

*RETHINKING THE 'OVERSEAS CHINESE' :  
WHAT'S IN A NAME ?*

Assoc Prof Huang Jianli

Department of History

National University of Singapore

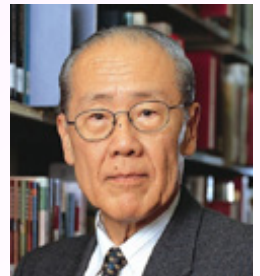
[2011 Lee Kong Chian NUS-Stanford Distinguished Fellow on Southeast Asia]

12 April 2011, Tuesday, 12-1.30pm

[\*\*\*Presentation based primarily upon journal article: Huang Jianli, 'Conceptualizing Chinese Migration and Chinese Overseas: The Contribution of Wang Gungwu', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, 6 (2010): 1-21]

# PRELIMINARIES

- Phenomenon of large-scale Ch migration fr mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to present day
- A vast & complex subject attracting academic attention fr various angles – eg. identity, transnationalism, gender, state-policy making, chinatowns, etc
- An impt pillar to think thro the subject is the issue of nomenclature or terminology, i.e. the naming of this particular group of migrants
- Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘What’ s in a name? That which we call a rose; By any other name would smell as sweet.’
  - Plot: Naming appears arbitrary but is actually of grave consequence!
- Today’ s seminar is abt naming . . . but doing so thro the prism of examining the writings & reminiscences of Wang Gungwu who is no ordinary scholar but one who has attained high reputation by being the pioneer & doyen of a new sub-field of China & SEA studies – that of ‘Overseas Chinese Studies’ . . . or should it be called ‘Chinese Overseas Studies’ or



# A. STRADDLING THE SCHOLARLY DOMAINS OF CHINA AND CHINESE COMMUNITIES ABROAD

- Prof Wang born in Dutch East Indies, grew up in Malaya & went to univ in China, Singapore & United Kingdom
- Such border crossings replicated in his academic journey
- Confession of ‘confused desires’ → ‘First love’ + ‘starting point’ was history of China *per se*
- BA (Hons), MA thesis resp on Rev vs Ref & Nanhai trade: Both dealing with inside & outside of China
- PhD thesis solely on China in immediate post-Tang era
- Turned towards Malayan hist when returned to Spore-Malaya in late 1950s to be ‘a local university man’
  - 1<sup>st</sup> steps in crafting a new sub-field: 1958 radio talks, 1959 *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese*
- Departure for Australian Nat Univ in 1968 (-1986)
  - Re-invigoration of pursuit of Ch hist, moving into its contemporary development
  - Also continue with research on Malaysia + SEA
  - Academic strategy by mid-1970s to straddle on the 2 boats of China & SEA Chinese → focus on dynamics of interplay betw these 2 dimensions

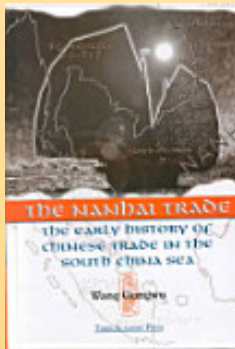
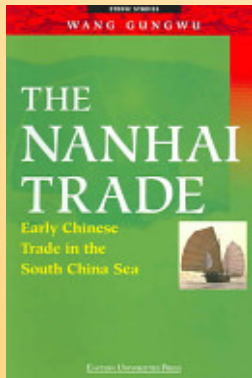


## B. WHAT'S IN A NAME? :

'NANYANG CHINESE', 'OVERSEAS CHINESE',  
'HUAQIAO'



- Impt of terminology to him
  - Chinese tradition: Much respect for notion of *zhengming* 正名 (rectification of names)
  - Danger of confusing terms for Ch migrants in SEA, esp 1950s-70s: Overtones of chauvinistic pride & extremist nationalist sentiment

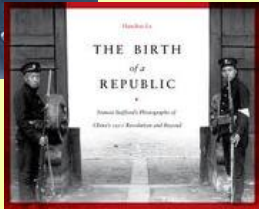


- His earliest engagement: Term of 'Nanyang 南洋 Chinese'
  - Arguing to confine term or at least be aware of historical roots being anchored not to whole of present-day SEA but only to key coastal strips of mainland SEA and most of island SEA

- His most extensive analysis: Term of ‘Overseas Chinese’ & its conflation with closely associated, commonly translated counterpart ‘*Huaqiao*’ 华侨



- Agst exaggeration & propaganda of a single community with considerable solidarity & clout
- Tried to tear term ‘*Huaqiao*’ away fr Overseas Ch & constitute it as a distinct sub-category anchored on notion of ‘sojourning’ (temporary, experimental migration)



- Made impt contribution in tracing genealogy of word *Huaqiao* as being loaded with Ch pol nationalism & arguing for applicability ONLY from mid-1890s to mid-1950s (with Ch govt recognition, support or protection)



- Regarded it as a distortion to use it for earlier Imperial Ch or to post-Bandung Conference era

