Global Thinkers Series 2021

Eminent Historian Wang Gungwu on Sinic Civilization’s Continental and Maritime Interactions
Professor Wang Gungwu (王赓武) has a life story deeply rooted in the history of 20th century Asia.

Born in Surabaya, Indonesia, in 1930, Wang spent his childhood in Ipoh, Malaysia. After the Second World War, he received his higher education at then the Central University in Nanjing and the University of Malaya in Singapore. Throughout his life, Wang has never left academia. He taught history for many years in Malaysia, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Wang was the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong for 10 years, after which he returned to his alma mater in the southern tip of Singapore — which had been renamed the National University of Singapore. There, he became the director of the East Asian Institute as well as chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

During the post-war era — when many new countries in Asia were gradually coming into existence — Wang traveled extensively and made his home in many parts of the world, observing first-hand the fusion of civilizations and thinking deeply about the changes of cultures and nation-states. He is recognized as one of the top three overseas-Chinese historians, alongside Ying-shih Yu and Cho-yun Hsui.

In August 2021, Song Bing, vice president of the Berggruen Institute, and Li Xin, the editor-in-chief of Caixin Global, co-interviewed Wang Gungwu. Casual, modest, and profound, the 91-year-old professor shared his wisdom and enlightening perspective on history.
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Part 1

Eurasian Core and Maritime Nations

**Song Bing:** Professor Wang’s journey and the unfolding of world history are intertwined. To paraphrase the Song Dynasty neo-Confucian scholar Lu Jiuyuan, reading modern history in Asia and professor Wang’s personal journey, it is as if “history annotates me, and I annotate history (历史注我，我注历史).” Your theory of “the Eurasian core and its edges” offers great insights into the rise and fall of continental and maritime powers over the past 3,000 years and aids us in understanding the deep psyche and underlying motivations of major players in today’s geopolitical landscape. Could you please share with us the key ideas of the Eurasian core theory? In what ways has the Eurasian core shaped the world today and current geopolitical dynamics?

**Wang Gungwu:** First of all, I would like to distinguish civilizations from cultures. Civilization refers to a strong, organized state or a group of states or people who can impact the world. Everyone has a culture, no matter how small a community — even a tribe, has a culture. They can be spread out anywhere in the world, have the origins of their language, have a unique way of life, think about life and death, the supernatural, and so on, and that’s all culture.

Civilization means something more — it brings together many people from different cultures, but with certain commonalities. It could be in the form of a set of conquered territories where people had settled, not necessarily in major cities, but at least with large constant urban concentrations and the capacity to build a state. To achieve this, they need to have a “language” to record what they did, explain themselves, and transmit values from one generation to the next and from the state itself to the different administrative sections scattered over a large territory.

The rise of civilizations is a much more complicated affair than cultures. There have been many attempts to build civilizations. However, many have disappeared after reaching a certain point, and only a relatively small number have survived. The three major civilizations of the world can be traced back to at least 5,000 to 10,000 years ago. Still, if you date them from when they have languages, they can be traced back to 5,000 to 6,000 years ago.
Today the origins of the three major civilizations are identified as the Mediterranean, Chinese (Sinic), and Indian (Indic). These three major civilizations are distinctive, all with long histories, unique languages, literature, and collective memories. Some of those elements may have a stronger impact than others.

I think the easiest way to explain a civilization is to start with its literacy — the “language,” which certainly applies to Sinic civilization. Once a language emerges and is adopted by more and more people from different cultures, the civilization begins to grow. At a certain point, it gives birth to a powerful state that supports a growing economy that generates surpluses and leads to technological and scientific progress. The state becomes more affluent, stronger, and more capable of ruling over larger territories.

The survival of a civilization determines its impact on world history. I discovered this only in the course of my study of Central Asian history. When I first started studying Chinese history, I learned it from the south, from the sea. In Malaysia, all the Chinese around me were from Fujian and Guangdong in southern China. I found that prior to the Tang Dynasty, there were very few records about the south, and almost all the historical records were about the north. Not only that, nearly all records dealt with challenges of Chinese civilization facing external enemies coming from Central Asia. Invasions from a group of powerful northern enemies have been a constant theme throughout Chinese history.

