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Wang Gungwu [Hong Kong, Vice-Chancellor HKU, historian]

Wang Gungwu

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Interviewee: WANG GUNGWU
Interviewer: Paul Evans
Date: 10 June 2015
Location: Singapore

00:00:20

[Paul Evans](#)

Well, what a pleasure to be with you today, Wang Gungwu. Today, we have an opportunity to talk about leadership in the context of education and higher education. You have education in your bones. Your father was an educator. Did that have an influence on what happened to you in life and career?

00:00:43

[Wang Gungwu](#)

I think that was a great influence on me. My father was very much an educator in every way. He could've done other things, but he chose to do education as one of his key training programmes. His first job was as a teacher, and he came out to Southeast Asia as a teacher with a mission, because those days in the 1920s, he thought of himself as having the responsibility to re-educate the Chinese in Southeast Asia about China, teaching them the language, the culture, and the literature. He saw that as part of his life work.

I don't think he expected to stay the rest of his life in the region, but he did, and so, he went on always in the field of education. School teacher, principal, inspector of Chinese schools, and then back to be a principal of a high school again. He devoted his life to that, and I respected him for that very much. He was there... very much respected asset as an educator. So that influenced me a great deal.

00:01:51

[Paul Evans](#)

Were you academic by accident, or design? You came out of some turbulent moments. You had time in mainland China, just before the victory of the Communists. Looking back, was it inevitable you were going to go the academic route or what happened?

00:02:10

[Wang Gungwu](#)

Nothing really prepared me for that. In fact, to be fair to my father, he wanted me to be well educated, but he never expected me to be a scholar. He never thought I had the temperament for it. He knew me better than I did, that I wasn't the scholarly type, or academic type, and he never encouraged me to do that, but he just encouraged me to learn, but not much beyond that. As a student, I was much more interested in things happening on campus, then got involved in all the

student activities that were prominent at that time. I just took part and enjoyed every moment of it. I really was someone who thought universities are marvelous places to grow up in, and I had many friends who took part in all kinds of activities, attending lectures regularly was not my favourite pastime so to speak. I spent much more time doing students' union work, societies, associations. Because of the turbulent period as you call it, I got very interested in politics, student politics to begin with, but related to the politics outside, being aware of what political changes were occurring. So even in China, it was transition between the Kuomintang in its last leg, on the eve of its defeat by the Communists. I was conscious of that. But coming back to Malaya with an Emergency going on, a war with Communism on the doorsteps and decolonization going steadily, and the British about to leave and leaving behind people who had to think of what they're going to do with the heritage so to speak. What are they going to make of it? What do they build out of what they receive? All that was very much in the minds of people. On the campus, we spent a lot of time talking about that, not only in terms of the politics, but in terms of the society, the culture, the language we're going to use, the kinds of things we need to do to make a new society. That was very much in the conversations that we had almost every day on campus. So that was much more interesting, and I confess I spent far too much time on that, and not enough on my studies.

00:04:35

[Paul Evans](#)

Well, as a scholar, as a writer, as a researcher, after you finished your degree in London, you came back to University of Malaya, later went to Australia, and established a scholarly career. But you took a twist, and that twist was that you did academic administration, administration in the sense of leadership roles in institutes, and then at the University of Hong Kong, where you served as Vice Chancellor starting in 1986. Why did you want to do university leadership and administration? Many scholars don't want to go that path.

00:05:13

[Wang Gungwu](#)

To be honest, I never wanted it and never expected to be that. But at the academic level, involvement in how the university is run was inevitable because I was put in positions of having to take a keen interest in that, because very early on I had become...was elected to be the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, then I was made Professor. I was head of a department in University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur for nearly ten years. When I was asked to go to Australia, I was head of a department, the head of the department of history in the Research School. Then I became director of the Research School of Pacific Studies. It sorts of followed because the fact that you wanted to see academic work done properly, you had to be involved in how funds were distributed, how young people were encouraged, how their careers could be supported, how to make sure that what the university does is doing good for the society, for the people around you, for your graduates. Are you really helping to make good careers for them? All these things involve you in more than just your own research. I tried to keep that up at

the same time, but it was inevitable because I kept on being put in positions of heading this or that, and I was reminded of the fact when I finally gave up my last headship of the East Asian Institute, I had been head of something or rather since my first election as Dean of Faculty of Arts in 1961, and it's not a matter of choice. One thing led to the other and I guessed people asked me to take on things because I was thought responsible enough for that. I cared enough and you asked to do it, then as you understand it, it's important for your students and your colleagues that somebody does it.

