

Asia and Asians in Australian Politics and Society

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent, or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences, and courses, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. The style of our essays is subjective and informal. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and our region.

In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Asia and Asians in Australian Politics and Society” – an especially timely topic as Australia held a national election on May 21.

Each author, broadly speaking, examines the extent to which Australia is embracing its place in Asia and its Asian-Australian communities. Professor Jia Gao examines the continuing lack of representation of Asian Australians in parliament. Associate Professors

Claire Maree and Jay Song show that this lack of representation remains in other aspects of contemporary life in Australia and that anti-Asian racism has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Professor Andrew Rosser looks at the continued difficulties Australian business has engaging with Asia due to a lack of networks, capabilities, and partnerships. Cathy Harper makes an argument that more than ever, Australia needs to embrace the Asian communities existing within it and throughout the region.

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Representation of Asia in Contemporary Australian Politics, Media and Everyday Life

Claire Maree and Jay Song

According to the latest figures from the Bureau of Statistics in 2016, the Asian-born population in Australia accounted for 10.4 percent of the total population.¹ This raises a range of issues in regard to the representation of Asian Australians in politics, the media, and other key areas of everyday life. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has seen a resurgence of racist remarks by right-wing politicians and growing anti-Asian sentiments and violence in public space. As Australia shut its borders to and from international travel in an attempt to stop the virus entering Australia, many Chinese – or Chinese-looking – migrants and international students, who were misconstrued as a source of the virus, became the target of racially-motivated violence. Due to the ongoing national border closures, many international students were forced to continue their studies offshore and online for two consecutive years.

In 2020, a group of researchers affiliated with the Gender, Environment and Migration (GEM) Cluster at the Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne in Australia examined various aspects of the representation of Asian Australians in the context of contemporary Australia. The collaborative work was published as a Special Issue of *Melbourne Asia Review* in March 2021,² and it includes an examination of issues relating to political under-representation and media portrayals of Asian Australians as well as the state of Asian-Australian studies.

Many would wonder about the definition of “Asian Australians.” Unlike Asian Americans, a widely-used term which also has an established field of study in sociology, media, literature, and cultural/racial studies, the history of Asian Australians is relatively short compared to analogous groups in the Americas or Europe. We use the term “Asian Australians” in reference to a diverse population comprising individuals who have migrated from the Asian region. The term is widely accepted

and used in Australian social, political, and cultural discourses. Many Asian Australians we included in our studies are first-generation immigrants or international students who just arrived in Australia. Furthermore, many Asian Australians elected to the Australian parliaments are of mixed heritage that includes both Asian and European ancestries. As the demographic composition of the Asian-born population in Australia changes, our definition may change over time going forward.

One key issue is the ongoing, well-documented lack of representation at all levels of public life. A lack of diversity on the small screen is paralleled in the political domain, where Asian Australians are under-represented in federal and state parliaments. Only 3 candidates with Asian ancestry were elected in the 2019 federal election. Difficulties in the pre-selection process can be an obstacle to greater engagement of candidates from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.⁴ Based on interviews



Fig. 1: Melbourne's Chinatown at night (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of Russell Charters on Flickr).



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The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne's key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.



Fig. 2: Melbourne's Chinatown (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of Michael Coghlan on Flickr).

with Australians of Indian origin – some of whom had been successfully elected to office and others not – Surjeet Dhanji recommends that Australian political parties should address the “representation gap,” initiate programs to close that gap, and harness the talent of those currently underrepresented.⁵

Although underrepresentation occurs at the level of politics, the pandemic has resulted in the continued hyper-visibility of Asian Australians, as manifested in increased anti-Asian racism. Hyper-visibility refers to the ways in which minoritized groups are over-represented in overwhelming negative ways. Qiuping Pan and Jia Gao, for instance, indicate widespread experiences of racism against Chinese immigrants.⁶ The most common manifestation of such racism

involved racial slurs and/or name-calling. Such incidents are also heavily gendered, with women lodging 65 percent of the COVID-19 Racism Incident Reports between April 2–June 2, 2020.

The relationship between the state and society has changed over the course of the pandemic. State responses to the global pandemic at a local level have direct and indirect consequences on minorities, especially Asian migrants in Australia. In order to understand changing state–society relations during and after the pandemic, trust in both the government and different media sources is an important area to study. In this regard, Wonsun Shin and Jay Song's online survey of 432 Asian Australians illustrates how much they have relied on

traditional media (e.g., mainstream TV) and how little they relied on ethnic language programmes.⁷ In spite of anti-Asian racism, the survey respondents showed a high level of trust in Australian governments. Others reported that Asian Australians are more likely to be anxious and worried due to COVID-19, and they have experienced “twice the drop” in work hours as other Australians.⁸

Asian Australians are highly diverse and constitute a fluid group that is being constructed and reconstructed by interactions among its members in an increasingly complex, mediated society. Studies on Asian Australians, therefore, require an intersectional and multi-dimensional approach to fully understand the challenges and opportunities of engaging with the fastest-growing population in Australia. One such example of an intersectional approach on Asian Australians taken by members of GEM examines sexual citizenship. This approach illustrated how gender, sexuality, and ethnicity influence Asian migrants' experiences in post-marriage equality Australia.⁹ The authors point to the necessity of critical reflexivity for the study of migration in contemporary societies.