All three civilizations originated in great river valleys: the Tigris and Euphrates river valley systems of the Middle East, the Indus and Ganges for Indic civilization, and Yellow and Yangtze for Sinic civilization. Since civilizations all began in river valleys, all of them have a tendency to orient towards the continent. These three ancient civilizations, including the Chinese, never took the sea very seriously. Even though the Chinese in fact reached the sea quite early, they were only concerned about the continent because that was where enemies were coming from.

Indic civilization had the same problem — they were also constantly facing invasion from Central Asia. The Europeans, too, were attacked by Central Asians who moved west into the northern and southern Mediterranean. I was struck by the fact that the Central Asians did not have a written language, nor what I would deem “civilization” — a unique, stable, and powerful state with a sustained history record. What they did do was to move east, west, or south. How could these people without a state and a written language become so powerful?

So I started my research in a straightforward way: by studying the Mongols. The Mongol Empire was mighty, arguably the most powerful continental state in history. They expanded in all directions: westward to Vienna, southward to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and eastward to China, which they conquered at one point. They also sent a navy to Japan (they knew nothing about sailing,
but they found out that the Chinese had ships and decided to use them to go to Japan), went to Java (Indonesia), and reached Champa on the coast of Vietnam. The Mongols rose from Central Asia and had no written language of their own. They copied their script from someone else's, and only after becoming an empire did they begin to keep their records. Why did this happen? And how could other civilizations be defeated by these people from the steppes of Central Asia on horseback?

Whether it was the Egyptians, the Tigris-Euphrates, or the Babylonians, the Central Asian invaders came from the steppes and took over the Indo-Europeans in the west and south. They then migrated west to the northern Mediterranean, south into Persia and the eastern Mediterranean, and south into northern India.

To cut a long story short, you see how fascinating the role these Central Asians played. They borrowed whatever they needed from other people's civilizations, used them, attacked and conquered them when they saw an opportunity, and moved on. Along with the migration and expansion, they also settled and integrated into these civilizations. Thus, they became part of the Chinese, Indian, Persian, and Islamic world. In Europe, they became Russians, as well as inhabitants of the border regions, the Caucasus. They migrated to Turkey, and the Ottoman Empire is an example of a perfect Central Asian state. The expansion and migration of Central Asians continued until the 18th century.

Meanwhile, wealth was gathering in the developing Indic, Sinic, and Mediterranean civilizations, but Western Europeans were on the periphery of all this wealth because they were held back by the Muslims. The rise of Islam was one of the most miraculous moments in world history. In less than a century, Muslims conquered most of the Mediterranean and expanded into Central Asia, reaching the borders of China and India. From that time on, Islam became so powerful throughout Central Asia that they converted most Central Asian countries, except for the Mongols, who remained Buddhists. The riches from the east, whether Indian or Chinese civilizations, were kept away from the Western Europeans by the Muslims. They were on the wrong side of the Mediterranean, and wealth could never reach there. People tell stories of Marco Polo’s travels, but that was an exception. Europeans had to be very friendly to the Mongols to cross Central Asia into the east. It was very frustrating for Western Europeans. They tried hard to trade with the Indians and the Chinese but were utterly cut off by the more dominant Muslims in between. The Crusades and other attempts to fight the Muslims failed one after another. Western Europeans were isolated on the outer edge.

In the course of that, countries near the edge of Western Europe, namely Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, and France on the Atlantic coast, were forced to find another way out. This even
included Scandinavians, but they were too remote. Eventually, two great adventurers came out of Portugal and Spain. Vasco da Gama headed south into the Indian Ocean, and Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic. When Columbus reached the Americas, he thought he had found India because that was his original intention. One could say that both Da Gama and Columbus found India. Only that one was real, and the other was not.

