

Asian Invisibility: Australians talking about Asia

Farida Fozdar, The University of Western Australia

Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which Asia is constructed within Australia by analysing focus group discussions about Australian identity, looking specifically at the ways in which migrant and non-migrant Australians construct Asia and Australia's relationship to Asia. Discussions by over 150 people in 26 focus groups around Australia were generated using photographic images rather than questions, enabling a relatively open discussion. After examination of the general tenor of the discussion, specifically the almost total lack of recognition of Asia as having any relevance to Australia (other than economic), responses to two images in particular, that of the world map and of former PM Rudd and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao shaking hands, are analysed. Implications in relation to national, transnational and postnational identities are discussed.

Background

Australia has always had an ambivalent relationship with Asia¹. Orientalist impulses have set the tone of our engagement for over a century. White settler opposition to Asian migration resulted in race riots in the mid and late 1800s (Jayasuriya and Pookong, 1999; Jupp, 2007). Fears of the 'yellow peril' were behind the 'populate or perish' programs of the post war period, and the racial exclusion legislation that was the White Australia Policy (see Jupp, 2007). The Minister for Immigration Calwell's comment that 'two Wongs don't make a White' (Jayasuriya and Pookong, 1999: p.x) reflected the tone of flippant racism embedded within such policies.

The 1980s and 90s saw a significant shift, politically, economically and militarily, in Australia's relationship with Asia with the Labor Party's 'push into Asia' (FitzGerald, 1997; Higgott and Nossal, 1997: p.169; Philpott, 2001). The goal was to move Australia away from its Euro/US-centrism to a more Asian-Pacific focus. The development of greater economic ties, regional dialogue, military engagement (at least in rhetoric), and more liberal immigration policies, prompted a rethinking of identity, at least among elites. These developments produced a reaction, however, and in the 1990s Pauline Hanson reignited debate about the place of Asians in Australia, racialising them as a collective Other threatening the monocultural white national Self (Ang and Stratton, 2001: p.107). She argued Australia's opening up to Asia during the Labor years meant Australia was being 'swamped by Asians', overcome by 'the yellow race' (Higgott and Nossal, 1997: p.169). Her message was that Asianness is incommensurate with Australianness and Asian culture unabsorbable in the national culture (Lo, 2006: p.17). The result was a reinforcing of the notion that Asian immigration poses a threat to "*our* heritage, *our* identity or *our* values" (Phillpott, 2001: p.375).

¹ It is recognised that 'Asia' is a constructed category, in the same way 'Asian' is: "'Asian' is a catch-all term that not only subsumes cultural, historical, linguistic and national differences but also disregards the complex heterogeneity of contemporary circumstances of being or being 'Asian' in terms of local and global continuities and fractures" (Matthews, 2000: p.29). For the purposes of this paper I am interested in how Australians engage with Asia generally, including any country in the broadly 'Asia' region.

Yet Australia has also been criticised for its complacency, a lack of curiosity and interest in what is going on in the world and with its closest neighbours, particularly in terms of Asia's incredible rate of development, and an insular expectation that things will continue as they always have. The sense that we are remote and small, unimportant in relation to the rest of the world and thus perhaps safe from political and economic forces that influence other nations, is a contradictory conviction (contradictory to the sense of anxiety and threat) that paradoxically offers a sense of comfort and complacency (Wesley, 2011).

Recent policy-level activity (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012; Asia as one of the cross-curriculum priorities and the 'reverse' Colombo Plan) suggest recent attempts to change Australians' relationship with their closest neighbour.

This paper asks whether Australians are engaging positively with such policies, and more broadly the new economic, social, political and cultural environment that links Australia with Asia.

Methodology

Data is drawn from 26 focus groups undertaken across five states of Australia as part of a larger project exploring conceptions of Australian, transnational and postnational identities². Focus groups are useful in eliciting information about sociopolitical identities (Gamson, 1992; Munday, 2006; Phillips and Smith, 2000), and provide an efficient means of exposing collective discourses and meta-narratives, particularly the binary nature of such discourses (Munday, 2006; Skrbis and Woodward, 2007).

Instead of questions, a series of still images was used to generate discussion, applying a technique (and indeed two of the same images) used by Skrbis and Woodward (2007). These images, including the 'Australian made' sign, a woman holding two passports, the cover of Australia's multiculturalism policy, pollution emitting smoke stacks, an Asian man helping a disabled 'white' person, and a man drinking beer, were selected to trigger discussion about ethnic, religious, national and supranational identities and relationships, orientations to the globe, and visions for the future.