As stated earlier, Asian migration to the Americas and Europe has a longer history, and studies on Asian diasporas are already an established field. Even though the field is relatively new in the Australian context, the nature of contemporary transnational Asian migration to Australia – from the arrival of Europeans to a hub for cosmopolitan highly skilled Asian migrants – has greater implications for scholars not only in migration and ethnographic research, but also gender, media, and inter-cultural studies.

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Better representation of Asian Australians in politics is needed more than ever

Jia Gao

With a federal election looming in Australia, the representation of ethnic minorities in the country's politics will be almost certain to come under the spotlight again. Asian Australians have long been a topic of analysis and debate because of Australia's anti-Asian past and the new politics of ethnic representation. Analysts and observers, including myself, will devote special attention Chinese-Australian candidates and how the communities will vote in the coming election, after years of being suspected of being the fifth column of Chinese communists and having their loyalty to Australia openly questioned.

In my 2020 book, *Chinese Immigration and Australian Politics*,¹ I examine how, on the surface, Chinese Australians have been so active that many new groups and associations have been created and party politics-related activities – both pro-Labor and pro-Liberal – have been frequently held in the community. As a result of their high levels of social activism and political participation, there has also been a recent upward trend in electoral participation by Chinese Australians. There were 21 candidates of Chinese origin in the most

recent federal election in 2019, after only six ran in 2016, seven in 2013, three in 2010, and seven in 2007.

The surge in the number of preselected candidates of Chinese origin – and the activities of such candidates – have, however, been mistaken and misused by some as evidence of alleged Chinese interference in Australian politics and public life. After the 2019 election, the push to counter China's interference in Australian affairs, as well as anti-Chinese sentiments, have escalated to an unprecedented level. Many sections of the Chinese-Australian communities feel threatened when some counter-spy and -espionage measures have been widely implemented. What has made the situation worse is that Sinophobia has permeated public discourse by unethical media outlets in the country, creating even more racial stereotyping and bias than before.²

As a long-time observer of the fast-growing Chinese-Australian community, I can see that there is a great deal of misconception and mistrust, both in terms of the facts and the way they are interpreted, in the many hostile comments made by politicians, journalists, and critics. Fear has long been part of the psyche of European

settlers in Australia, and China has long been seen as a peril in the Australian imagination. This round of Sinophobia is, however, different and characterised by a mistake of believing that many activities by Chinese Australians are driven by geopolitics, or that they are guided by China's ruling communist party. Many networking activities of Chinese-Australian businesspeople, which have been promoted by Australian government bodies and businesses, are seen as signs of China's meddling in Australia's domestic affairs.

My analysis has shown that many critics are reversed in what a succession of Australian governments has been doing over recent decades in using migration schemes to sustain the country's socio-economic development. The reckless ‘othering’ of the Chinese has failed to consider Australia's post-war historical shift towards Asia and the merit-based migration system that has been developed and implemented since the 1990s. Both the strategic shift and the merit-based migration system have not only transformed the economic structure and the demographic composition of Australia, but importantly have also changed established patterns in the distribution of employment opportunities, wealth, and political influence in Australia.

Australia's immigration selection criteria have been progressively developed to emphasise the importance of qualifications, skills, business experiences, and financial capacity. As a result, more Chinese migrants are from mainland China as it has become a key producer of most tradable goods. The immigration regime has also resulted in the Chinese-Australian community being a few years younger than the median age of the total Australian population. They have become better educated and qualified in comparison with portions of the Australian population, and many of them are also financially better off than previous generations, making it possible to set up and run more businesses. Australia's high dependence on trade with China, as well as tourism and international education, have placed many Australians of Chinese origin in a position to capitalise economically. It is fair to say that these changes had been welcomed since the mid-1990s – before the recent Sinophobia – as Chinese Australians

not only meet Australia's need for more skilled labours, but also bring other benefits to the country.

All of the above changes have added a new and unfamiliar dimension to Australian politics, aggravating the long-brewing resentment of many Australians towards those of Chinese origin.

This negative sentiment has been exacerbated by other related issues, such as the activities of some ethnic Chinese buyers in Australia's housing market and their strangely enthusiastic interest in community and network-building activities. The latter is beyond the comprehension of many non-Chinese Australians, as they are unable to imagine the need of Chinese Australians for networks. Many also question the donations by Chinese Australians to political parties, but almost no one challenges the parties that accept these donations.

After several years of particularly xenophobic sentiment in Australia, questions have been raised in regard to the future of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in Australia. Specifically, many Asian Australians are now wondering whether they could buy a house without upsetting others, and to what extent their children can academically perform well without facing discrimination. Ordinary Asian Australians want to know when Australian society can once again become as tolerant as before and when it will accept the reality of its ethnic diversity.

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Fig. 1: Senator Penny Wong speaking at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2017 (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of a Wikimedia Commons user).

