Anglo-Chinese Encounters since 1800
War, Trade, Science and Governance

Chinese encounters with the British were more than merely those between two great powers. There was the larger canvas of the Empire and Commonwealth where the two peoples traded and interacted. In China, officials and merchants placed the British beside other enterprising foreign peoples who were equally intent on influencing developments there. There were also Chinese who encountered the British in personal ways, and individual British who ventured into a “vast unknown” with its deep history. Wang Gungwu’s book, based on lectures linking China and the Chinese with imperial Britain, examines the possibilities, as well as the limitations, attached to their encounters. It takes the story beyond the clichés of opium, fighting, and the diplomatic skills needed to fend off rivals and enemies, and probes some areas of more intimate encounters, not least the beginnings of a wider English-speaking future.

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To my grandchildren

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I am grateful to the Smuts Memorial Fund for the invitation in 1995 to give the Commonwealth Lectures at the University of Cambridge in 1996–1997. A couple of months before I was supposed to give these lectures, unforeseen circumstances forced me to cancel my trip altogether. This caused great inconvenience to the organisers, and especially to my host, Gordon Johnson, President of Wolfson College, Cambridge.

In preparation for the lectures, I sketched out the story of Anglo-Chinese encounters, in China, in Britain and in the Commonwealth. I had just spent nearly ten years working on the edge of China in the last major British colony of Hong Kong, and recently translated to Singapore, a member state of the Commonwealth that was already over thirty years old. The two island port cities seemed to be good starting points from which I could make my excursions. I have never strictly observed modern political boundaries in my readings of modern Chinese history. As someone who was born Chinese in a Dutch colony, Java in the Netherlands East Indies, but has lived all but three years of my life in countries that are, or were, parts of the British Empire and Commonwealth, I had often wondered if I could bring the Chinese and British stories together in some way. The Smuts Commonwealth Lectures would make an interesting framework for me to reflect on some of the encounters the two peoples have had since 1800.
Acknowledgments

It came as a pleasant surprise two years later when the Smuts Memorial Fund renewed its invitation to give the Commonwealth Lectures in the year 2000. Again, Gordon Johnson offered to be host. This was a generous gesture and gave me an opportunity to return to the notes and sketches I had made. This volume is a slightly revised version of the lectures I gave in Cambridge in October 2000.