The focus group discussions were conducted among pre-existing groups. Half were ethno-specific, migrant or multicultural groups, the rest were collectives based on some shared interest. These included a Christian group, an environmental group, a neighbourhood house group, a P & C, sporting groups and so on. The rationale for this selection was that individuals would feel more comfortable discussing issues of identity among a group of people they already know. Participants ranged from 18 year olds to people over 80, with a slight overrepresentation of older participants and women. No claim is made about the representativeness of the sample – the goal was to generate interchanges between participants that reflected the sorts of discussions going on around dinner tables, office lunch rooms, and pubs around Australia.

Additional quantitative data comes from the current round of the AUSSA survey (n=1240, Waves 1, 2 and 3 combined).

Quantitative Results

² Research was funded by ARC Future Fellowship FT100100432.

It is useful to consider how a random sample of Australians responds to Asia generally through survey responses. AUSSA, a mailed survey conducted every year, contains a question that asks how close participants feel to their local area, state, nation and region. The results indicate that Asia comes a very poor fourth in such a measure, with more than 70% feeling not very or not at all close to Asia. Perhaps unsurprisingly the nation-state is the most important entity to which most feel connected, with almost 90% agreeing they close or very close to Australia.

How close do you feel to:	1 V close	2 Close	3 Not very close	4 Not close at all
Your town or city	29.3	49.8	14.0	2.74
Your State or Territory	24.1	48.5	18.5	2.82
Australia	51.1	37.1	5.48	1.45
Asia	2.58	16.0	31.5	40.6

Source: 2014-02-20, "Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2013 Wave 3",
[http://hdl.handle.net/TEST/10019 UNF:5:Wldjqwz+R/Tqbtq47+VHzA== V1](http://hdl.handle.net/TEST/10019_UNF:5:Wldjqwz+R/Tqbtq47+VHzA==_V1) [Version]

A similar story is told in responses to a question about whether they feel more like citizens of the world than of any country. Most Australians feel strongly Australian. Just under 20% agreed with the statement 'I feel more like a citizen of the world than of any country', and over 56% disagreed.

So Australians do not appear to feel part of the Asian region, nor citizens of the world.

Qualitative results

The general responses to the 11 images were very loco-centric. Participants were asked to respond to the images in terms of how the image made them feel about themselves and their place in the world, although some of the facilitators used slightly different prompts, some of which were more Australia-focussed. Migrant focus groups did discuss transnational relationships more, but otherwise their discourses were surprisingly similar to the non-migrants.

For this paper a focus is taken on responses to two images, a picture of the map of world and an image of the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd shaking hands with Chinese Premier Hu Jintau.

Map of the World

The map of the world was selected for its potential to generate discussion about Australia's place in the world and closeness to Asia and relationship to the region; it was also expected to

generate discussion about how small the world is, the ease of travel and transnational communication. While these themes were occasionally raised, the most common theme was 'how far away we are', framed with no sense of a need to state the invisible point of reference.

Of the 187 times that the words 'Asia' or 'Asian' were mentioned in the focus groups, only 8 instances occurred in relation to the map of the world (in only 6 of the focus groups, since 2 mention it twice - thus 20 focus groups did not mention Asia on seeing a map of world being asked about how they feel about their place in it), demonstrating how little we feel embedded in Asia geographically or culturally.

In response to the image of a map of the world, four broad themes loosely related to Asia (often in terms of its absence) were identified.

- **Geography:** The notion that 'we are so far away' was the most common immediate response to the world map image, with people not bothering to identify where 'we' are 'far away' from, suggesting that the European land mass is the unquestionable point of geographic and cultural reference.³ What was significant was the absence of discussion about being close to Asia. There was also a strong sense that this 'lucky country' benefited from its isolation, that 'our little corner of the world' being far removed from the affairs of the big powers meant that we were under the radar – our insignificance made us safe. It also protected us from pollution and biological hazards.
- **Economic:** Asia's relevance was most frequently mentioned in terms of mining income, and occasionally in relation to concerns about Chinese purchases of farms and land; but also, surprisingly, in terms of aid, notably aid to Indonesia. Where aid was mentioned it was immediately followed by an argument that Australia should be looking after its own first, often in terms of the need for more assistance for Aborigines.
- **Cultural:** There was no discussion about cultural difference or similarity between Australia and Asia, but a common theme was that people in Europe and America know nothing about Australia.
- **Political:** the key political issue raised in relation to the map of world image was the issue of 'boat people' which prompted discussions of legitimacy, queues, economic migration, people smugglers, the need for border protection, deaths at sea and so on.