In modern history, the globalized maritime technology enabled Western Europeans to dominate the rest of the world and changed the global history. Until that point, Eurasia was the core. The Eurasian core constantly pushed and migrated east, west and south, from over 5,000 or 6,000 years ago to about 400 or 500 years ago for an extended period of history. However, in the last 400 years, one navy emerged and dominated the world for the first time. Having defeated France, the British Navy marshaled the world into an era of maritime domination.

But could the British Empire alone dominate the globe and change world history simply by occupying the seas? Perhaps it was built upon the foundation that was laid down by the Eurasian core for thousands of years. The conquest and migration of Eurasia provided the means to connect all the surrounding territories, allowing people on each continent to discover and influence each other. When people migrated in all directions, they had to pass through Eurasia again. Under Mongolian rule (Pax Mongolica), trade between civilizations was most accessible. At that time, the Mongolian Empire provided a unified and stable system for trade between east and west and even south. This was extraordinary.

Maritime groups had already existed back then, but they were overall tiny in size and composed of merchant ships engaged in shipping and maritime trade, not warfare. Moreover, shipbuilding technology was not well developed yet, and the sea always seemed unpredictable and full of danger. There was a lot of fear and anxiety about going to the sea. As a result, the amount of maritime trade was generally limited.

Of course, that is not to say that continental trade was easy. Transporting trade goods from one place to another on the continent meant that many land borders had to be crossed, which often led to wars between different groups of people. In this matter, the tribal peoples of Central Asia had the upper hand: they have been on the move and dominating over Central Asian routes — including the Silk Road that we talk about today — because they were the only ones who knew how to control the caravans. So trade by land was not easy, but it was possible and evolved a lot of entities. In contrast, the sea trade only needs to involve a small number of people who know how to sail.

To this day, the maritime orientation of the world’s global economy is so apparent. China’s success in becoming the world’s second-largest economy resulted from its participation in the maritime economy — which allows it to sell goods to the global market and bring back resources from the vast expanses of the outside world.

So, it was essential for China to turn towards navy-building and the maritime world. It is a fundamental issue of survival for the Chinese. Suppose China cannot control its coastal region or have access to the sea. In that case, it could lead to the weakening or even the end of its economic prosperity.
Part 2
The Expansion of Chinese Civilization

Song Bing: You are famed for your groundbreaking work on overseas Chinese studies. Your research on population shifts in China and Chinese emigrants to Southeast Asia has also offered important insights into the spread of Chinese civilization and culture in the Asian region, as well as the patterns of civilization growth and expansion. What were the main reasons and patterns of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, which began as early as the Song Dynasty? What modes of thinking determined the growth and expansion of Chinese civilization?

Wang Gungwu: Before the Song Dynasty, the sea contributed very little to the Chinese economy. It was mainly agrarian.

However, during the Song Dynasty, the frontier was gradually pushed to the south by invaders from the north. The Chinese had to turn to the sea and seek income from other sources, thus increasing trade with Southeast Asia. This was very successful, but it led to the increasing dependence of the Chinese economy on maritime trade. Before the Mongols conquered China, the Song Dynasty was actively trading. Still, it was never strong enough to make the Song Dynasty an empire, but merely a minor kingdom in Chinese history with limited boundaries. Eventually, all of China was conquered by the Mongols. However, unlike the Han Chinese, the Mongols already had a great link with the Middle East over land. While ruling China, the Mongols discovered that the Arabs and Persians were also trading with China by sea. Naturally, the Mongols encouraged them to continue doing that.

Under the Yuan Dynasty, trade began to accelerate, with more Arabs and Persians coming into China and the Chinese moving into the Indian Ocean. Because of this, we had Zheng He’s voyages — as a result of Mongol expansion and the significant shift towards the Indian Ocean as an important transportation route for global trade.

However, after the Mongols, the Ming Dynasty introduced a “closed-door policy” and only allowed tributary trade. This was a completely different kind of trade, meaning that anyone who wanted to trade with China could come to China as long as they paid tribute to the emperor. Even small amounts of
business would happen under the umbrella of tribute. It was almost a very defensive way to handle relations with foreign countries. In this way, the government tried to prevent and stop many Chinese from trading overseas. Foreigners could only be allowed to enter and trade but not the other way round. This went on for almost 200 years.

