

First Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF1)

In partnership with the Brunei Darussalam Ministry of Education and Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Empowerment through Knowledge and Technology: A Celebration of Ten Years of the Commonwealth of Learning
1-5 March 1999

ASA BRIGGS LECTURE Education and Bridging Work Cultures

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Introduction to the Asa Briggs Lecture (delivered by Professor Wang Gungwu)
by
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The Commonwealth of Learning**

Lord Briggs of Lewes, former provost of Worcester College Oxford, Chancellor of the UK Open University and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex, historian extraordinaire and man of letters, was the first Chairman of The Commonwealth of Learning.

His interests span both communications and education, and indeed it is the convergence between the developments in communications technology, and the demands on education for greater access and better quality, that informed and inspired the early years of The Commonwealth of Learning and its subsequent development.

Since he was one of my teachers in Oxford University over forty years ago, you can imagine my delight at being elected to succeed him as Chairman of COL on January 1, 1994. When I first arrived as a student in Oxford, I was told that no one attended weekly lectures with one exception: never miss Asa Briggs lectures on Victorian England. Indeed, I never missed one, and I will always remember their delightful style and constant.

To maintain the Briggs name as part of the living history of COL, we decided to establish the Asa Briggs lecture to be given from time to time by a distinguished Commonwealth figure. I am sorry he could not accept my invitation to join us in Brunei in view of numerous other commitments.

This is the second such lecture.

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EDUCATION AND BRIDGING WORK CULTURES

I am greatly honoured by the invitation to speak at this Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. Not being an expert in continuing education or distance learning, I am somewhat awed by the presence of specialists with a wide range of experiences in this field. Professor Dhanarajan and his colleagues have pioneered the extension of Open Learning across the Commonwealth. Their innovative approach to an area of education that is of growing importance to us all is a considerable inspiration. I am struck by the theme of the conference, "Empowerment through Knowledge and Technology". It reminds us that the demand for education continues to expand and career-oriented knowledge is increasingly dependent on mastering new skills. This has led me to focus on the topic of work cultures for this lecture. We are all living longer, changing technologies are very demanding, and we are beginning to see how this perspective of the future affects our attitudes to work. It has even been suggested that regular secure jobs may soon be a thing of the past. Fortunately, there has been much improvement in methods of delivery to bring a greater variety of education and training to all who need it. This may better prepare us for the day when each of us will need many skills to keep working.

We have high ideals for education as the key to the transmission of knowledge and values as well as the way to stimulate the creative imagination. But it cannot be denied that schools, colleges and universities, especially in Asia and the developing world in general, are primarily expected to get the young ready for work. Thus, while we may argue that education better prepares us for work than mere training, we still need to convince parents and students that this has practical advantages for employment. Over the past two centuries, jobs have evolved to favour increasingly those educated to think critically, those who know how to learn.

With each generation, such workers are more likely to adapt to our knowledge-driven society than those trained to execute specific skills. In this context, education is not confined to enabling people with different cultural heritages to understand each other, or to help bring together the universal and perennial that each culture has to offer. It would include other features which dominate peoples lives, not least the culture of work itself. I propose to talk today about this aspect of culture, that is, how people cope with changes in work cultures and what that might tell us. For this purpose, I shall take the example of China, not for its own sake, but because I wish to offer a perspective on how a vast agrarian society adapts to modern work conditions. While much of that experience points to the limits of education, it also suggests that changing attitudes towards work must depend on some kind of empowerment of those being educated, as indicated in the theme of this conference.

It is appropriate that the lecture is named after Asa Briggs. His contributions to our understanding of the changing nature of work, and its impact on those who work, during the past two centuries are well known. How he has related that to the way communication methods have been revolutionised has been an eye-opener to everyone. But most of all, he is an historian who loves, in his own words, history as a "serious

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pursuit" but also recognises "the contradictions of progress" in history, something the history of modern China had a lot of. Changes in the culture of work are no less serious and contradictory in Asia, not least in the example of hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants adapting to a cultural revolution in the world of work. For a major transformation in work culture, England of the industrial revolution took the lead. It showed the way educational change played its part in helping people respond to the industrial revolution. China, on the other hand, with the largest peasant population in the world at the turn of this century, suffered massive shocks to its system. Its people experienced the most radical changes to their work cultures that anyone has ever endured. How they overcame such changes, how the work cultures were bridged, have lessons for the rest of us.