- Wang also tried to raise ideas to a higher conceptual plane
  - Developed typology of 3 categories along pol orientation: A-Ch nat pol, B-Ch community pol, C-Non Ch pol (indigenous, colonial or nationalist)
  - Delineated 4 patterns of Ch migratory waves, of which *Huaqiao* repr only 1 stage: Traders, Coolie, Huaqiao/ Sojourner, Descent/Re-migrant
  - Both typologies have limitations & not widely accepted (eg. critique of Leo Suryadinata & Adam McKeown)
- Also examined usage of the 2 terms of OC & Hq in contemporary era, i.e. after post-WW2 decolonization & emergence of nation-states in SEA as well as post-1955 Bandung & post-1978 PRC reforms
  - Now narrowed term *Huaqiao* to just Ch nationals (with PRC passports) who are living in a foreign country
  - Those of Ch descents who are of foreign nationality termed as *Waji huaren* 外籍华人
  - English term ‘Overseas Chinese’ now tended to be translated back into Ch as *Haiwai huaren* 海外华人, avoiding pol-legal connotations & leaning on ethnicity



## C. CONTEMPLATING A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

- Fr abt 1972, Wang considering alternatives. Commented some local Ch leaders were calling ‘themselves *Huaren* instead of *Huaqiao*, but see themselves as Malaysian Ch (*Ma-Hua* 马华), Thai Ch (*Tai-Hua* 泰华), Indonesian Ch (*Yin-Hua* 印华) & so on.’
- Noted other local SEA scholars too labouring on lexicon: ‘They have tried to use alternative terms like *Huaren* 华人, [*Huazu*] 华族, *Huayi* 华裔, & for Spore & Malaysia, [*Xinhua*] 新华 & *Ma-Hua* 马华 (other prefixes varying with each country), but are not yet agreed which is the most suitable alternative.’ [Others too concerned abt terms but WGW at forefront & played major role; Lack of consensus]
- Offered view that ‘if *huaqiao* are sojourning Ch, *huaren* would be ethnic Ch, and *huayi* those “descendants of Ch” who consider themselves politically integrated with their adopted countries if not culturally assimilated as well . . . . I shall use shorthand references . . . . sojourners for *huaqiao*, ethnic Ch for *huaren*, & local nationals for *huayi*.’



- Wang had greatest difficulty with term *Huayi* 华裔 as his parameters went beyond descent line & imposed conditions of pol integration & cultural assimilation with local environment [Prominent Ch naming of 1995 Chinese Heritage Centre in Spore; But WGW also backed down to accept conventional usage by then]



- PRC govt & scholars offering of term *Waiji huaren* 外籍华人 for Ch sojourners who had settled down & sought local nationality is acceptable to him



- But he objected strenuously when they put forward hybrid notion of *Huaqiao-huaren* 华侨华人 continuum. To him, this deliberate ambiguous use of mixed term is 'least helpful' & a 'very clumsy idea'



- But proliferation: One of the battles he lost

The linked image cannot be displayed. The file may have been moved, renamed, or deleted. Verify that the link points to the correct file and location.



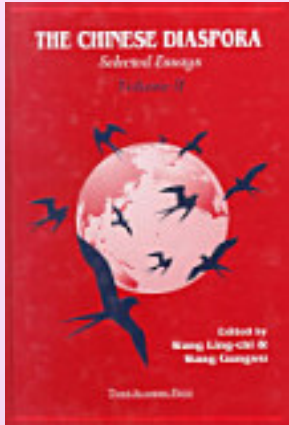
## D. INTERROGATING 'GREATER CHINA', 'CHINESE DIASPORA' AND 'CHINESE OVERSEAS'



- Deng Xiaoping's market reform & open door policy  
→ new term of 'Greater China', with great deal of ambiguity over geogr coverage & pol-econ implications
- Special issue of *China Quarterly*, Dec 1993, Wang criticized 'the lack of precision', 'careless & cavalier use of the term', 'expansionist & imperialist sounding', wrongly conveying 'alarmist sense of outreach & extension of an unstoppable force'
- Strongly agst including Chinese who lived outside of PRC, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan
  - To him, 'the moment you apply the term to Overseas Ch, it's totally misleading, and it's dangerous . . . . It begins to have a political significance that is quite misleading and, I would say, wrong.'

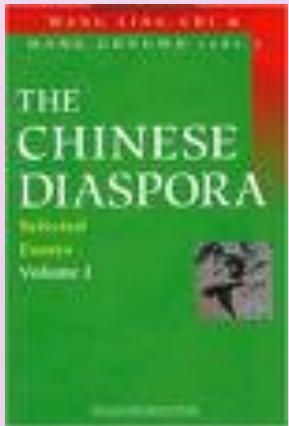


- Also opposed term ‘Ch diaspora’ , although at times defensively because a collection of papers for 1992 conference in San Francisco wh he co-edited with Wang Ling-chi & published in 1998 entitled *Chinese Diaspora*. Why objections?