I began to do all these things, so when the question came up of being a Vice Chancellor, something I never thought of doing, I guess I wouldn't have wanted it if it was just any university. To be honest, I think the idea of being Vice Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong was particularly appealing because of the timing. As someone who has devoted my life to history by that time, this was a historic moment. Not only was Hong Kong the last major British colony to be decolonized, it was doing something that none of the other colonies did, which was to be returned to its original home, and to work out the transition of how Hong Kong can do that, not becoming independent country like all the other colonies had, but to become part of China again. The China that was so different in almost every respect from the system that was operating in Hong Kong. The temptation to be actually present to see how this happened was probably greater than anything else. It wasn't the administration of the university that attracted me, I'd be very honest. I think that was the greater pull, was the chance to be there to see how history actually happen and how this would end. I had no idea, and I was very curious to know how things would develop, how the people of Hong Kong will react, how the people in China would get to understand Hong Kong. What the British in London and the leaders in Beijing sought out for the future of Hong Kong? It was extremely intriguing and fascinating.

00:09:07

[Paul Evans](#)

You had a double challenge. One was the continuation of the change of University of Hong Kong from a British-oriented institution into a little bit different kind of university. Of course, the other transition was preparing and protecting the University of Hong Kong for reintegration into the Chinese world, in a direct way. How did you take on that latter challenge? How did you want to situate that university so that it could survive and thrive in a different context?

00:09:42

[Wang Gungwu](#)

I have to say there are two aspects of this. I had some idea, some knowledge about University of Hong Kong from very young days, from early days. When I started as a young student, I had spent six weeks at the University of Hong Kong, starting my first research project, in fact, in 1952. So, I had a fondness for the university, and then every now and then I would go there to attend conferences, to give lectures. I knew the people reasonably well. Then I was invited, quite to my surprise, to be a member of the Universities Grants Committee for Hong

Kong. This was before I became Vice Chancellor. I sat on that grants committee for several years, to understand how the system worked, how money was distributed, how the funding was arranged. I learned quite a bit about it beforehand. So, I didn't actually go to Hong Kong with totally a new perspective. I was already part and parcel of it, to some extent.

You're right to identify the challenge. The challenge was how would this university survive in the new context and how would it be treated. I was concerned that the university should be respected as a fine university. When I contacted my colleagues in China, or my counterparts in China, I realised that the Chinese had very genuine respect for the university, that had an international reputation for good research and teaching, and its graduates were good and respected everywhere. If Hong Kong can succeed in doing that, then it's really safe that the university will be treated with great respect. So, my colleagues in Hong Kong also understood that, so we got together to work out how to do it. The biggest challenge to me was a university, that had been primarily a teaching university, with very little resources for research, and not encouraged to do that by the colonial government, and not funded for that. How to achieve that, make that change, so that its scholars are respected for their scholarship, not just for their teaching? That was a major challenge.

We had quite a bit of trouble doing that because many of my colleagues had not had resources to do research. We managed finally to persuade the Hong Kong government to give us the funding, so the Research Grants Committee was set up, and money was made available. How to make sure that my colleagues, who had not been doing this for a long time, to actually make good use of the funding? To justify the funding, and actually to produce research work of the quality that is internationally recognised, all within a few years that was quite a challenge. I must confess, I don't think I finished the job. The job was finally finished by my colleagues, my successors. It took us quite a while, but I think we started on the right track. That was the right way to go. All my colleagues were determined to make that happen. It took us a while, but I think it has now more or less got there.

00:13:06

[Paul Evans](#)

It's sometimes said that working with professors, trying to lead them in a direction, is like trying to herd cats. Any specific examples... were there situations in which you learn something about academic leadership at your Hong Kong days? Some important lessons that you learned?