Before I turn to the cultures of work, let me briefly outline what education has meant for the bridging of cultures as it is more conventionally understood. In many ways, the role of education in transmitting cultural values between generations and in culture-contacts has been taken for granted. Therefore, it is easy to forget that these values include changing attitudes towards work. Education has normally functioned in the larger context in which work cultures are but a part. We all acknowledge that the transmission and enrichment of cultural values in general have always been matters of concern. In recent decades, however, responding to a rapidly changing world, to a globalizing world in which local cultural differences seem less important, there has been growing emphasis on education as the teaching and learning of scientific and technical skills. This is particularly true of developing countries which felt that they had fallen behind in these areas and must speed up the process of learning new and vital skills. All you have to do is to look at the number of schools, colleges and universities all over Asia which have greatly expanded their courses on science and technology, and the number of new institutions largely dedicated to engineering and business, to see the contrast with the more traditional institutions of the Western world.

This is understandable. As for open learning, this has been broader in conception from the start, but there is pressure on it as well to contribute directly to the acquisition of skills favoured in modern careers. In particular, the technology available for distance learning and the teaching of large numbers of students makes it easy to communicate skills which are universally valued and cut across parochial and national cultures. Where the more conventional ideas of culture are concerned, as represented in the arts and humanities, the adjustments have been more difficult and less appreciated. The transmission of such cultural values simply cannot compare with the relative ease experienced in the transfer of skills in technology and business.

Indeed, modern education of this latter kind is so successful that it will not be long before many traditional cultural values will be treated as irrelevant for most of the important linkages in the world. The growing number of people who speak the international languages of science and business will ensure that, at one level, there is immediate communication all round. Hopefully, there will always be the few in every society who specialise in the study of specific cultures and help distinctive cultures in the world to survive. If not, these cultures and their value-systems will in time disappear, in the same way that

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hundreds of languages, customs, artifacts and technologies have been eliminated during the past two centuries. This is, of course, a rather grim scenario. The outcome is still uncertain and may not be that bad. But the fact that many smaller cultures have disappeared is incontrovertible.

This does not have to be so for those which remain viable today. The rich variety of cultures that human beings have developed during the past five to ten millennia is a great gift from the human past. There is a store of experience and wisdom there that could be tapped, for what they might be able to tell us about how to face the future, not least the place of knowledge and technology in their work cultures. It would be a tragedy if what is past is forgotten, and if it were assumed that whatever is not directly useful deserves to end up in nostalgic museums for curiosity value alone.

The point is that the world is getting smaller and this not always kind to matters pertaining to culture. Certain powerful cultures have expanded at the expense of others. For example, modern Western culture, or in some contexts, its earlier form of Judaeo-Christian culture, or in more specific circumstances, Anglo-American culture, has expanded to many corners of the globe. Others, like Indian or Hindu-Buddhist or Sanskritic culture did have its day but are contained in a more limited area today. Similarly, East Asian, or more specifically Confucian & Taoist culture has had considerable impact over large areas, but has been facing some very trying times since the beginning of this century. It is also readily acknowledged that Islamic culture (including its many linguistic manifestations, whether Arab, Turkic, Persian and Urdu, Bengali, Malay or Indonesian) has not stopped spreading for more than 1,300 years. Yet some of the strongest exponents of that culture have had to be very defensive in the face of globalisation pressures. As each of these historically powerful cultures expand towards one another, many cultures in between, whether local or tribal, national or mixed multicultural, have found themselves to have been under threat.

