Being Chinese and Singaporean

BY SU GUANING

A RECENT column by Professor Wang Gungwu in this space—“China needs to stay true to its civilisation”—caught my eye. In Prof Wang, we have an exemplary bilingual and bicultural scholar. He wrote an insightful piece on China, using English, the (near) universal language. It is a pity there are so few such scholars.

I was educated in Chinese and transitioned to the English world when I attended Raffles Institution. In my eight years as president of Nanyang Technological University (NTU), I have had deep engagements with China, while continuing to be engaged with the West. I experienced first-hand the differences between the two worlds. This leads me to seek an understanding of what it means to be a Chinese and a Singaporean.

Before 1965, there were no “Singaporeans”. We were Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian. The stereotype of the colonial Chinese gentleman was English-educated, urbane and sophisticated. He was often disdainful of backward China. And the stereotype of a Chinese business and cultural elite was of someone whose motherland was China and who was disdainful of Western thinking.

Two exceptions stand out. Lim Boon Keng (1869–1957), a Peranakan Queen’s Scholar educated in medicine at Edinburgh University, who loved Chinese language and culture. He spent 16 years as president of Xiamen University in China at the invitation of Tan Kah Kee, the founder of the university.

Another exception was Lee Kong Chian (1893–1967), very much a Chinese business leader but comfortable in the English-speaking world. He supported the promotion of Chinese language and culture, including Nanyang University, as well as a wide range of philanthropic enterprises in the Western world.

From a fractious group of diverse communities, Singapore has evolved into a multicultural, multi-religious society. However, there remain lingering differences between the “more Chinese” Chinese Singaporeans and the “more Western” Chinese Singaporeans. The influx of immigrants from China has also brought new flavours into our mix.

Our “Chineseness” provides an advantage for Singapore in China. To be able to identify with China at the cultural level allows us to play a unique role in the country. This advantage was the genesis of NTU’s Mayor Class programme in 1992.

When Deng Xiaoping made his “Southern Tour” to revitalise China’s reforms, he urged the Chinese to learn from Singapore. NTU began non-degree training programmes for Chinese officials. This developed into the master’s programme in management economics in 1998. Later, we added the executive MBA, master’s in public administration, master’s in entrepreneurship, master’s in finance, and master’s in educational administration.

Today, these programmes, all conducted in Chinese, produce more than 300 graduates a year. Together with participants in short-term training programmes conducted by the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration, Nanyang Business School and National Institute of Education, NTU has 15,000 alumni in China. They include many senior people in government, business, education and entrepreneurship who are positive towards Singapore.

Building on this, we have extended our efforts to Vietnam and India and developed the “New Silk Road” peak of excellence as part of our strategy. With regard to China, the “New Silk Road” envisages further development of NTU’s position as a knowledge hub between East and West. This leverages on Singapore’s position in China and NTU’s heritage as the first Chinese-language university outside China.

We will tap the continuous of Chinese Singaporeans, ranging from the “very Chinese” to the “Western Cosmopolitan”. But at the core, we have to be culturally “Chinese” to be able to find common cause with the Chinese as southern “cousins”.

But our more Western Chinese Singaporeans worry, justifiably, of falling into China’s orbit. As Singaporeans, we need to be able to chart our own path. Often, this is a middle path between the superpower (the United States) and the rising power (China).

In engaging China, however, we have to avoid appearing cold and calculating, not how they expect friends and kinsfolk to behave.

In the case of NTU, we have to be sincere in wanting to help China as cousins, while maintaining objectivity and independence. Without overemphasising this on the emotional plane, we maintain on the intellectual plane that Singapore is not one and the same as China, and that we give the best value to China when we provide an objective vantage point to study China from the outside.

In the end, it takes a deep appreciation of our cultural kinship with China to be close to them. It also takes a keen awareness that we are not China to be useful to them. The ability to hold these two opposing ideas simultaneously in our minds is the key to realising Singapore’s competitive advantage in China.

If Singapore is to leverage on China’s rise, Chinese Singaporeans must have a nuanced understanding of their identity. We must be able to handle emotional kinship with China while being rationally detached from China. We must reach deep into the core of our existence as Chinese Singaporeans to appreciate our history, identity and uniqueness.

The writer is president of Nanyang Technological University. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore’s tertiary and research institutions.