Of course, the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese merchants in Fujian and Guangdong found other means to get out, but mostly illegally. The Ming government did nothing to protect them. In the government’s view, leaving without permission was a crime. In this case, the Chinese went down to Southeast Asia to trade, and after that, it was challenging to return to China because they could be punished if they returned. Therefore, many of them settled in Southeast Asia, married local women, and assimilated. Centuries later, most of them became part of the local population in Southeast Asia.

So, initially, there was no overseas Chinese community. The only exception was some Muslim Chinese — Muslim children of Arabs, Persians, and other Central Asians during the Mongol rule — who went and settled down in Southeast Asia. It was not until the end of the Ming Dynasty that private merchant powers such as Zheng Chenggong and his father Zheng Zhilong rose to prominence and started trading with the Japanese, the Europeans such as Portuguese, Spaniards, and the Filipinos in Macau. Other Chinese merchants began to join in gradually. The Ming government did not control this very strictly. So many overseas private enterprises sprung up, though the government did not recognize them.

Because the Ming Dynasty was so weak, Zheng Chenggong set up his little naval kingdom in Taiwan and later fought with the Manchus when they conquered China. In the end, the Qing Dynasty took over the Zheng family’s territory in Taiwan. But the Manchus didn’t want to carry out trade either because they had had enough dealing with the southern Chinese. They did not want to encourage people to go out and trade with foreigners but only wanted to limit trade with foreigners coming into China. Macau was very important for this purpose.

The Manchus, as part of the Eurasian core, have dealt with the Mongols throughout the plateau. This includes those in Xinjiang, Turks, all the way to Afghanistan — anywhere where you can find remnants
of the Mongols. As you know, Central Asia was becoming very strong and active again, but this time, the Europeans were involved. The British were coming from India into Xinjiang and Tibet, and the Russians were coming right across from Siberia. The Central Asian bloc was once again the focus of attention.

Meanwhile, the Qing Dynasty was mounting a counterattack, trying to defend itself by seizing territory. It wanted to control all the Mongol tribes and the Muslim Turks. Central Asia during that period was the main focus of the war, but the economy was heavily dependent on sea routes. Trade on land was confined to a small scale while the maritime economy continued to grow. As naval technology developed, shipping became the new norm of transportation. By the 19th century, ships were so safe that sailing was no longer something to be feared.

People once again sailed from Europe to the Indian Ocean through the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal, but traveling was no longer the same. In this context, overseas Chinese communities emerged in large numbers. They were subjects under overseas colonial rule, with no rights and minor status, and could only work for the officials and merchants of the colonies. In turn, local colonial officials and merchants used them to trade with China and the surrounding areas.

Back then, the Chinese who went overseas didn’t really have a strong sense of identity. These immigrants, primarily from Fujian and Guangdong, never recognized the Qing government, and the southerners were the most resentful of the Manchus. Likewise, the Qing government did not intend to care for or protect them. Besides, the fact that they were overseas to trade was in itself illegal — they were supposed to stay home and be filial sons and loyal subjects.

It was not until the end of the 19th century, in 1893, that the Qing government revised its policy regarding the ban on going to the South China Sea. During this period, millions of Chinese went out without any protection. As a result, they depended on the local colonial government. They did not connect themselves with the Qing Dynasty, much less define themselves as “Chinese.” In a way, it can be said that they have a sense of nationality but no corresponding designation. They do not have the word “nation” in their concept. They were all from Fujian, or Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Guangzhou, or Chaozhou and identified with their own dialect groups rather than China under the Qing government. The “Qing Empire” had nothing to do with them. Most of them addressed themselves as “Tang people” because it distinguished them from the Qing Dynasty.