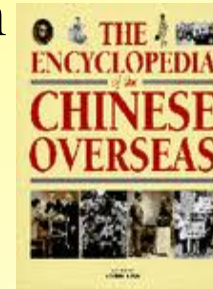
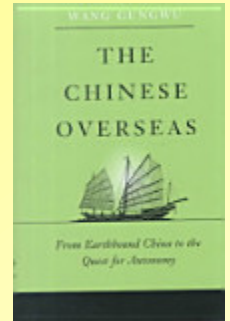
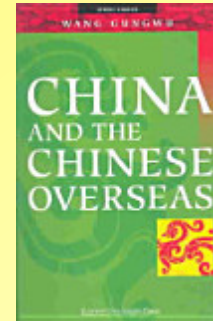
- Unlike Jews, Ch migration of last 20 yrs lacked wide-scale business acumen & wealth factor
- Ch migrants also never a single large cohesive social group

- ‘A term wh may also be extremely misleading . . . . a word that has the kind of pol content comparable to term *Huaqiao*’



- Used by politicians to evoke image of a yellow peril: ‘saying China is behind it, sending out people & contacting people all around, acting like an enormous octopus, spreading its tentacles & 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

– ‘The more I think about it, the unhappier I am that the term has come to be applied to the Ch. I have used the term with great reluctance & regret, & I still believe that it carries the wrong connotations & that, unless it is used carefully to avoid projecting the image of a single Ch diaspora, it will eventually bring tragedy to the Ch overseas.’



• In looking for best possible, embracive, generic term to cover all Ch abroad, Wang’s preference is for ‘Ch overseas’. In his mindscape, this term is to cover both Ch of China nationality who are residing overseas, as well as foreign nationals of Chinese descent who are also commonly referred to as Ethnic Chinese

– Nonetheless, he acknowledged lack of perfect precision & ‘there is now no universally accepted term that includes all Ch living abroad’

# E. CONCLUDING REMARKS: COMING TO TERMS WITH SCHOLARSHIP & POLITICS (Policy Making)

What deserves final attention is his self-declared positioning as a scholar of Ch ethnicity born & bred in SEA & who is ideologically committed to campaigning agst any insidious depiction of Ch abroad as a unified threatening force for humanity in general & localized SEA nation-states in particular

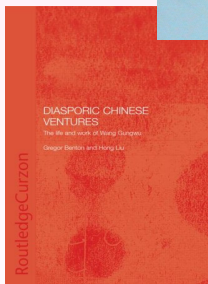


- Politics & its impact on policy making towards the Ch communities abroad are always on his radar screen



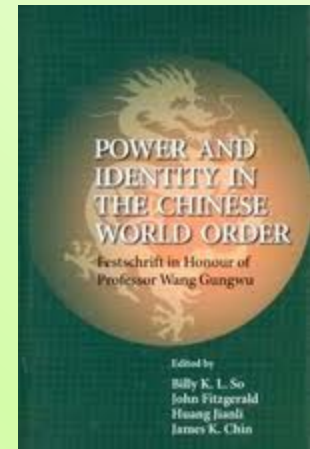
Hence, the thin red line betn scholarship & politics in Wang's writings is not always prominently marked out, instead it is often blurred

- Adam McKeown called the 'many writings of WGW' as an example of 'politically conscious scholarship'
- Gregor Benton & Liu Hong surmised that 'his scholarship is characterized by a high-minded sense of social responsibility'



– Philip Kuhn called him ‘a public spirited intellectual’ & commented subtly on Wang’s crossing of the thin red line:

➤ ‘Dispassionate scholarship & 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 & even disasters grow fr myths, & 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 Ch overseas & the nature of China’s relations with her maritime neighbours’



- Coming to terms with Wang's scholarship on definitional distinctions & related issues has proven to be a difficult task for the pluralistic, and at times quarrelsome, scholarly community.



- Disagreement has resulted in the lack of standardized terminology & confusion in turn has led to paralysis & surrender
- Example – Editors of *New Studies on Ch Overseas & China* (2000): ‘The definitions of “overseas Ch,” “Ch overseas,” and “Ch diaspora” have been frequently debated in past decade. Scholars with different research agendas use these terms differently in their research context. . . . In this vol, these 3 terms are interchangeable. . . . because editors respect the complexity of the meaning of terms adopted by the authors in their papers’

- Did WGW himself come to terms with his own struggle with terminology in the protracted game on ‘What’s in a name?’:
  - ‘We need more words, each with necessary adjectives to qualify & identify . . . . We need them all to capture the richness & variety of 100s of Ch communities . . . . Have I & others been inconsistent? Will we confuse our readers? I expect there will be confusion . . . . 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, & more names have to be found to mark the more striking changes’
  - He thus betrays no regrets & suggests that it has been a necessary & meaningful exercise, & that the process will likely to be a never-ending one. That is indeed so, as with all great historical enterprises



Assoc Prof Huang Jianli  
Department of History  
National University of Singapore