparent reference to the context of Southeast

Asia, he urged that “it is necessary to contest both the sloppy and lazy way of grouping all those of Chinese descent as ‘Overseas Chinese,’ and the deliberately ambiguous use of the mixed term, *huaqiao-huaren*.” To him, “[the] least helpful of all among [the terms for] such new citizens of foreign countries is the extended use of the combined *huaqiao-huaren* form which is now favoured by the scholars in the People’s Republic of China. It may serve some purpose in China but, from the point of view of the receiving countries, neither *huaqiao* nor *huaren* would adequately convey the idea of migrants who have been accepted as nationals of their new countries” (Wang 2003f: 156-59). On another occasion, Wang tagged the continuum as a “very clumsy idea” (Wang 2004d: 227).

However, it was neither the sloppiness nor the clumsiness in scholarship and government policy documents that caused the greatest concern to Wang. What drew his strongest disapproval was the implied political and economic threat posed by Chinese communities as embedded in the usage of the new terms, “Greater China” and “Chinese Diaspora.”

### **Reflecting on “Greater China,” “Chinese Diaspora,” and “Chinese Overseas”**

After about a decade of rapid economic advancement since Deng Xiaoping’s market reform and open door policy, a new term, “Greater China,” surfaced and it came along with a great deal of ambiguity in its geographical coverage and politico-economic implications. In December 1993 a special issue of *China Quarterly* appeared specifically to discuss this issue (Shambaugh 1995). It was on this occasion that Wang expressed his wariness in no uncertain terms. He was concerned that there had been “much speculation about the re-emergence of China as a powerful actor in world politics. The idea of Greater China is one of the products of that speculation.” Wang noted “the lack of precision in the term” and the uncertainty as to whether it should cover Hong Kong-Macau, Taiwan and all of the People’s Republic of China or only parts of it. But he was adamant that the term should not include those Chinese living outside of the Chinese region and was most concerned about the impact it would have on the Chinese abroad (Wang 2003d: 87).

Wang later referred to the term as “expansionist and imperialist-sounding,” and said in elaboration, “the main reason for the rise of the term ‘Greater China’ and all its many variants, [is] to convey the threat of a regional China, Inc. . . . Placed together with the use of the term ‘Overseas Chinese’ to include all Chinese in the world outside the People’s Republic, there is the alarming

sense of outreach and extension of an unstoppable force.” He thus warned “against the careless and cavalier use of the term” (Wang 2003f: 153, 158, 164 fn 22). He also linked it explicitly to the revived fear of the yellow peril: “Opening up China again after 30 years of isolation led to an economic surge that surprised the world. . . . The ramifications are so great and incalculable for the region’s Chinese that scholarship has yet to catch up with the changes. Instead, they have spawned many sensational writings, ranging from chauvinistic calls for a Chinese economic commonwealth to fearful projections of a new wave of the ‘yellow peril’ ” (Wang 2004b: 166). Other scholars, such as Leo Suryadinata and Tan Chee Beng, had voiced similar warnings of a broad inclusion of Overseas Chinese and the yellow peril imagery (Suryadinata 1997: 2-3, 27). In one interview, Wang had reiterated his firm opposition in no uncertain manner:

I have strong views about using the term Greater China. I think the term should never be applied to the Chinese overseas. Greater China is in fact a myth, in my view. It’s a convenient kind of shorthand used among businessmen for the last decade or so to talk about the economic activities of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and southern China, and eventually may be extended to include the rest of mainland China. . . . But the moment you apply the term to overseas Chinese, it’s totally misleading, and it’s dangerous. . . . It begins to have a political significance that is quite misleading and, I would say, wrong (Wang 1996: 49).

“Chinese Diaspora” is another broad term which Wang raised his objections to, but at times rather defensively because he had not been always consistent on this issue. Indeed a two-volume collection of papers (presented at a 1992 conference in San Francisco) which was co-edited by him and first published in 1998 was entitled *The Chinese Diaspora* (Wang and Wang 2003). Wang Gungwu defended the use of “*diaspora*” in the title as follows: “I had to do some heart-searching about that. I have long advocated that the Chinese overseas be studied in the context of their respective national environments, and taken out of a dominant China reference point.” The two volumes to him had at least dutifully “stressed settlement, as in the phrase *luodi shenggen*, meaning growing roots where you land; and also differentiation among the communities in six continents” (Wang 2004b: 157). Another instance of inconsistency is his usage of the term in his introduction written for *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* edited by Lynn Pan (Wang 1998a: 10-13).

Despite those lapses, Wang is on record as having spoken out strongly against the term. He first raised his views in 1994 about it being “a term which may also be extremely misleading. . . . I do not agree to the word being used for the Chinese because it has implications which may have applied to some

aspects of the sojourners in the past but do not apply to ethnic Chinese today. In many ways, diaspora is a word that has the kind of political content comparable to the term *huaqiao*, which also has many political overtones” (Wang 2003g: 241).

