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## <Book Review>

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**Ooi Kee Beng. *The Eurasian Core and Its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014, 254p.**

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of summer flings and mostly out of wedlock relations . . ." (Amor 1992) when their births were first picked up as an issue by journalists, or "one-night babies" by the director of one NGO (Kyodo News Int. 1992). Since 2005, the migration of Filipina entertainers to Japan has starkly declined. However, the lingering association of this migration with sex-work continues to affect a number of Japanese-Filipinos who report about scathing comments by classmates and about being bullied for having a Japanese father (DAWN 2010).

These reactions go back to the issue of shame that Aguilar explores in chapter 3. The children born of this "shameful" migration (to Filipinas who worked in Japan's entertainment districts) are viewed as evidence of the nation's feebleness to foreign money and power. The children of former entertainers and Japanese men also "haunt the nation" (p. 197), but in ways far different from how Filipino-foreign offspring born under other circumstances are regarded.

A singular achievement of this well-organized work is its synthesizing of the many strands arising from the profound changes that followed from the massive emigration of Filipinos. To someone who has studied these issues, some of its arguments are not entirely new. But for readers with limited familiarity with the Philippines, *Migration Revolution* is a major introductory text to deepen their understanding of the complicated relationship between migration and nationalism.

Fiona-Katharina Seiger  
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## *The Eurasian Core and Its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World*

OUI KEE BENG

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014, 254p.

Scholars from, or based in, Europe, North America, or Australia have shaped most of the writing

on world history over the past half century. Few Asians have taken up the challenge of examining the forces and developments, contacts and collisions, connecting and shaping the world's societies over the centuries. Although it has a somewhat limited focus (mostly Eurasia) and emphasizes the Big Picture rather than details, this innovative book illuminates the always interesting thoughts of a prominent Singapore-based Malaysian scholar, Wang Gungwu, and adds a new and largely Asian perspective through a dialogue with a younger Malaysian historian also working in Singapore, Ooi Kee Beng. In a series of interviews in 2013 the author, Ooi, skillfully posed thoughtful questions to Wang and compiled their extended conversations into this unconventional but intriguing book. The collaboration, which is loosely organized thematically rather than chronologically, should be of interest to specialists on world, European, Indian, Southeast Asian, and especially Central Asian and Chinese history. The result is like a rewarding and intellectually exciting graduate school seminar with a master historian bringing together his vast knowledge to ponder the broad structure of world history over several millennia.

Few historians are more qualified to explore and identify some of the main themes of such a vast topic. Wang Gungwu is one of the most outstanding, prolific, and wide-ranging historians of our generation. His life and career have spanned the tumultuous transition from Western colonialism through World War II, decolonization, the Cold War, and the multipolar globalized world of today. His background is exceptionally cosmopolitan. Born in 1930 in colonial Indonesia to an ethnic Chinese family and raised in British Malaya, Wang was educated at the University of Malaya in Singapore (BA, MA) and School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London (Ph.D.) before his highly successful academic and administrative career at the University of Malaya (History Department Head), Australian National University (Professor and Head of Far Eastern History and Director, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies), Hong Kong University (Vice Chancellor), and National University of Singapore (University Professor). His travels and sojourns have also taken him to many countries around the world. This reviewer first met Wang in the mid-1960s at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, where Wang had helped build a "globalized" History Department with a multinational faculty offering courses on both Southeast Asia and various world regions, a harbinger of the cosmopolitan approach he would demonstrate in some of his writings, including this book. Wang's numerous books and articles examine diverse topics but especially China's pre-modern and modern history and politics, Chinese migrations and the resulting diaspora (a concept he dislikes), Malaysian and Singapore history and society, political and economic relations among Asian societies, and Asia's role in world history.

The book is structured around several key themes that Wang believes were major factors in the broader history of Eurasia, which he identifies (along with North Africa) as the canvas where most of world history was made. This view does not conflict with a lot of Western historical writing on the subject, which also (in the reviewer's mind, wrongly) devalues Africa and the Americas prior to the past few centuries, but Wang places stronger emphasis on Central Asia and China.

Wang views Eurasia as a vast core of irrepressible power and several coastal edges (some historians might use the term fringes)—the agrarian-based west (Europe), south (India), and east (China)—connected by Central Asian horse-riding pastoral nomadic societies whose interaction, friendly or hostile, with inland-looking states to the west and east fostered the emergence of European and Chinese civilizations. He might have said more about the role of Central Asian migrants and invaders in shaping Indian civilization. The conflicts between the core and the edges, especially Atlantic Europe, led to Western mastery of the seas and the Global Age of today. In Wang's conception, Central Asians were not supplementary to world history but the key factor, which contrasts with the views of many Western historians for whom the region's role is peripheral and does not extend much beyond the Silk Road, Mongols, and possibly Turks. Central Asia was oriented largely to overland exchange but over time lost power and influence to the coastal edges—Western Europe and China. Wang asserts that only in modern times did the expansion of the Russian Empire destroy the Central Asian core.