The result is that each of the now relatively few dominant cultures in the world has become both extensive and concentrated. The majority of the bearers of each of these cultures crowd closer together in larger and larger metropolises. The pressures of modern living are producing complex societies. Some cultures, such as those in modern migrant nations, e.g. United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia and Brazil, encourage the search for identity among individuals and small groups in the community. Others demand much greater conformity for nation-building purposes, and regret the variety of cultural choices that present themselves to their citizens.

Yet others are themselves under threat and survive only in urban ghettos and reservations in the wilderness, and are often better represented in museums than in real life. It can even be argued that, while we may today have the illusion of great cultural wealth, many cultures are no longer independently viable and this smaller world has really made us culturally impoverished.

Of course, there are some contrary examples. Close by, we see the unique cultures of the Ibans and Kadazans adapting well to the pressures of modernity. What we observe is the result of good nurturing and learning, and good teaching by all means available. In this way, the more accessible cultural artifacts

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like their family rules and structures, their laws and customs, their manifold artistic performances, faiths and practices, texts and testimonies however transmitted, have co-mingled with the secular and efficient features of the globalizing and universal civilisation around us. Their current forms have thus provided variety and depth to the cultural heritage of Malaysia. Such examples could be an inspiration to others. Without describing it in so many words, a particular form of cultural bridging has been successfully put into practice.

I am not being sentimental about cultures which have failed altogether to preserve their distinctive features in the face of modernisation. If the bearers of these cultures are unable or unwilling to adapt to modern pressures and either choose to abandon their respective cultures, or seek to reinvent themselves in new ways, so be it. It may well be that the forces of globalisation may revive the need for people to emphasise local identities and thus give the ethnic and sub-ethnic cultures more room for refinement and preservation. I do not embrace a simple Darwinian stance on cultures. In this part of the world, I am struck by the number of minority peoples, within countries like Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia, who have maintained their distinctive cultures in healthy condition by integrating some modern values into their own traditions. Thus they are able to strengthen their own identities in the midst of material success.

Bridging such cultures and ensuring that they are strengthened is one of the purposes of modern education. I do not know whether distance learning methods can do as well as face-to-face teaching and learning in the area of culture learning. I am impressed by what can be achieved in the area of lifelong learning where these methods have been successfully introduced. With continuing education; the bridging is helped by the maturity of the students and their ability to relate what they learn to the experiences they have had. With ever improving audio and visual aids, and the increasing range of modern communications technology, there is little doubt that knowledge gaps can be rapidly and efficiently bridged.

But we still need to be conscious of how cultural factors underlie many of the subjects we teach. For example, there is a great deal being written and taught about the work cultures embodied in modern business systems and methods. There is evidence that the advances gained through Western capitalist experiences have been absorbed in our region. Thus, local cultural values have played their part in making Chinese and Japanese entrepreneurs, for example, successful in quite different ways. In the fields of agriculture and health sciences, a bridging of cultures, one empirical and traditional and the other scientific, is occurring before our eyes. Scholars and students in Asia and in the West have much to learn from one another. They should be systematically encouraged to be aware of the cultural values involved.

Another example is our concern for the environment. There is a considerable gap in understanding here, mostly due to differences in stages of economic development and in the standards of scientific and engineering knowledge. But there are also the differences in cultural attitudes between rich and poor countries towards major kinds of pollution. The role education can play in the transmission of the latest

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knowledge and appreciation of environmental issues will become increasingly important. As myriads of interactions bring business systems closer together, greater attention would have to be paid not only to differences in practice and in governance and law, but also to the underlying social and cultural concerns of the people involved. The bridging of business and other work cultures is a vital part of the theme of your conference, empowerment through knowledge and technology.