Five years later, when invited to deliver the inaugural lecture for the launch of the Centre for the Study of Chinese Southern Diaspora at the Australian National University, Wang brushed aside concerns about etiquette and delivered an extensive critique of the term which appeared as part of the name chosen for the new institute he was launching:

I still have some disquiet about the use of the term diaspora, not because, in English, it has until recently applied only to the Jews... nor because the word refers to exile (in Hebrew) or dispersion (in Greek), which are rather specific manifestations of the phenomenon of sojourning and migration. Of course it is misleading and politically sensitive for the Chinese to be compared to the Jews in the Muslim world of Southeast Asia, but if the reality makes the comparison appropriate, so be it. My reservations come from the problems the Chinese encountered with the concept of sojourner (*huaqiao*) and the political use both China and hostile governments have made of that term. From China's point of view, *huaqiao* was a powerful name for a single body of overseas Chinese.... After some 30 years of debate, the term *huaqiao* now no longer includes those Chinese with foreign passports.... [W]ill the word diaspora be used to revive the idea of a single body of Chinese, reminiscent of the old term, the *huaqiao*?... [W]ill it acquire the emotive power that would actually change our views about the nature of the various Chinese communities overseas (Wang 2004b: 158)?

Wang had a sense of the popular, widespread usage of the term but insisted on linking it to all the previous apprehensions tied to *huaqiao*:

It should not surprise us that many social scientists are now ready to use a term like diaspora to highlight the new dimensions of the Chinese phenomenon. What is intriguing is whether this will encourage Chinese governments to affirm the idea of a single Chinese diaspora again, along the lines of the earlier concept of *huaqiao*-sojourner for all Chinese overseas? Will the use of diaspora lead even those who write outside China, notably those who write in Chinese, also to revive the more familiar term, *huaqiao*, the term that Southeast Asian governments and the Chinese there had spent so much time and trouble trying to discard for the past 40 years (Wang 2004b: 166-68)?

Wang reaffirmed, “The more I think about it, the unhappier I am that the term has come to be applied to the Chinese. I have used the term with great reluctance and regret, and I still believe that it carries the wrong connotations and that, unless it is used carefully to avoid projecting the image of a single

Chinese diaspora, it will eventually bring tragedy to the Chinese overseas” (Wang 2004b: 166-68).

In a 2000/2001 interview, Wang stated in clearer terms his opposition from more specific angles. In his view, “the word diaspora, as I understand it, implies nowadays, both business acumen and wealth among a dispersed population. . . . For the last two hundred years, the Chinese who left China by the millions were [mostly not] traders or businessmen. They were poor. . . . I cannot associate such a migration with the word diaspora, which has the opposite meaning.” The term also has the connotation of being a large cohesive social group and Wang felt that as Chinese “adapt to new circumstance and thus become very different from other groups of Chinese living elsewhere. I don’t see much cohesion.” Again the political connotations were not far from his mind. “One has to look at the context in which the term diaspora is used to see it is not innocent. . . . In the media or in the context of public affairs, it becomes politicized and it is then used by politicians who have an agenda. . . .” To him:

It is simply not true but unscrupulous people can use such a description to build up the image of a new yellow peril. Some people are going even further, saying that China is behind it, sending out people and contacting people all around, acting like an enormous octopus, spreading its tentacles and building up its network. Such nonsense is bound to be believed when one is using out-of-context words like diaspora. With a lot of imagination, one could even end up saying: “The Chinese are coming, the Chinese are coming” (Malvezin 2004: 49, 51-52)!

Wang again exhorted the academic community to avoid this scenario: “The scholars must be careful and thorough. When the word diaspora is used out of context, they must denounce it and point out that it is not used legitimately but for a political purpose. . . . [S]cholars must definitely take a stand and expose whoever has a political purpose. After all, is there any justification to use the word to imply that there is some kind of international conspiracy or network of Chinese all over the place acting as one force? . . . No, it’s sheer nonsense” (Malvezin 2004: 52).

After rejecting “Greater China” and “Chinese Diaspora”, Wang then dealt with the remaining task of looking for that most appropriate, single embracive term to depict the Chinese communities abroad. Here, he took the stand that “Unfortunately, there is now no universally accepted term that includes all Chinese living abroad, both Chinese nationals and the ethnic Chinese.” He declared categorically that he had “chosen to use ‘Chinese overseas’ to refer to everyone of Chinese descent living outside,” even as he acknowledged its lack of precision (Wang 2003d: 88-89). He merely stated his preference and never

quite explained why he would rather not settle for the popular alternative of “ethnic Chinese,” as advocated by other scholars in the field such as Leo Suryadinata and Tan Chee Beng (Suryadinata 1997: vii-ix, 1-4, 25-29; more recent and sharper exposition in Suryadinata 2007: 1-3, 29-33).

In a 1996 interview with *Free China Review*, conducted in conjunction with the appearance of a belated review of his 1991 book, *China and the Chinese Overseas*, he reminded his readers that “In fact, my book is called the Chinese Overseas, quite deliberately using ‘overseas’ as a geographical term, as in ‘outside of’” (Wang 1996: 49). In a later speech, he reiterated: “My own books have preferred ‘Chinese overseas’... and so has ISSCO, the International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas which was founded after the San Francisco conference in 1992, and also the new *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* edited by Lynn Pan” (Wang 2004b: 169-70).<sup>4</sup> Although not spelt out specifically, the two latter projects were closely related to Wang who was one of the key drivers of that conference and subsequently founder member and first president of the ISSCO, and the deputy chairman of the Chinese Heritage Centre which had overseen the encyclopaedic project.

