

JOINING
THE **M**ODERN
WORLD

Inside and Outside China

Wang Gungwu

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Preface

In recent years, I have been impressed by the fresh efforts of Chinese people everywhere to try to be as modern as possible. At the same time, I am struck by the way the criteria of what is modern has been changing during the past century. The standards of modernity, often proclaimed as self-evidently universal, have been set by the successful countries and these standards have been rising as those countries grow richer and more powerful. Two consequences follow from this trend. The first is positive. The higher demands make the Chinese work harder to strive for that elusive modernity. Never having been afraid of hard work, most young Chinese are ready to meet that challenge. The other is negative. The Chinese people are beginning to feel a deep contradiction in this setting of standards. When China and other similarly poor countries were down, the standards were low or lowered and little was expected of their leaders and the people. But when there has been marked progress, as has happened in China during the past two decades, standards were lifted incrementally so that China seems always to be behind, with little chance of ever reaching the moving standards expected of it. Indeed, standards seemed invariably higher for the Chinese as if the successful states sought

to hold a moral sword above Chinese heads indefinitely. In addition, what sounds like a school principal's tone at seeing a poor report card at the end of each year is deeply offensive.

The ongoing drama of Chinese people trying to be modern has also been enacted in different parts of the world. There are interesting differences among these Chinese depending on where they have been living. The general trend, however, is unmistakable. A great striving for betterment is supported by a strong capacity to adapt and change, and this is reflected in the way Chinese seize new opportunities when they occur. The essays collected in this volume try to capture these efforts both inside and outside China. Seven of them were first presented as occasional lectures, each covering changes during the past century and a half. The sixth, "Transforming the Trading Chinese", was written to describe a longer term development that is transforming Asia generally, but China most remarkably. Together, they offer small pieces of the mosaic that seeks to portray some aspects of the Chinese practising the art of *modernising*.

The question remains, will the people in China go on accepting their fate as that of Sisyphus, condemned to push that huge modern boulder up a hill that seems to get steeper whenever they get near the top? Or, will they conclude one day that the mythical hill was placed there to keep them inferior and thus stop worrying about it? The evidence is that, when standards of progress take a people's history and cultural values into account, they are better understood and more readily sought after by these people and, therefore, more likely to be achievable. When they do not and, instead, are relative to the specific kinds of progress achieved by a few countries through accumulated wealth and power, such applications of standards undermine the will to keep trying. I do not believe the Chinese people are easily discouraged. We simply have to look at their history over the past 140 years or so to see

how resilient and hopeful they have been. But it is important that these efforts get the recognition they deserve, not as proof that universal criteria have been validated but as achievements of people who have fought adversity with determination against all odds.