This brings me to work cultures past and present. Having as background what Asa Briggs has had to say about the work revolution in Britain, I have taken my example from changes in work cultures in China. This is a subject that is relevant to the debate on how more radical changes to the nature of work may occur throughout the world in the near future, and thus how changes will be made in education to deal with them. We all know that the culture of work has changed massively in modern times. We now face the prospect that the next generation of workers may no longer need the lifelong work skills which they have been proud to master through years of apprenticeship and education. Some kinds of work will change or disappear while new kinds will be created to meet new needs. We know the broader historical trends that show the many strategies people have used to adapt to cultural change where work is concerned. I shall concentrate here on modern China, not as a country but as representing one of the largest agrarian societies in the world. It is instructive to see how its people responded to the way work cultures changed so rapidly several times during the past century.

The Chinese adapted themselves remarkably well to the traumatic changes they encountered. They endured economic disruptions, wars and civil wars, revolution in the workplace that followed alien models and then, more recently, a dismantling of structures that had shaped their work cultures for a generation. They had begun early this century with 90% of their people still tied to the land as peasants. The picture we have of them is that they eked out a living by doing their work in ways laid down by their ancestors millennia earlier. A half century later, they had become largely wage-earning in a variety of work units, co-operatives and communes created by Mao Zedong's Communist Party. These were created by the revolutionary victors acting in the name of industrial workers. Then, in another turn around led by Deng Xiaoping some twenty years ago, they confronted yet another kind of work culture that was modified from the very capitalist system that their revolution had sought to destroy.

How was this done without totally destroying the Chinese people? How have they remained so resilient and adaptable for so long and are still ready to change further? The recent history of peasant life, especially certain kinds of peasant attitudes to work, including the readiness of the ablest of them to adapt to changing conditions, may help us explain how people dealt with changes in their work cultures. They had little or no access to formal school education, but many of them showed a readiness to learn new skills under conditions of great stress. Their behaviour in meeting challenges, sometimes of desperate uncertainty, may have something to tell us about how people might approach changes in work culture.

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With modern education now available in so many forms, that in turn may suggest how some kinds of education can be more directly useful to cope with rapidly changing and somewhat unpredictable changes in the nature of work in the years to come.

I should emphasise that Chinese peasant life was not unique. Some aspects of the Chinese social structure, including the specific ways the peasants related to the ruling literati elites, may have made them distinct from peasantry elsewhere, but Chinese peasants shared many features common to all peasants. Also, the cliché that peasant China has been unchanging through the centuries is very misleading. Far from peasants being limited in their ability to do many kinds of work, there is ample evidence to show that Chinese peasants had always been extremely hardheaded and eclectic in their attitudes towards any kind of work that would help them make a better living. In order to do that, some may be said to have been early practitioners of lifelong learning and better adjusted in their attitudes towards retraining than those who were more formally trained and educated.

Before I deal with the transformative changes that Chinese peasants faced, let me offer you a very eloquent picture of peasants in Europe which comes remarkably close to my understanding of the way those in China made their living right up to the beginning of this century.

"The peasant survived, managed to pull through, and this was true everywhere. But it was usually thanks to plying a hundred extra trades; crafts, wine-making, haulage. We are not surprised to find the peasants of Sweden or England also working as miners, quarry men or iron workers; or the peasants of Skane becoming sailors and carrying on an active coasting trade in the Baltic or the North Sea; or that all peasants spent at least some of their time weaving, or occasionally worked as carters. When, in the late sixteenth century, a latter-day wave of serfdom descended on Istria, many of the peasants escaped to become peddlers and carriers travelling to the Adriatic ports, and some set up an elementary iron-working industry with blast furnaces in country districts....."

"In Naples, we are told there are many who do not only live by their work as day-labourers, but who every year sow six tomola (unit of land) of wheat or barley....grow vegetables and take them to market, cut and sell timber and use their animals to transport goods. A recent study has also shown that they were, in addition, both borrowers and lenders of money, small-time usurers and careful herdsmen....."

These are the words of the French historian, Fernand Braudel, taken from his book, *Civilisation and Capitalism. 15th to 18th centuries*. I was struck by how well Braudel's characterisation of the European peasant describes the Chinese peasantry. Chinese peasants too were able to do a different range of tasks in order to survive, and could be said to have been equally versatile, if not more so, over the millennia.