00:13:28

Wang Gungwu

Your description about cats would be unfair to my academic colleagues. They were actually quite persuaded, that the university was at a turning point, and therefore were equally determined as I was, to make sure that the university could come out of this period of transition; the kind of university that the new relationship with China would not cause any difficulty. That would actually persuade the Chinese in China to treat this university with respect, and preserve its traditions, and allow it the full autonomy that it had enjoyed. To achieve that was what we had in mind. My colleagues shared that. They realised that it was a genuine problem, and an end worthy of their efforts. They all, without exception, did the utmost to support me on that particular issue. We had other issues which are a range of other problems, but that particular one, we had no real difficulty. Everybody recognised it. But how to do it? Because some of my colleagues just simply hadn't done any research for a long time, because there's simply no funding. So, they spent most of their time just concentrating on being good teachers. They were very responsible teachers, and very good teaching records. But on the kind of universal standards of universities today, not to have a good research record as well, would've handicapped, or disadvantaged all of them. So, we had to try and transform them, in a way their mindsets, to give equal importance to research, and to get them back on track, and get them to put up projects, which would earn them grants, and then to make full use of the grants, to have products at the end of it all. Publications, which are worthy of the funding. All that was very tough. It was hard going for some anyway. Some of the younger ones had no problems because they come out of PhD programs, they could do that. But the ones who've been in the middle group, could've been ten to twenty years without that kind of support. For them to do that it was really quite... I can understand that. It's not an easy thing to do, so we were quite patient. We encouraged, offered whatever support that we could. Whatever support we could give them and I'm glad to say at least half of them responded very well. Within a few years, they were producing very good work. But others found it more difficult. It was that sort of challenge.

00:16:18

Paul Evans

Looking at your career, what's the most difficult decision you had to make as an academic leader and educator?

00:16:25

Wang Gungwu

There are lots of difficult decisions, I don't know what the biggest one... but that had to go back to my young days. I guess the decision to be a scholar was a very difficult decision. I had never been much of a scholar, or much of a student. I had never followed my studies properly, and studiously as I should have, if I wanted to be a scholar. When I decided to be one, it was really an uphill battle for me to not only change myself to live in a different way, but to keep my mind focused on

things which I had not taken seriously before, and to set aside all the things that I've been doing and enjoying so much before.

00:17:25

[Paul Evans](#)

As an administrator, as a university leader, what was the hardest kind of, we talked about the problems that we addressed in Hong Kong. Was there a decision point that was particularly difficult or challenging?

00:17:40

[Wang Gungwu](#)

To me, at least looking back, one of the most difficult ones, probably the most difficult ones, was the kind of balance that the university needs in its staff. Students are fine, because we get the best possible students from your own country, or from even neighbouring countries. The balance of the staff is a difficult one, because we need people, who also know the country well. Most of them would have to be local. At least to know, if not just Hong Kong itself, but Hong Kong and its neighborhood, south China and China, because the population is part of China. Yet at the same time to have enough of people from outside to bring new fresh ideas to challenge some of the accepted traditions, and so on, to look afresh at things, to get the right balance to make it a fruitful mix of people, who can interact and really produce new things. If you're too many, if you're imbalanced, and have too many people from outside, it changes the nature of the university. The university cannot perform the role that society expects of it. So, you have to have that balance.

Now that's not something you can artificially do. You have to allow some natural talents to emerge, and yet at the same time you cannot be totally free. You have to guide it to some extent, to get the right balance. In the case of Hong Kong, we did face the problem because at the beginning of course, the staff was almost entirely from outside Hong Kong, part of the colonial education system. Then we were replacing them with a lot of Hong Kong people, but then they didn't want to go too far, that becomes too narrow and parochial, you have the danger of that. What we don't want to have is just simply reproducing ourselves, we want to have really new people come in. Trying to get that balance, that's not for one Vice Chancellor. It's a university... must take on as its full responsibility. Every generation must continue to keep that in mind, if that university is to perform its best for the community, and at the same time be a great university. That's a tough one.

00:20:06

[Paul Evans](#)

You mentioned as a student you spent a lot of time involved with political things and learned some skills then. Can universities teach leadership?

00:20:18

[Wang Gungwu](#)

I've never been taught leadership, so I wouldn't know whether you can or not in the university. What I understand is that universities can provide you with the kind of knowledge, the skills, technical skills, and mastery of certain methods of doing things, how to get things done, learn some degree of efficiency and sense of timing. They can teach some of that, so that at least the technical side, is all available to you. Whether you, as a person, are interested in being a leader, or have the instincts to respond when leadership is required, because very often the thing doesn't arise.

