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Abstract

Extract:

In 1979 a group of nine scholars left China for Australian shores. They were the first such group to leave China for more than 30 years, and they came to be known as the Gang of Nine. Professor Wang Guofu, Chairman of the Australian Studies Centre of Suzhou University was 'one of the Gang'.

Keywords

Gang of Nine, Cultural Revolution, Australia, Commonwealth Education Department, study abroad

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Regions and Developments in China:

China's Gang of Nine:

A Reminiscence with Professor Wang Guofu

by Annabel Day(1)

In 1979 a group of nine scholars left China for Australian shores. They were the first such group to leave China for more than 30 years, and they came to be known as the Gang of Nine. Professor Wang Guofu, Chairman of the Australian Studies Centre of Suzhou University was 'one of the Gang'.

When Wang Guofu was finishing his studies at Suzhou University in the early 1960s, the Cultural Revolution was just beginning to rumble. Trained to be an English teacher, he taught for only a few months before he was sent to the countryside to be himself re-educated. At that time the future seemed to stretch in front of him, a never-ending patchwork of paddy fields.

In 1978 that future abruptly ended, and Wang embarked on a new one. The Cultural Revolution greatly affected the standard of teachers in the 1970s, a whole generation had missed out on vital training and experience. To remedy this problem the Ministry of Education invited professors from western countries to give 'crash courses' to a selection of outstanding young English teachers. These courses were run in some of the major Chinese cities, and teachers were selected from around the country to attend them. Wang Guofu was one of those selected.

"I was very nervous", Wang recounts. "Though I had been learning English since the mid 1950s, in twenty years I had never conversed with a native speaker." Just after the Spring Festival in February of 1978, Wang packed two cases full of English books (so great was his fear of being misunderstood), and set off to Beijing.

While he was busy studying, he was contacted by Suzhou University who informed him that he, along with five others from his province, had been selected to sit the National Examination for the Selection of Scholars to Study Abroad. This was the first national examination to be held since the advent of the Cultural Revolution and the chance of a lifetime, so Wang was keen to take it. Unfortunately he was unable to leave Beijing for the duration of his English course, but so great were the hopes placed on Wang that officials arranged for him to take the test in Beijing.

In May of that year, Wang was greeted (and somewhat surprised, he admits) with the news that he, along with nine others, had been selected to study abroad. He had become a member of the Gang of Ten. In October the Gang were informed that they were off to Australia.

"When I learned I would go to Australia ...I rushed to the library to read books on it, but could find nothing in Chinese or in English. All I knew was the name 'Australia', and that it was in the South Pacific, and that Marino Wool came from there."

In order to prepare for their study abroad, the ten went to Beijing in November where they sat through various lectures and tests, including a physical one. Such was their stress and excitement that only four passed the first such exam. They were ordered to go home and rest before taking it a second time. This time all but one passed. Wu was a tall, strong basketball player and all were surprised when he failed to clear the cursory check. He sat the exam a third time and again failed, and so missed out on the trip to Australia. In 1979, however, he was able to go to the United States where he studied

for two years. Sadly, two months after his return to China he died of cancer. This is how the group became the Gang of Nine, rather than the Gang of Ten.

On the 21st of February 1979, the Gang of Nine left China for Australia on a flight that started in Beijing and stopped in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Manila and Brisbane before landing in Sydney. Upon arrival they were met by the Commonwealth Education Department. "It was very hot," Wang remembers, "and immediately we were in our pants and shirts." They were taken straight to International House on City Road where they were treated to a welcoming barbecue by its manager Mr DeGraff. Mr DeGraff took this opportunity to teach the newcomers some essential Australianisms such as 'to pull someone's leg' and 'fair dinkum'. The term 'dinkum' was actually recognized as Cantonese in origin. "In the 19th century a lot of Cantonese went to Ballarat in the Gold Rush, when they found gold they would shout 'dinkum', *din* meaning real and *kum* meaning 'gold'," explains Wang.

Unfortunately, this recognition was an exception, and Wang struggled with the 'many colloquialisms' that pervade every part of the Australian culture. "In those days I told myself we should have a dictionary of Australianisms, perhaps then we could have coped with the situation better." It was a vision he was to fulfill many years down the track.

It was not just the colloquialisms that the Gang had to contend with. Degrees had been non-existent in China since their abolishment in 1949, so although they had all studied and graduated they had nothing to show for it. For the first year of their study they were enrolled as non-degree students, "so of course we worked very hard ... no part-time jobs, we dared not, study was the most important thing." The gang's adjustment was quickened with the help of their supervisors, Professor Leonie Kramer and Professor Michael Halliday who organized special adjustment courses for their new students. Their dedication and study paid off, and at the end of the first year the nine were informed of their acceptance into MA programs, the courses they had already completed were "to be recognized retrospectively".

Somehow amongst the late nights they found the time to explore their new land. After a while all of them left International House and "dispersed among the Australians...The whole of Sydney and Australia showed us great hospitality...on the weekend an Australian would ring us up and take us to the barbecue, the Blue Mountains, Bondi or Manly." Apart from getting to know the locals, they became very close to one another. It is a closeness that persists to this day.

After two years of study, in early 1981 the Gang of Nine decided to return to China. Sydney University held a special graduation ceremony during the summer holidays which was well-covered by the local media. "We were really stars then!" remembers Wang.

In China too they were stars. "We were the first group who had come back from study abroad so hopes were placed on us. Within one or two years, nearly all of us became the leading person in our University Departments." The Australian Studies Association was formed by the Gang of Nine in 1988 following a visit by Gough Whitlam in 1987 "to see what these Chinese students had been doing all this time," laughs Wang. Australian Studies Centres were established in Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, Xian and Nanjing. There are now twenty such centres across China.

Mr Whitlam addressed the second conference of the Australian Studies Association in 1990, and was greatly appreciated. "He's really a great orator, and his English is *so* nice and his talk is so vivid...we were really carried away." Spurred on by this talk, and by the fact that the next conference was to be held in Shanghai and Suzhou, Professor Wang made a request to the President of the University for the establishment of an Australian Studies Centre at Suzhou University. The request was granted "but he made it clear that the Centre would not have any funding, buildings or personnel, so we called it 'the Centre with three withouts'." It did however have a name, "and with the name I did a lot."

Indeed he did. In 1992 *The English-Chinese Dictionary of Australianisms* was published in collaboration with Neil Courtney of Monash University, and following this Professor Wang was invited to the Dictionary Centre of Macquarie University in Sydney. After six months of research there, the Macquarie Publishing House authorized Wang to bring back the famous Australian dictionary and translate it for a growing body of interested Chinese. It took him two years and the help of thirty translators from five universities to complete the mammoth task, but it was well worth it. Never again will a Chinese immigrant have to struggle with the peculiar form of English we call "Australianism". His contribution was recognised internationally, and he became the recipient of the 1998 Australia-China Council Translation Prize. The *Macquarie English-Chinese Dictionary* was formally launched in Beijing at a ceremony attended by Mr Downer, the Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in July 1999.

This year in Xian, the Gang of Nine will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of its first voyage to that wide brown land we call home. In Australia we remember them as the Gang of Nine, but in China they're referred to as the Australian Gang. And they're fair dinkum.

Footnotes

1. Annabel Day is an Australian Masters graduate who taught at Suzhou University for one year during 1998-1999.

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