During the 19th century, the urban pull towards industrial work began to change the peasantry in Western Europe. Asa Briggs has provided us with vivid descriptions of what happened in the cities of Victorian England. His work on the Chartists and the origins of the English working-class revolt are classics. A

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whole generation of labour historians has been stimulated to study how people responded to new factory cultures and what this did to attitudes towards work. In more recent years, as the capitalist system adjusted to trade union power and the development of automation technologies, we now observe further changes to the nature of modern work. You all understand this because some of you have been directly involved in the restructuring of the kinds of education needed to match the changes ahead.

In China, industrialisation started late and the peasants were not forced to leave the land until the 20th century. For southern coastal China, the more adventurous among them began to do so earlier. They left China in large numbers to come to Southeast Asia or travel much further to the Americas and Australasia. There they found work cultures that were totally different from what they had known at home, but they seemed to have had little difficulty adapting to different kinds of work. They simply seized what chances were made available to them and adopted different strategies to meet different conditions. For example, in colonial Southeast Asia, those who could do so moved away as soon as possible from labouring tasks to various trades. Local conditions favoured those who could turn themselves into businessmen. In the Americas, there were different patterns. While the majority stuck to the occupations in which they were tolerated, there were better educational facilities all round, and this enabled many in the second and subsequent generations to gain upward social mobility through the modern professions.

Within China, new opportunities were fewer and political conditions were chaotic for much of the first half of the 20th century. In any case, long before the peasantry was directly affected, traumatic changes in the nature of work were to hit the highly educated scholar-officials first. And these elite groups adapted badly. I am reminded of my grandfathers story. When the imperial examination system was abolished, and modern schools introduced, he and his generation who had prepared for those examinations so that they might become gentlemen and mandarins, found themselves lost. Their ruling class skills were downgraded. Many of the older ones tried to reinvent themselves as business associates - fixers and go-betweens for entrepreneurs. Others re-emerged as administrators and managers in larger firms. But few were successful in their new careers. In their place was a growing class of compradores who had grown up on the China coast and learnt to deal with the new capitalist enterprises from the West and from Japan. They had commercial backgrounds and their education came not from schools and books, but from practical experience.

Tertiary level education at the time did little to change attitudes to work. Modern universities were established to help the educated elites adapt to the new work demands. The earliest of them had been founded by American and European missionaries who sought to bring the latest work skills from the developed West to a new generation of Chinese. These were followed by some which were established by the Chinese themselves to try to revitalise imperial Confucian values or to imitate the best examples of what they saw in either Western or Japanese universities. But the country was in such continuous disorder that few of them were given time and adequate support to establish a new set of ideals that would define new standards and goals of work. The country was simply too poor and chaotic. The universities that were supposed to educate a new generation for the new work culture were ill-equipped and poorly staffed.

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In any case, they catered for very small numbers of elite students who had little incentive to empathise with the bulk of the rural-based populations. External interventions, foreign threats and actual invasions, and a series of civil wars, all conspired to make the new work culture little understood.

Thus, for at least two generations after the fall of the Qing empire in 1911, the old gentry or scholar-official class were still unable to adjust. There was a refusal to change their attitude towards unfamiliar kinds of work. They did not adjust to make themselves available to new kinds of employers. Even those who went to modern schools could not always accept the changes. Instead, the more idealist among them were drawn to a new activism, and turned to efforts to secure a new political and economic order which they could control. They sought to restore themselves to the positions of authority they thought were due to them as an educated elite. It led them to turn to another kind of work, that of fomenting revolution of one kind or another, and this led them to spend their lives fighting others of their kind for supremacy.