You can see how I’ve come to understand Chinese history. This north-south division of China is related to the continental and maritime division of different governmental policies over the first 2,000 years of documented history. The southerners, who lived by the sea, didn’t know much about the continent and developed a separate identity that was connected to the sea. They have a perception that was different from inland Chinese. But unfortunately, the upper-class Chinese who studied the classics, took exams, and became officials were obsessed with northern civilization. Everything about the classics — the idea of “Datong” (Great Harmony, 大同) and the Confucian ideal of “ruling the nation and pacifying the world (治国平天下)” — came from the north. They identified with the north and wanted to go to Beijing to work for the Qing government. However, the ordinary people of the south — merchants, artisans,
adventurers, and entrepreneurs — who gazed beyond the sea eventually developed an entirely different worldview. In fact, they called themselves “Tang people” rather than “Han people.”

Finally, I would like to say that this issue depends significantly on our understanding of the “scholarly class” (士大夫). Although they were a small group, perhaps no more than 2% or 3% of China’s population, they held all the official jobs and were the most educated people who wrote history and spread the classics. They teach traditional civilization’s values, are highly distinguished and respected for having high moral integrity, and are well-versed in the deep philosophical thinking that stretches across Chinese culture. However, they did not have much contact with the Chinese people at large. The ordinary Chinese people were farmers in the north or fishermen, merchants on the southern coastline such as Guangdong or Fujian. This difference means it may be challenging to find a definition that genuinely describes everyone when one talks about the Chinese.

Part 3

“Nation-States” and Empires

Song Bing: After World War II, many post-colonial nations were facing the issue of nation-building in the modern sense. After establishing a preliminary state comprising many ethnicities, they now need to integrate these different groups of people into a nation. In contrast, European countries historically had nationhood before they established their independent state power. Modern China is still going through this transition of moving from its former imperial framework to the modern “nation-state.” Is this correct?

Wang Gungwu: The first aspect you mentioned is correct. Many of the colonized countries were not originally “nations” but were simply lands left behind with borders drawn by their colonial powers, often with various ethnic groups within the borders. So now, the rulers had to find a way to make everyone feel that they belonged to a nation. That’s the part of “national identity building.”

The second aspect of the question is, “What is an empire?” We take it for granted that the West defines
what it means to be an empire based on the model of the classic Roman Empire. About the nature of
the Roman Empire, we can first find the former Roman Republic growing, expanding, declining, and
later becoming the Holy Roman Empire, which was centered around the Catholic Church as opposed to
the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Roman Empire constructed this division in a very different way, and
finally, history culminates in the evolution of the Roman Empire into the Holy Roman Empire. The sense
of unity in the Roman Empire was based on shared history, religion, and cultural identity.

But the “Chinese Empire” never went through anything like that. Perhaps during the Han Dynasty, one
can see similarities between the “Chinese Empire” and the Roman Empire. But what happened after
the Han Dynasty? You have the Northern and Southern Dynasties after the collapse of the Western
Jin Dynasty. The northern dynasties were ruled by foreign groups — the imperial families were all
“Xianbei” (鮮卑, northern tribal groups). What made them become Chinese and join this civilization?
They adopted the Chinese language and ran the state along the lines that the Han developed since the
Shang and Zhou dynasties, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States, and the Qin. They ran China
according to the previous rules and regulations passed down from the Han Chinese. However, the
ruling elites were not usually Han Chinese. They came from everywhere: Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet,
to name a few. They all came to northern China as the “Five Barbarians.”

So, the question is: “What kind of empire emerged from there?” There was no “Chinese Empire” like the
Roman Empire model or the empires that we talk about today, such as the British Empire or the French
Empire, national empires. In the 19th century, the concept of national empires was created by the
Europeans either intentionally or unintentionally. The British East India Company became the symbol of
the British Empire, the Dutch East India Company became the Dutch Empire, and the French created
their own French Empire. But before that, they were all feudal empires in one way or another. However,
starting with the French Revolution, after the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, these empires became
national empires.