Therefore, in looking for the best-possible, embracive, generic term to cover all Chinese who are abroad, Wang’s clearly stated preference is for “Chinese overseas.” In his mindscape, this term covers both the Chinese of China nationality who are residing overseas, and the foreign nationals of Chinese descent who are also commonly referred to as ethnic Chinese. This has remained as Wang’s recommended default position for the academic world.

### **Coming to Terms with Scholarship and Politics**

Wang Gungwu’s cautious examination of a range of specific terms to define, categorize and analyze various aspects of Chinese migration and settlement outside of China constituted the foundational premise of a sub-field of study pioneered by him. His scholarly approach in taking on the task with a wealth of knowledge traversing the length and breadth of Chinese history from ancient to contemporary times and with a multi-layered precision is obvious for all to see. What deserves our attention ultimately is his self-declared positioning as a scholar of Chinese ethnicity born and bred in Southeast Asia, who is ideologically committed to the cause of campaigning against any insidious

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<sup>4</sup> One shortcoming of this useful encyclopaedia is that it is inconsistent and uses the terms “Overseas Chinese” and “Chinese Overseas” interchangeably and confusingly. See for instance, Pan 1998: 15-17, 103-10.



depiction of Chinese abroad as a unified force threatening humanity in general and the localized Southeast Asian nation-states in particular.

The thin red line between scholarship and politics in Wang's writings is not always explicitly drawn. Rather, it is often blurred. This has led Adam McKeown to call the "many writings by Wang Gungwu" as an example of "politically conscious scholarship" (McKeown 2001: 342). Gregor Benton and Liu Hong as editors of a volume on Wang's interviews and writings surmised that "his scholarship is characterized by a high-minded sense of social responsibility" (Benton and Liu 2004: 4). Philip Kuhn who contributed a prologue to the festschrift volume in celebration of Wang's seventieth birthday approached the issue with sensitivity. He recognized that "Gungwu's concern to allay fears about China and the Chinese overseas is of long standing and forms a consistent part of his historical calling." He suggested that one group of people who would have "excellent reasons to be grateful to Gungwu" was "the peoples of the region for his resolute liberalism amid what must have been heavy discouragement." Calling him "a public-spirited intellectual," Kuhn commented subtly on Wang's crossing of the thin red line:

Dispassionate scholarship and passionate engagement often seem an ill matched pair, so most professional scholars try to keep the two in separate halves of their minds. The dangers of allowing political commitment to tilt the playing field in historical research are obvious. Yet how rigidly can the separation be maintained in real life? When injustices and even disasters grow from myths, and when these can be corrected by studying the evidence, we are justly summoned to battle. In Gungwu's case, the dangerous myths to be corrected involved the socio-political identities of the Chinese overseas and the nature of China's relations with her maritime neighbours (Kuhn 2003: 15, 25, 27).

Coming to terms with Wang's scholarship on definitional distinctions and related issues has proven to be a difficult task for the pluralistic, and at times quarrelsome, scholarly community. Disagreements among scholars have resulted in a lack of standard terminology and the confusion in turn has at times led to intellectual paralysis and surrender. For instance, the editors of *New Studies on Chinese Overseas and China* have openly admitted to giving up all efforts at reconciliation and settled for total inter-changeability in terminology: "The definitions of 'overseas Chinese,' 'Chinese overseas,' and 'Chinese diaspora' have been frequently debated in the past decade. Scholars with different research agendas use these terms differently in their research context. . . . In this volume, these three terms are interchangeable. . . . The reason for this is because the editors respect the complexity of the meaning of the terms adopted by the authors in their papers" (Huang, Zhuang and Tanaka 2000: 3). It is equally notable that, despite Wang's clearly stated objection to

the term “*huaqiao-huaren*” and its embedded ambiguity, the use of this term in scholarly publications in mainland China has exploded phenomenally (Wu and Wu 2008; Saw and Wong 2007).

One would also wonder whether Wang Gungwu has come to terms with his own engagement with the protracted terminological exercise in “What’s in a Name?” Shortly before the turn of the millennium, Wang offered the following thoughts:

We need more words, each with the necessary adjectives to qualify and identify who exactly we are describing. We need them all to capture the richness and variety of the hundreds of Chinese communities that can now be found. . . . Have I and others been inconsistent? Will we confuse our readers? I expect there will be confusion if we do not specify more exactly why [we] use a certain term and what is meant by it. But, after 40 years living with the problem, I no longer believe that there must be a single term for such a complex phenomenon. As a historian, I recognize that conditions change, and more names have to be found to mark the more striking changes (Wang 2004b: 169-70).

As such, his line of thinking betrays no regrets and suggests that it has been a necessary and meaningful exercise, and that the process will likely be a never-ending one, as with all great historical enterprises.

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