During this period of confusion, there were limits to the education of the elites. For the peasantry, there was almost no education available. They were the desperate majority of the population willing to support any change that would give them the ability to respond to new work opportunities. The study by R.H. Tawney on land and labour in China in the 1920s, and more recent studies of the Chinese interior provinces by Philip Huang, William Kirby and Ramon Myers during the same period and into the 1930s, show that there were many peasants, artisans and local merchants who had also failed to adjust to the prevailing anarchy and uncertainty. What was significant were the numbers of the well-educated who could not modify their attitudes towards the changing nature of work while most of the peasantry seemed able to use their many-faceted heritage of flexible work habits to respond to the new opportunities. In short, in addition to the cultural traditions that inhibited the ruling elites, there was a growing gap in attitudes towards changing work cultures that energised the peasant majority.

Following the communist victory in 1949, the nature of work was changed decisively by decree. The new political leaders who brought Soviet work models to China. These revolutionaries created a totally different kind of work culture for all Chinese, an alien culture of tight social control which brought specific groups of workers together. In modified forms, this kind of worker control was extended to villages and communes and other farming units in the countryside. The danwei was established as the standard work unit to which all industrial and white-collar workers as well as any peasant leaving his village must belong.

Even the new tertiary institutions were restructured to fit this basic pattern, with intellectual indoctrination and specialist training being more important there. In this kind of education, centrally planned careers for the graduates were expected to serve the national interest best. A large number of guided specialisations were systematically instituted. The consequent effect on the fragmentation of teaching and learning matched the work cultures that operated on the factory floor. That the consequences would be the suppression of natural talents was known, but this was regarded as a small price to pay if the collective efforts of all could bring rapid development to the country and win the respect of the world.

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The mobilisation of the peasantry in China, about half of billion people in the 1950s, to accept a new work culture was an awesome achievement. The danwei, or comparable work units in the countryside, were responsible for all training and education, which was structured to transmit a new set of cultural values. These danwei were stronger than traditional clan systems and challenged the native-place, family and language group loyalties that had characterised China. Their members depended on the danwei for everything they needed. This dependence survived even the internecine struggles of the Cultural Revolution decade and remained the basic framework through which Deng Xiaopings economic reforms after 1978 had to be implemented.

When the time came to change, their members looked out to see what other Chinese who received different kinds of education elsewhere were doing, especially those in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Indeed, the difference in work cultures inside and outside the mainland was vast. This is not to suggest that there were no dislocations and discontinuities there. What saved those outside was that there was no pretence that there was only one basic kind of work. Thus the environment was much easier for both the surviving Chinese elites and those of peasant origins. For those with elite backgrounds, the educational institutions they looked to were stable and well structured, and the variety of work they could choose from to suit their specialised talents and skills was greater. As for the peasants who could adapt to the new work cultures, their heritage of internal mobility which had allowed them to take on many kinds of work according to season, or according to need, or according to opportunity, stood them all in good stead. For many, secondary school education became available and was broad enough to reinforce their flexible approaches to new kinds of work.

The Chinese leaders seeking to reform China could see that the educational facilities outside bridged many kinds of work cultures. They looked to the work cultures of Japan and the United States for models and studied those of the welfare societies of Western Europe, and their British offshoots in Canada and Australasia. The plurality of models may have been confusing, but it was obvious that the presence of choices and the freedom to adopt a work culture that was appropriate to different occupations and professions were assets which these Chinese of whatever origin appreciated and took full advantage of.

Once this was understood, the Chinese within China were ready to change again. This was not easy after thirty years of tightly organised work units which had controlled a narrowly conceived education system. Those who were best adapted to the danwei work culture had the most to unlearn. Although the danwei, or work unit, has survived, the ideal of a single work culture has been abandoned. The plurality of contending forces linked with a market economy, albeit with socialist characteristics, has been accepted. This opened up many new possibilities for the Chinese people. A very elaborate reorganising of formal education, beginning with the tertiary institutions, was undertaken. The Peasantry outside the danwei, however, did not need this education to respond to the new opportunities. It is significant that, when the reforms started, the most rapid and successful were those outside major cities. These acted through village and township enterprises that were the least structured and had retained more of the free-wheeling work cultures of the past.