Most of the time, we don't live to be leaders. We live to do all our things and so on, but when suddenly something happens, we require somebody to take the lead, someone emerges and offers to do it or you just point to somebody and say, he's the person to take us the next step forward, or something like that. How that happens is a mystery to me. But it happens, I have seen it again and again. There's a problem, we all sit around and talk, and it becomes obvious, that so and so should actually take the lead, and that person does. Maybe all of us could have done it. Each one of us could have done it, but one person stood out as the person most likely to succeed maybe, or something like that or that person volunteers. He is quite willing to sacrifice the time, or whatever it is, and finds it quite natural and effortless or... to just stand out and take up the issue and take it one step forth. Whether you can teach that, I don't know. I think every one of us, if we learn enough from what we study at the university level, we should be mentally, and physically ready, to take on extra burdens beyond what the normal work you do, and you just know when you have to do it.

You get the sense that something needs to be done, and somebody has to do it. You look around, and maybe you're the person to do it, because nobody else seems to be interested, or something like that. I don't actually know how you can teach that, except to give people good education, and everybody's ready for it. If it's not required, you don't do it. But if it's required, somebody will come up and say, I'll do it.

00:23:02

[Paul Evans](#)

As you survey the educational landscape in East Asia, and Southeast Asia now, who are some of the leaders of the future? Who do you think are the people that are going to build the institutions? Is there an example or two, or a person or two, whom you think that in the way you have been a leader over 50 years of a career, who's the next generation leader?

00:23:28

[Wang Gungwu](#)

I can't claim to have been that kind of leader. My work is a very simple work compared to the kind of responsibilities that the kind of leaders you're talking about would have to face. I don't know of anyone I can think of, in those terms. You set the bar too high for anybody today.

The last half century of nation building--after the colonisation for most of the countries in Asia--have been very challenging ones and very, very difficult ones. Many of the borders are not borders drawn by any evolving sense of where the border should be, but drawn on the map, with lines on the map, and people within those borders have to find ways and means of living together harmoniously and peacefully. It's been extremely trying, and exhausting to many of the leaders that I find, and therefore the struggle to look for a system whereby they could ensure a longevity, and continuous development has led to all kinds of distortions too to the various systems, political struggles, to power. All these are enabled by the fact that so much is unclear, so much is not yet determined, so many of the values that the people are seeking don't match, and the contesting conflicts between people with different value systems, remains very much with us in different parts of Asia, different degrees, but different parts of Asia.

That's a major challenge. The leaders have all been so occupied with that, that they haven't had too much time to offer more future-oriented ideals. They're struggling to build something out of something that wasn't there.

00:25:27

[Paul Evans](#)

What kind of a leader is necessary going forward in education, and what kind of leader does Southeast Asia need going forward?

00:25:35

[Wang Gungwu](#)

If we confine ourselves to Southeast Asia, we are talking about ten relatively small countries in the world. They have to be, I would say the region, should produce a group of leaders, who understand that as leaders of small countries, they must learn to work together, and not be picked off one by one so to speak. Hence being united, to be able to learn to develop shared values in the sense of community, is probably the biggest responsibility for small countries in a region like Southeast Asia. Different countries need different kinds of leaders. When you're a small country, it's not enough to be just a leader of your own country, but to understand that, all the small countries in the region have a shared fate, as small countries. The only chance of feeling left alone to develop the way you want to, is to share that responsibility together.

00:26:44

[Paul Evans](#)

If in fifty years, people look back on your career, in the fifty years of work you've been doing as an educator in the world, and in Asia in particular, what would you like the one word to be chosen about what you've tried to do, and what you've achieved? What would you like that next generation to look back and say, Wang Gungwu did... fill in the word?

00:27:13

[Wang Gungwu](#)

One word?

00:27:14

[Paul Evans](#)

Three words.

00:27:17

[Wang Gungwu](#)

Actually, the word that I have used quite often, not sure that it is the most important word, but I have used it often, is openness. I have used it partly because I'm conscious of the history of China, and because I have studied it for so long. I felt that China did best when it was open, and whenever it stopped being open, and tried to close down, it created more problems for itself than it needed. But each time it opened up to the world, the new ideas, new peoples, new systems, new methods, and so on, it flourished. So, openness is one of the words that I would like, and I believe that having an open mind for an educator is also very important. The university should be open, teaching should be open. Open to new ideas, open to be challenged, and if all my students, pupils, all the young people can share that openness, I will be very proud.

00:28:20

[Paul Evans](#)

Thank you for a wonderful conversation.

00:28:22

[Wang Gungwu](#)

Thank you, for the chance to talk about things.