That was never the case in China. We see a completely different empire built up through culture,
civilization, writing, language, and historical records, which allowed them to run the country differently.
Whoever conquered China found themselves having to rule in this way. Since then, we have referred
to all successive Chinese dynasties, including the Mongols, Liao, Jin, Yuan,
and Qing, as Chinese dynasties in this sense. What they all have in common
is that they inherited a single way of running China based on the recorded
legacy of Chinese history from the
“Shiji” (史记, “Records of the Grand Historian”) and the “Hanshu” (汉书,
“Book of Han”) all the way to the Ming
History. People still want to write the

A bookshelf laid out with ancient books in Shanghai. Photo: VCG
Qing history because it would serve as a complete narrative of a civilizational record based on the same language, a set of records that can be preserved under the “History” section of the “Complete Library in Four Sections” (四库全书). “History” is not just history but documentation of all dynasties and periods. There is a continuous record from “Wen Wu Zhou Gong” (文武周公) to the present.

It has been proven that today most Manchus are identified as Chinese, most Mongols have become Chinese, and all other 50-plus ethnic groups have mostly accepted that they are part of China. Thus, the current state of China is different from the idea of empire inherited by the West. Once we recognize the difference between the two, this Eurocentric notion of “empire” does not have to be applied to the narrative framework of nation-state building. We can build our state in our own way, following our traditions and taking into account the legacy of the “world” established during the Shang and Zhou periods.

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**Part 4**

**Symbiotic Relationship Among Civilizations**

**Song Bing:** In the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington sounded the alarm about the clash of civilizations. He thought that all future conflicts would occur between cultures and civilizations. In particular, he pointed out that Islamic civilization and Chinese civilization were the two biggest threats to Western civilization. Regardless of the merits of his argument, I would like to draw out the other side of this narrative, which is: how civilizations can inspire and learn from each other and the symbiotic relationship among different cultures throughout human history. In today’s world of geopolitical strife, the spirit of seeking common ground while preserving differences is sorely lacking, and there is much that humanity should learn from history. Can you share some examples of how civilizations have nurtured and inspired each other? How do civilizations survive and thrive in a symbiotic relationship?

**Wang Gungwu:** I have always believed that civilization does not correspond to political boundaries. Once you start with the proposition that civilization has no political boundaries, you find different kinds of borders, for example, moral, religious, or others that evolved from cultural values, and
institutions. These borders are actual, but they are not political borders. This is my first point.

The second is the interaction between civilizations. In Eurasia, Central Asians did not have their distinct civilization, although they did have a particular culture. They were good at borrowing from different civilizations, mixing them, and then transporting them back and forth during their migrations — allowing civilizations to communicate and learn from each other. Buddhism is the best example; Islam is another example in a different form. Buddhism was entirely peaceful and had no borders as a religion. Today, some countries are Buddhist, and the country next door is not Buddhist. These borders are political. They are modern and artificially drawn lines between different cultures and different civilizations.

But Buddhism has no borders. When they arrived in China, China welcomed them: they found that Buddhists offered something that the Chinese did not have, some metaphysical ideas lacking in the Confucian and Daoist traditions. The Buddhists brought these ideas with them and introduced them to the Chinese. Once the Chinese realized that these were things they did not have and found them valuable, they adopted them wholesale, and over the course of several generations, Buddhism quickly spread. Within a few centuries, the whole country was practicing Buddhism in one way or another. There is no doubt that there were different schools of Buddhism in China, but they were all Buddhists. In fact, Buddhism almost died out in India, but it flourished in China and elsewhere. This is an interesting story.

The Chinese took Buddhism to fill the gaps in Confucianism and Taoism. All three were almost equally important in the eyes of the Tang rulers. By the Song Dynasty, when the emperors decided to use Confucianism to run the state, Confucian philosophers were wise and sensitive enough to be willing to draw from the rich Taoist and Buddhist heritage to enrich their understanding of Confucianism and provide further depth to its spiritual nature. As a result, people like Zhu Xi (朱熹) emerged. Although there were quite different ideals between Zhu Xi and the later Wang Yangming (王阳明), their doctrines were both Confucians adopting new ideas to try and enrich their self-practices.

