

Introductory remarks by Professor Anthony Reid at the Inaugural CSCSD Lecture on 26 February 1999 at the Australian National University

Vice-Chancellor, Your Excellencies, Gungwu, Friends

There is a legend in India about the first migration of Parsee refugees from Iran many centuries ago. Their leader was brought to the King by a minister who denounced them and demanded expulsion, because the country was already full. He asked for a glass of milk, filled to the brim; then took a pinch of sugar and sprinkled it in. Noting that it had not overflowed he presented the glass to the king saying, 'You are the milk, we are the sugar; you will know of our presence only by the sweetness which suffuses the whole'.

This is Diaspora at its best, in a fashion we know well in Australia. The rich abundance of cultures and ideas has manifestly savoured and sweetened Australian society. The violent demonstrations by the Kurdish PKK movement around the world last week show a less attractive face of modern diasporas, equally part of their nature in our time.

The extraordinary mobility of populations in the globalising world, together with the core of instant communications around that world, have given a new urgency on a very old phenomenon - a spatially dispersed minority which nevertheless feels some kinship or has that kinship thrust upon it by a hostile environment.

There is a theoretical and a practical story of how we came to establish this Centre. Theoretical: Faith in the sovereignty and internal coherence of the nation state has weakened, and all sorts of other forms of community are finding legitimacy again. Many, more than ever, still intermarry, or find their children culturally remote from them as they adjust to a host society. It is their multiple options, possibilities and transactions which demand attention, and the new Centre has been established to focus on them.

So much for one contested word, 'diaspora', the strength of which is the modern literature which has grown around it stresses precisely the ambivalences and pluralities of multiple identities.

Another contested word is our title is 'Chinese', which we somehow use to include some purely English-speaking Australian, purely Indonesian-speaking Indonesians, purely Thai-speaking Thais, and a range of multilingual others speaking a variety of languages deriving from south China, north China, south east Asia and England. The one thing virtually unknown in this 'Chinese' diaspora category is a monolingual Chinese-speaker. What gives the unsatisfactory everyday term some analytical usefulness is the tensions it creates in all those of Chinese or partly Chinese descent outside China, between heritage and environment.

In our part of the world the Chinese and the British (or Anglo-Irish) have been the two most important diasporas. We don't (yet) have centres for the British diaspora because Australian studies is itself largely concerned with this. The British, specifically the English, have built states where they went and this is their greatest legacy. Chinese migrants had learned from long experience to expect little of governments, and to rely much on the networks of kinship, culture and trust. They have played the role for a millennium in south east Asia, and a century and a half in Australian and south west Pacific, of economic innovators and cultural minorities, challenging dominant cultures by their

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Opening of the Centre, 1999

otherness, their skills, and their ability to tame hostile frontiers. They deserve sustained study, and we hope this Centre will, over the long term, provide it.

I mentioned a practical reason, also, which explains why here and now. The study of Chinese outside China at the ANU has a long history, going back to Patrick FitzGerald and Charles Price, but it's fair to say the ANU became a world leader in the field when tonight's speaker, Wang Gungwu, came here in 1968 as the second occupant of the chair of Far Eastern History. He attracted a number of outstanding students from Singapore, Malaysia, and Australia, including Yong Chin Fatt, Yeng Ching-hwang, Steve Fitzgerald and Ng Chin-keong. He also brought to Canberra in 1976 (I believe) Jennifer Cushman, then a young graduate working on Thailand-China connections. She remained until her premature death in 1989 wholly concerned with Chinese in South East Asia and Australia and worked with Gungwu in a number of important book projects.

Jennifer's sudden death, not long after Professor Wang's departure for Hong Kong, deprived us of our two key scholars in this area but also in a curious way galvanised us into action. We organised a series of lectures in honour of Jennifer, which may have pushed both Craig Reynolds and I further into this field than we would otherwise have gone. Those lectures became a successful book in 1996, *Sojourners and Settlers*. We also launched a memorial fund, which we used to help younger scholars in the field of Sino-Southeast Asian Studies visit the ANU or Cornell, the other university Jennifer cared about.

In 1996 another of our former ANU colleagues, Ben Batson, died suddenly and tragically in Singapore where he was lecturing at the National University of Singapore. He had helped and supported us with the Jennifer Cushman fund and lectures, probably as much because of his affection for Jennifer as for his admiration for our goals. He very generously left US\$100,000 in his will for the Jennifer Cushman fund. It is that bequest, in addition to a grant last year from the Chiang Ching kuo Foundation, which has made this Centre possible. We will use these funds for a specialist post to be advertised soon as a research co-ordinator, and for a series of lectures, workshops and conference. The Centre also supports a course on Chinese southern diaspora in the Faculty of Asian Studies, which has reinvented a course first taught by Wang Guangwu and Jennifer Cushman.

Finally to return to our distinguished speaker, you are impatient to hear. From what I have said already you know why he was the only person we could ask to give our inaugural lecture. Although also very distinguished as an historian of China, he has done more than anyone to create the academic field of study on the Chinese southern diaspora, even though he may not approve the term. We are always delighted and inspired to have him return. We owe this Centre, and to an extent the field it represents, to him.

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Report: The inaugural lecture by Professor Wang Gungwu, 26 February 1999, ANU

Professor Wang Gungwu provided a stimulating history of the field in the inaugural CSCSD Public Lecture entitled 'A Single Chinese Diaspora?: Some Historical Reflections'. In a talk peppered with autobiographical anecdotes and insights gained as one of the pioneer scholars, he reminded all those present of the complexity of ethnic identity in 1999 and the folly of overgeneralization.

Having returned to the ANU to start the Centre off on the right foot, Professor Wang also warned that the term 'diaspora' needs to be used with utmost care since it might actually encourage ethnic essentialism amongst insensitive academics or even anti-Chinese feelings in some quarters.

The world's pre-eminent authority on the Chinese diaspora, Professor Wang was born in Suryabaya, grew up in Malaysia, and took his Ph.D at the University of London. The first Malaysian to hold the Chair of History at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, he moved to Canberra as Professor of Far Eastern History in the Reserarch School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University in 1968. Here he established the first major school for Chinese diaspora studies, supervising many important doctoral studies. Among his many distinctions, he was Director of the RSPACS [now RSPAS] from 1975-80, President of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in 1978-80, President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1980-83, and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong from 1985-93. Professor Wang is currently Director of the East Asia Centre of the National University of Singapore.

His many books include: *The Chinese Minority in Southeast Asia* (1978), *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (1981), and *China and the Chinese Overseas* (1991). Since its foundation in 1992, he has been President of the International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas.

Report: The official opening, 26 February 1999

Following Professor Wang Gungwu's inaugural lecture, a dinner was held at the Polish Ex-Servicemen's Club in Canberra where the Hon. Philip Ruddock, the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, formally launched the CSCSD, noting Australia's diverse, multi-cultural, nature and the ANU's celebrated involvement with Chinese studies.

About 120 guests attended, including the university's Vice Chancellor, the Director of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies, the Assistant Chief of the Australian Defence Force (Reserves), General Darryl Low Choy, Professor David Goodman (UTS), Paul Taylor of the Melbourne Chinese Museum, Sam Wong of the Multicultural Council and many other community leaders and academics.