In terms of the bulk of the content of the discussion on the map of the world, Asia was almost invisible, the focus instead being on Australia and on Europe and the US.

Political leaders shaking hands

It was expected that the image of Kevin Rudd and Hu Jintao shaking hands might generate discussion about Australia's relationship with China, from an economic, political or cultural point of view, and perhaps pride in the fact that an Australian politician can speak Mandarin

³ It is also possible that this references the distance of Australian capital cities from any other country, even those in the region.

and is thus well placed to progress a more positive relationship with China. Instead the most common response was to focus on Australia – specifically discussion about how Rudd came to power, and Rudd’s ability as an Australian politician, particularly issues around his leadership.

RA: Ok, move on to the next slide. Ok, so this is former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd with China’s leader Hu Jintao. How do people feel when they see this image?

Asia⁴: I feel sorry for him

Nana: Which one?

Asia: Kevin Rudd, for what Julia Gillard did to him. Booted him out. It’s a Prime Minister, so...

John: I didn’t even like him from the start but when that happened I immediately had sympathy for him

Asia: I mean now that Labor is running the government for Australia I would prefer Kevin Rudd over Julia Gillard

Nana: This makes me feel that photo was staged.

[*Polish Dance Club*, state not identified for anonymity]

Such responses reinforce the perception that Australians are very parochial in their worldview, and that Asia is not seen as being relevant for consideration, let alone an important topic of discussion.

The theme of vulnerability or anxiety was also mentioned by many groups in relation to this image. In the following example (and another not quoted, where the term ‘obsequious’ is used to describe the apparent relationship between Rudd and the Chinese leader) simply the body language in the photograph is seen to represent something sinister, although the speaker is keen to emphasise that this is not a racist reaction.

Wanda: I think- somebody who picked up on the body language, I feel vulnerable, and not just in our relationship with China or Asia but as a very small nation, the same with America, I feel that we’re at their mercy and it behoves us to be nice to them and please take care of us... and I think that image as somebody said the Chinese premier looks relaxed and his hand is kind of extended whereas Kevin Rudd is holding on for dear life.

Diane: See we are friends!

Wanda: Yeah, look after me, it makes me - it’s sort of a vulnerable position I think as a small nation and with a physical proximity to Asia I think there’s a sense of vulnerability. And it’s not a race thing because as I say like I said I feel the same way about our relationship with America and it needs to be nurtured and there’s a certain extent that we need to suck up to other nations.

[*P&C*, WA]

The notion that the Chinese are powerful, smart, and there are a lot of them was common.

Facilitator: What do you think our relationship should be with China and Asia?

Erin: Good, because

Bilbo: They’re very powerful

Erin: Yeah

⁴ Participants were invited to select a pseudonym. Where they did not, one was selected for them.

I think...

Erin: There's a lot of them. They're smart

(Laughter)

The Phantom: We've still have got to be wary of it but, like with a lot of um, the farming land, not long ago, I think it was Australia's biggest cotton farm I think it was got sold to foreign interests and it just lessons our um, stake in the market sort of thing. So they're, yeah, I mean, not just China, I meant, that one was China, but with any other country too, like, you need to be careful with how much we sell off to other countries, to foreign interests, cause you know, you then, lose,...

Soccer Club, NSW

The following discussion from a group of Vietnam veterans demonstrates these concerns which link ambivalently with a sense of the promise of new opportunities. One of the first comments was that the image showed us 'kowtowing to the Asians' (a term that was also used in another focus group). Then after some discussion that started to get side-tracked to domestic politics, the following discussion occurred:

Facilitator: Can I just ask another question about this. Um, what should our, what do you think our relationship with China/ Asia should be?

Smokey: Ahh

MAC: I'll, I'll just [inaudible]..My thoughts on that photo is, you know, well there we are a part of Asia, we are not part of..

Susie: Yeah

Rich: Whether we like it or not

MAC: That is what I thought when I first saw it.

Morgan: China is the rising power in the world.

MAC: Yeah, we are a part of Asia, we are not part of, yeah..

Morgan: They are economically larger than [indistinguishable]

Mitch: There you are

Morgan: [indistinguishable_ "rise" (?) than America in twenty years

Mitch: Yeah, apart from New Zealand, we are the only Anglo-Saxon one in the area.