In common with many Western scholars, Wang also emphasizes that in more recent centuries "the global is maritime" (p. xiv). The advent of maritime skills and technology made global travel, trade, resource extraction, military conquest, religious spread—indeed, a whole new world—possible. It also undermined the influence of land-oriented continental powers like China and Russia and helped seagoing nations like Britain. As Wang puts it, "No doubt the West was an outlier as well in the face of Eurasian clout, but thanks to its maritime power, it created its own globality. They could not have become a global power were it not for the sea. Mastery of the sea and ruling the waves is the secret of becoming a global power. Now, the Chinese don't know how to do that" (p. 142). Hence, he concludes, powered by the Industrial Revolution, the maritime global economy closed a chapter in human history. The United States, both a continental and maritime power, moved to the forefront, invulnerable on land and sea, in contrast to China. In his account the Cold War becomes a conflict largely between maritime (U.S., Britain, France) and continental (Russia, China) powers. Some scholars would portray a more complex situation.

Wang claims that the dominance of continental power kept much of Southeast Asia, in his view never a cohesive region, peripheral to continental dynamics, hence, as he oddly puts it, enjoying "a relatively beautiful and peaceful time" (p. 62). One suspects that local peoples may not have perceived their world as lacking conflict, threats, and challenges. Furthermore, he suggests, sea power was never developed on the basis of a very powerful state with the possible exception of Indianized Java. The Malay world was left alone, Wang believes, because the continental powers had little interest in the oceanic peoples. This approach downplays the maritime tradition, albeit largely a commercial but sometimes a military one, in parts of the region (especially the Indonesian archipelago). Wang tends to view maritime power as largely of military rather than economic importance, despite the considerable amount of trade within Southeast Asia as well as with East Asia, South Asia, and even the Middle East.

The eastern Asian and Indian Ocean maritime worlds probably deserve more attention in his account. In other writings he has expressed reservations about the “Asian Mediterranean” concept (Wang 2008; 2012) but does not say much about it here. To Wang the Southeast Asian waters were at best a “semi-Mediterranean” since China made little effort to exercise power there, a Sinocentric view. Nor does he pay much attention to the “Maritime Silk Road” via the Malay Peninsula, Straits of Melaka, and Indian Ocean as a counterpart to the overland Silk Road. Some recent scholarship (Andaya and Andaya 2015; Gunn 2011; Hall 2011; Lockard 2010; Miksic 2013; Paine 2013) suggests the maritime trade route was more significant than earlier studies, mostly focused on the overland route, concluded. Today China, seeking to assert itself and become a maritime power, builds a navy and claims vast stretches of the South China Sea.

Given Wang’s long interest in China, the reader will find many interesting side trips into Chinese history and comparisons between Chinese and Western traditions and mindsets, especially the Confucian legacy which Wang sees as very powerful today and a stark contrast with Western thinking. Western thought, he suggests, is analytical and categorizes everything; religion, philosophy, etc. are all defined and bordered. The Chinese mix and match Confucianism and Buddhism (one might add here Daoism and ancestor worship), making Chinese thought a bit of everything but not a philosophy. It would have been interesting to get his take on the “Great Divergence” debate concerning when and why the West took the lead over China (Pomeranz 2000; Wong 1997). But Chinese have learned to adapt. “Becoming the [world’s] second economic power is the product of the fact that the Chinese have mastered everything that has made Japan and the U.S. wealthy and powerful. What’s left is the question, where is the heart, where is the soul” (p. 192). China’s rise, including growing naval power, shows that they have the latecomer’s advantage. Besides the South China Sea, to maintain its rise China needs to keep the Straits of Melaka, Sunda Straight, and Indonesia neutral and hence open to Chinese shipping. Still, he believes that the United States has better long-term prospects because its continental and maritime reach is secure and because it possesses cyber and air power. “Together, this makes you quite unbeatable. The Chinese are vulnerable on all these fronts” (p. 226).

The book is full of arguments for other historians to consider. Given its genesis in conversations rather than a well-researched manuscript, the structure is not very tight and the narrative sometimes wanders off into often interesting tangents. Wang and Ooi do not explore the detailed history of the wider world; the focus throughout remains on Eurasia although Wang also makes some interesting observations about the United States in the world. There is very little attention to regions such as Africa or Latin America or even South Asia, with most of the examples coming from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Europe. Wang also says surprisingly little about Southwest Asia (the Middle East) and Islam, and tends to downplay Arab and Persian maritime trade. Many historians would place a stronger emphasis on Islam as a major factor in Afro-Eurasian history. There are some other problems with this ambitious effort, including a few questionable

assertions or perhaps just slips of the tongue in recorded conversations. For example, it was the Mughal Empire rather than the Sultanate of Delhi that finally collapsed in 1857. Borobodur was a Buddhist temple complex, not a kingdom, in tenth century Java. Wang credits Hindus with destroying Buddhism in India but this is too simple; Muslims, White Huns, and even severe problems and divisions within the Buddhist establishment were also contributing factors. Despite the flaws and some debatable points, this is a stimulating book that may interest academic historians and can be used in a graduate seminar but not a survey course on world history, more a way of thinking about history rather than presenting it. Wang remains an active scholar and role model for many of us. Ooi and Wang should be congratulated for this book, which gives us access to Wang's learned and provocative thought late in his much-respected and influential career.

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