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As the variety of work increased, cadres, workers, peasants and intellectuals alike have responded with different degrees of gusto to the chance to change their attitudes. The results have been dramatic. Gone were the hesitations of the older class of literati whose reluctance to bridge the changes in work cultures had led to their own destruction. Instead, we observe an explosion of pent-up energy as one work culture is eagerly discarded so that people can adopt another that is freer and more variegated. It should not surprise us that the initial outburst came most strongly from the peasant communities of the interior. There the freedom that returned them to their culture of versatility and adaptability was crucial. There are, of course, serious limitations as to how far the majority of those of peasant origins can go without further education to acquire modern skills. But their venturesome vigour has given them a capacity to adapt to new demands with surprising success.

It is remarkable how much of the current work culture in China reminds one of time when the workers of Victorian England organised themselves and gained political respect from their ruling elites. Will the Chinese now proceed to experience what had occurred there? Will they too tame the excesses of capitalist exploitation? Will they form a similarly powerful trade union movement that would lead to the creation of a welfare state mixed economy? There are scholars who expect these things to follow eventually, and comment with dismay on the continuing resistance in China towards efforts to bridge their present work culture with the more humane culture that emerged in Western Europe after World War II. Others dispute that analysis. They suggest that the present regime is building a different kind of bridge, that it does not have to develop towards a Victorian Dickensian past. They are really trying to adapt a select number of capitalist methods to fit the socialist frame that had already been erected, one which it hopes to modify and secure. This shows in the way educational reform has been conducted at all levels, including the universities where a capitalist work culture is still kept at a distance, if not treated as quite unacceptable. The focus there is on providing education which will bridge the different work cultures without threatening the political order.

But the nature of work world-wide is itself facing radical change. With the new technologies changing dramatically each decade, we must all be alert to the probability that the next generation will have to do without the kinds of jobs they are training for. Most will have to prepare themselves for work that has yet to be defined. In that context, the way millions of hardy and versatile Chinese peasants, many already accustomed to lifelong learning, have adapted to dramatic changes to their livelihoods this past century deserve our close attention.

With the advent of new technologies and the evolution of a knowledge-based society as the foundation of the new global economy, profound changes to the nature of work are facing the whole world and not only China. Some speak of a world without regular jobs, a world where work consists of a series of shifting skills and performances to which workers adjust to the best of their ability. As I have shown above with the Chinese, the most carefully trained literati had the greatest difficulty in adapting to radical changes. When they were not given appropriate re-education or re-training conditions, many kicked over the traces and turned their minds to revolution in order to actualise their ideals or regain their past privileges. The

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less educated peasants, artisans and merchants, in contrast, had the versatility to respond creatively and vigorously once the shock was over. It seems clear that the strong family and clan structure that could be found in any typical Chinese village provided social cohesion, moral support as well as some basic features of a practical education.

As for formal education, especially at the tertiary level, what is appropriate to meet the new challenges has been subject to much scrutiny everywhere of late. Many cherished ways have been questioned. There is increasing awareness that there has been complacency at this high level of education and training, and that over-specialisation is a major weakness in the face of new economic needs. If this continues, how can we talk about empowerment through knowledge and technology?

Open learning is a relatively new area with fewer entrenched values to defend. It is more sensitive to the challenges ahead. It is certainly not overly dominated by a mandarin literati culture that feels that building bridges to connect various kinds of cultures is unnecessary and even beneath its dignity. Therefore, the new forms of distance and lifelong learning may be better placed to provide bridges to the new work cultures that are just being identified. The contrast between Victorian England and post-imperial China may be relevant. The former bridged its strong culture to match the changes that came. The latter resisted and was ultimately forced to self-destruct in order to let a new work culture in. But that China was able to do that, not once but several times in quick succession, owes much to help from its vast human resource base, hundreds of millions from the countryside that prided themselves on their long history of versatility, adaptability and resilience. Not many countries can count on such a resource base, but the experience of flexible responses to changing work cultures has been invaluable. It prepared their people for the new kinds of work that have been identified for our future, and that may be all the empowerment that anyone may need.