Rich: yeah yeah

Facilitator: So we

Jim: And we would be committing political suicide actually if we weren't part of that handshake.

Mitch: And if you don't like all our foreign aid to Indonesia and Malaysia everything, that gets up my nose a bit, but.

Morgan: I think we're... I believe we have got to have a great friendship with China because the growth of China is absolutely amazing

[...]

Smokey: It probably leaves a sense of insecurity.

Jim: But I make a point, if they are so friendly, why are they building the biggest navy in the world? That's all.

[...]

[*Vietnam Vets, NSW*]

This particular focus group was characterised by these short interchanges of only a few words with 'opinion' being constructed collaboratively by several speakers. It shows the cohesion of

the group, their mutual support, and the shared nature of the discourse being built. The recognition that we are part of Asia is immediately following by a 'whether we like it or not', a construction that was common. The sense of looming power, with two small 'Anglo-Saxon' nations being forced to develop a relationship with China because to do otherwise would be 'committing political suicide' is only a step removed from the 'Mongolian octopus' image of 1886 (May, 1886). It is a grudging and somewhat suspicious engagement, that is looked at for what it gives to Australia, but also raises concerns due to the economic and apparently growing military power of China – 'why are they building the biggest navy in the world'.

However it would be overstating the case to suggest that these were the only responses to the image. Several focus groups discussed Rudd's ability to connect Australia with Asia as a positive thing and some people expressed pride in the PM's ability to speak Mandarin.

Donald: He led the way in making it clear that whether we liked it or not we are part of the Asian and Pacific world, not just the European!

[Retired Group, QLD]

Others noted the importance of developing greater ties, and were aware of the White Paper and moves to improve Asian language knowledge in Australia, although these tended to be migrant or tertiary educated groups, and such discourses were far less common than those characterised by the themes above.

Conclusion

The data demonstrates the two themes of anxiety and complacency identified in the literature in relation to Australia's perception of Asia.

FitzGerald (1997: p.4) suggested "the Asian challenge for Australia is not economic or commercial. It is intellectual, and the issues are political and cultural". The data demonstrates that in the two decades since these comments, Australia has not particularly developed in this regard. There is little evidence that the wider population is aware of the 'inversion' Wesley (2011) identifies, apart from vague fears of being overwhelmed by an economic giant. This represents a new manifestation of what Ang (Ang, et. al. 2000: p.xiv) identified as "a persistent underlying anxiety about Australia's Asianised future".

The invisibility of Asia, and the shallowness with which the general public engage with Asia, should be a matter of concern. The focus on domestic issues suggests a level of parochial thinking that both continues to privilege the nation over the region, but ironically also overlooks the importance of engagement for the sake of the nation.

References

Ang I, Law L Chalmers S and Thomas M (eds) (2000) *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*. Sydney: Pluto Press.

Ang I and Stratton J (2001) Multiculturalism in crisis: The new politics of race and national identity. In: Ang I (ed) *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge, 95-111.

Commonwealth of Australia (2012) *Australia in the Asian Century: White Paper*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

FitzGerald S (1997) *Is Australia an Asian Country?* Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Gamson W (1992) The social psychology of collective action. In: Morris A and Mueller C (eds) *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 53-76.

Higgott R and Nossal K (1997) The international politics of liminality: Relocating Australia in the Asia Pacific. *Australian Journal of Political Sciences* 32(2): 169-185.

Jayasuriya L and Pookong K (1999) *The Asianisation of Australia?: Some Facts About the Myths*. Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press.

Jupp J (2002) *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Lo J (2006) Disciplining Asian Australian studies: Projections and introjections. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27(1-2): 11-27.

Mathews J (2000) Violent visions and speechless days: Corporeality and the politics of image. In: Ang I, Chalmers S Law L and Thomas M (eds) *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture*. Sydney: Pluto Press, 25-41.

May P (1886) The Mongolian octopus: His grip on Australia. *The Bulletin* (Cartoon) 21 Aug 1886.

Munday J (2006) Identity in focus: The use of focus groups to study the construction of collective identity. *Sociology* 40(1): 89-105.

Phillips T and Smith P (2000) What is 'Australian'? Knowledge and attitudes among a gallery of contemporary Australians. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35(2): 203-224.

Philpott S (2001) Fear of the dark: Indonesia and the Australian national imagination. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 55(3): 371-88.

Skrbis Z and Woodward I (2007) The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: Investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. *The Sociological Review* 55(4): 730-747.

Wesley M (2011) *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*. Sydney: UNSW Press.