However, the state stepped in and thought it was useful to adopt just one part of the Confucian debates as the state’s official ideology and make this narrow form of Confucianism the primary content of the imperial examination to become an official. From then on, Confucianism closed its doors and became very narrow, defined entirely by one set of interpretations of the Confucian classics that became the classics for all examinations all the way up till 1904.
Confucianism's shift toward closure was a result of political intervention, which isn't natural to a civilization's evolution nor the way people think. When politics intervene, it prevents the free exchange of civilizations. Civilizations work spontaneously by having people from one civilization meet people from another, recognize their differences, and naturally learn from each other. Once political boundaries are drawn, the natural interaction between civilizations is weakened.

I think Huntington was really talking about political boundaries because he's a political scientist. Thus his main focus was on politics, that is, the political boundaries of the West. He calls it “civilization,” but it is just political power.

Where exactly is the border? Frankly, I disagree with Huntington’s drawing of a sharp line between Christianity and Islam because the two religions believe in the same God. They come from the same set of Hebrew bibles as a source, but today they are divided for political reasons. In fact, the Islamic world was created by a group of Arabs, but how many Arabs conquered large territories and then created borders? It was politics that drew artificial boundaries between Christianity and Islam. The Crusaders went east so many times, and the two religions fought each other for so long, over a 1,000 years. As a result, that line is becoming almost impossible to cross. But if we look at the source, they were part of one civilization.

Part 5

Afghanistan and The Graveyard of Empires

Song Bing: People say that Afghanistan is the “graveyard of empires.” The Soviet Union was there for 10 years and the United States for 20 years. Both ended in failure. Can you share your insights about the geopolitical significance of Afghanistan based on your perspective of the Eurasian Core theory?

Wang Gungwu: There is so much history in that part of the world. I was always very struck by the fact that Alexander the Great was able to reach Afghanistan back then.

When I was studying European history, I remember reading about Alexander's armies reaching as far
as Afghanistan and India. Before that time, many of the people who ran Afghanistan were descendants of Indo-European speakers related to Iranian, Persian, or other Central Asia. Some of these languages have disappeared; others survived and blended into Persian, Hindi, or Sanskrit, all of which are branches of the Indo-European languages in this part of Central Asia related to Afghanistan in one way or another. Either they pass to the south or the north. When Muslims occupied Persia, they passed through Afghanistan into Central Asia. When the Buddhists entered China, they too passed through Afghanistan.

I remember as a young student finding it somewhat mind-boggling to discover that many of the so-called Indian Buddhists were not Indian at all but came from western Pakistan and Afghanistan, some from Kabul. The Indo-European speakers were coming out of Central Asia. Afghanistan was a critical juncture where they diverged to India or Iran, or both. When the Mongols and Turks came in later as Muslims under the Mughal Empire, they went over that way again.

But let's return to Alexander's conquest. The idea was to take over everything from the Iranians and Persians, who had threatened them for too long. They pushed as far as they could, but of course, Alexander died, very young, and the military eventually retreated. But the fact remains that Alexander’s armies were in Afghanistan long enough to leave behind a considerable amount of Greek relics, ideas, architecture, etc., in the area. Thus, Afghanistan was a meeting point for three civilizations — the Mediterranean civilization that pushed eastward; the Mongols, Turks, and others driven out by the Chinese; and the Indo-Europeans who used it to enter India.

From this point of view, there exist several great hubs of penetration from Central Asia into other regions, where two ancient civilizations were under the significant threat of these Central Asian powers. For China, this hub was Dunhuang, a necessary route for Eurasians to enter China. At first, they also used this route; however, soon, the Chinese empire managed to develop a sufficiently strong defense system with efficient continuity, making the crossing increasingly difficult until finally, it was almost impossible. The Han Chinese, together with the Manchus and Mongols, kept the Muslims out of bay through a solid defense. It is remarkable that after the Battle of Talas (in the Tang Dynasty), from the middle of Xinjiang, Muslims were on one side and non-Muslims on the other, and it was difficult for Muslims to cross this defense. Some Muslims came through as people, but at least half of Xinjiang was never dominated by the Muslims.