Professor Wang Gungwu
Director, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore
Distinguished Senior Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
former Vice-Chancellor, University of Hong Kong

BRUNEI, 2 March 1999

Bio Data:

Wang Gungwu is Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore and Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, and emeritus professor of The Australian National University.

First Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF1)

In partnership with the Brunei Darussalam Ministry of Education and Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Empowerment through Knowledge and Technology: A Celebration of Ten Years of the Commonwealth of Learning
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He was born in Surabaya, Indonesia, and brought up in Ipoh, Malaysia. His first degrees were from the University of Malaya, Singapore, and his doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

He has taught at The University of Malaya (in Singapore, 1957-59; in Kuala Lumpur, 1959-1968), where he was Dean of Arts (1962-63), and Professor of History (1963-68). From 1968 to 1986, he was Professor of Far Eastern History in the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University. During that period, he was also Director of the Research School for five years. In 1986, he was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, a post he held until the end of 1995.

Wang Gungwu is a Commander of the British Empire; Member, Academia Sinica; Honorary Academy Member, Chinese Academy of Social Science; Foreign Honorary Member, American Academy of Arts and Science. He is Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; and Honorary Professors of Hong Kong, Peking and Fudan (Shanghai) Universities.

Among his books are *The Nanhai Trade: the early history of Chinese trade in the South China Sea* (1958 and 1998); *The Structure of Power in North China during the Five Dynasties* (1963); *China and the World since 1949* (1977); *Community and Nation* (1981 and 1993); *Dongnanya yu Huaren* [Southeast Asia and the Chinese] (1987); *The Chineseness of China* (1991); *The Chinese Way: China's Position in International Relations* (1995). He also edited *Changing Identities of Southeast Asian Chinese since World War II* (with Jennifer Cushman) (1988); *Global History and Migrations* (1997); *Xianggang shi xinbian* [Hong Kong History: New Perspectives] (1997) and *China's Political Economy* (with John Wong) (1998).

For Immediate Release 17 November 1998

Wang Gungwu to deliver Asa Briggs Lecture in Brunei

VANCOUVER The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has announced that Professor Wang Gungwu will deliver the high profile *Asa Briggs Lecture* at its Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Brunei next March. Wang will speak on the topic, *Education and bridging cultures*

"Professor Wang brings the best traditions of Eastern and Western scholarship to any discussion relating to education, society and history, which is his special field of expertise," said COL President, [Dato Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan](#). "His research on and academic contribution to the history of the Chinese Diaspora are seminal works in the field; and as an academic leader and university administrator he has won acclaim from peers, colleagues and governments throughout both the Asia-Pacific region and



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the Commonwealth. We are indeed fortunate to have him present the *Asa Briggs Lecture* at the Pan-Commonwealth Forum."

Currently Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore and Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, Professor Wang is best known as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong from 1986 to 1995. Previously, he was a history professor at The University of Malaya (in both Singapore and Kuala Lumpur) and at the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific Studies.

The *Asa Briggs Lecture* honours the founding Chairman of The Commonwealth of Learning, the Rt. Hon. Lord Briggs of Lewes, also a world-renowned historian.

The [Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning](#) will celebrate the tenth anniversary of The Commonwealth of Learning. The event will be co-hosted by COL, the Brunei Darussalam Ministry of Education and Universiti Brunei Darussalam, and is being organised in collaboration with the Commonwealths open and distance learning professional associations. It will be held at the International Convention Centre in Bandar Seri Begawan from 1-5 March 1999.

Further information is available on the forum web site (www.col.org/forum) or by contacting the Forum secretariat at COL's Vancouver headquarters (forum@col.org).

The Commonwealth of Learning was created by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1988 and became operational in 1989. With headquarters based in Vancouver, the international organisation serves the 54-member Commonwealth with a mandate to widen opportunities for learning by promoting the development and sharing of distance education resources and communications technologies.

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For further information contact: Mr. Dave Wilson, Communications Manager

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