Afghanistan remains one of the hubs at the heart of this Eurasian continent. When we return today to China’s thinking about the Belt and Road Initiative and so on, it is clear that at least by sea, China can
succeed economically. However, by land, my feeling is that profitability is less critical; what is crucial is the defense system. China has to find that balance again between making the economic surpluses it needs through the sea on one side and fortifying its defenses in vulnerable places on the other. I think that's what the “Belt and Road” kind of balance represents.

Part 6
Where is home?

Li Xin: Finally, I would like to touch on your personal history. You have mentioned that your father has always held the belief that as a Chinese, you will eventually return to China because that is where you call home. Amidst the historical currents, was this a shared notion among overseas Chinese?

Wang Gungwu: Most first and second-generation Chinese who went to “Nanyang” and elsewhere would speak of China as their home. They look forward to the day when they can return, or at least to go back often.

But those who have been here for multiple generations have a different feeling. They have settled in Southeast Asia for at least 300 or 400 years. Many have adapted to the local life and established families there. Some do not even know where they came from in China, but only roughly Fujian or some other province, while others can trace their roots back to the village where they originated based on their surname. If their tribe with the same family name came from a particular village, this gave them a sense of identity, but when these people settled overseas for 200 or 300 years, such tracing became quite rare.

After the Opium Wars, especially in the late 19th century, hundreds of thousands of new immigrants came to Southeast Asia. My father came as an educator for Chinese children in “Nanyang.” My parents were both from China, and my father was recruited to teach Mandarin to Chinese children. So, I am a descendant of immigrants.
Li Xin: You have witnessed, not just once, but several times, the process of nation-building, for example, in Malaysia and Singapore. Many overseas Chinese like you who have lived in multiethnic societies in Southeast Asia have also become citizens of these emerging nation-states. How do they define their own cultural identity and find their voice and expression?

Wang Gungwu: Southeast Asia is a special place because almost all territories, except Thailand, were once under colonial rule, whether they were colonized by the British, the Dutch, the French or the Spanish, or later the Americans. So the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia do not have a strong sense of nationality, for the rulers were once colonialists of one sort or another. What they tended to do, were to form Chinese communities. Back then, colonial rulers would recruit people from all over the world to come and work for them in the colonies, including the local indigenous people, so it was always a pretty diverse area. Almost all port cities in Southeast Asia are pluralistic societies with many different communities, religions, languages, races, and origins. However, they don’t mix much with each other.

There may be a common language among the various ethnic groups that can be used over doing business in the marketplace. Every colonial country would have a language as an official language. For example, in Indonesia, people used Malay as the general language of commerce. So, Malay was the lingua franca. Most of us can speak Malay to some extent. But each community will have its mother tongue or speak its own dialect. Because my father sent me to a governmental school, I had a mix of Chinese, Indian, and native Malay students among my classmates. So, we grew up together in the colony, and diversity was the norm for us. That’s how I grew up.

Li Xin: The story of you and your wife, Margaret Lim Ping-Ting, is a very touching one. You moved to Australia with your family and lived there for 18 years and had lived in Hong Kong for almost 10 years, Singapore for over 24 years. Where is home for you and your family?

Wang Gungwu: My children call Australia their home because we brought them there when they were still little. Although the country they grew up in is Australia, they all know that they are Chinese too. When we first moved there, they still thought they would return to Malaya one day, but they didn’t have a very deep sense of belonging.

So, I think we had a very shallow and thin understanding of the concept of “our nation” and “our home.” To rephrase the words of my wife’s when we left Malaya, “Home is where we are.” This simplifies our understanding, wherever we are located, is our home. It could be in a city, a country, an island, or
anywhere else. This is especially true for me and my whole family.

We also identify with the universities that I work for. My wife and I took that as our home. Because campuses are filled with people from all over the world, every campus I work on is multicultural, multilingual, and multinational. There is no narrow definition of nationality. Therefore, home is pretty much defined by what we like and whatever we see comfortable to define it. Especially for an academic like me, as long as I am free to study, teach, and do my writing and research alone, that is my ideal home.

Wang Gungwu (far right) with his family in Singapore in 1968. The whole family moved to Australia shortly after this photo was taken. Photo: The Paper

*Berggruen Intern* Jin Young Lim contributed to the story.