Why expert Asia-related analysis is more important than ever, in Australia and the region

Cathy Harper

The eastern Melbourne suburb of Box Hill perhaps represents the future possibilities of Australia's place within Asia and its relationship with its Asian Australian communities. It's well-known for its concentration of Asian diaspora communities, particularly Chinese. It's about half an hour from central Melbourne by car or train, located near a major highway and train station, with high-rise hotels and a large shopping mall. It's also one of the State government's designated metropolitan activity centres. Official statistics show that more than 35 percent of residents report Chinese ancestry compared with a national average of 3.9 percent. Top countries of birth of Box Hill residents (other than Australia) are China, Malaysia, and India. The residents of Box Hill are generally younger and more educated than the national average.

It's one of the places where Australia's immigration and other policies are being manifested in everyday life. As Professor Jia Gao argues in his essay for this section, the merit-based migration system has "not only transformed the economic structure and the demographic composition of Australia, but importantly has also changed established patterns in the distribution of employment opportunities, wealth, and political influence in Australia."

However, in the words of Professor Vedi Hadiz, there remains a lack of appreciation for the complexities of Asia and the

nuances in Australia's connections with Asia.¹ Australia's challenge in and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is to find a new narrative² that aligns its national imperatives with a vision for how it relates to its region.

England and New Zealand continue to be major source countries of migrants to Australia, but the proportion of those born overseas who were born in China and India has increased since 2011 from six percent to 8.3 percent, and 5.6 percent to 7.4 percent respectively. International students in Australia are part of this picture. International education is, depending on the measure used, Australia's third or fourth biggest export, behind coal, iron ore, and natural gas. Over the past two decades, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia, Korea, and Vietnam have been the main source nations of international students in Australia.

But serious analysis of Asia and Asia-related issues in Australian news and other media remains marginal. For example, 2022 research by respected think tank the Lowy Institute found that 53 percent of foreign news stories in Australia's mainstream media about COVID-19 were about the experience in the US and UK. Southeast Asia accounted for only five percent and South Asia 1.5 percent. Research published in 2021 by academic Wanning Sun, found that tabloid media in Australia resorted to Sino-phobic positions in reporting on China's efforts to contain COVID-19. Very recently, some media outlets owned by News Limited

appear to be supporting unsubstantiated claims by a federal government minister about Beijing's claimed preferences in relation to Australia's upcoming federal election. A 2018 study by Deakin University – which examined media coverage of issues related to multicultural Australia – found that more than a third of stories reflected a negative view of minority communities. A 2019 report by Media Diversity Australia found that 75.6 percent of television news and current affairs presenters, commentators, and reporters were Anglo-Celtic.

Australia needs to support serious research, analysis, and discussion within Australia and from Asia, with a diversity of voices and perspectives, about the major challenges it and its neighbours face. How can Australia – and other nations in the region – better manage great power competition between China and the US? How can Australia improve its relations with Southeast Asian nations?³ How can democratic decline be mitigated?⁴ What can business do to help sustain human rights?⁵ What is the state of Islam in contemporary politics?⁶ How does politics influence culture and identity through regulating language learning?⁷ These are issues that affect all of us.

Domestically, can Australia help overcome a surge of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism related to COVID-19 by addressing the nation's continuing lack of "Asia-literacy"? How can the conspicuous lack of Asian-Australians⁸ in Australian parliaments⁹ be overcome?¹⁰ How can we better harness the cultural and economic potential of Asian diaspora communities in Australia?¹¹

Melbourne Asia Review, published by the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, gives voice to experts across the region, including in languages other than English. It 'translates' research into context relevant to current, developing challenges. As the region and the world adjust to the cleavages wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, we

need serious consideration of what our region could and should become.

The reality – as exemplified by the Melbourne suburb of Box Hill – is that Asia and Australia are more deeply intertwined than ever before, both between nations and within them. Australia and the region need to better articulate forward-thinking ideas based on evidence, research, and considered analysis that will deeply influence the nature and trajectory of Asia and Australia and their diverse communities.

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Australian Business and Economic Engagement with Asia

Andrew Rosser

Australian government policy-makers have long asserted that Asia is a source of economic opportunity for Australia, especially for Australian businesses seeking to internationalise their operations.¹ Neither growing geopolitical tensions between Australia and China in recent years nor the economic dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have altered their thinking in this respect.

Despite this situation, however, few Australian businesses have so far established a significant presence in the region. In recent decades, Australian mining and agricultural companies have exported vast amounts of primary commodities to the region, including iron ore, coal, gold, petroleum, wheat, and beef, contributing to Australia's wealth and prosperity. But Australian businesses have made little direct investment in the region, preferring instead to put their capital into countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In a series of recent reports on Australia's economic relationship with Asia, the business advisory firm PwC has observed that Australian businesses "are looking offshore for growth but are largely ignoring the world's fastest growing region."² Few are planning to expand into the region.³

To address this issue, PwC, the Business Council of Australia (a leading business representative organisation), the Asia Society (a prominent think tank), and the University of Sydney's Business School collaborated between 2019 and 2021 on a program of research and consultation aimed at examining "how Australian companies can increase their presence and position in Asia to ensure [Australia's] continued prosperity and deliver progress for future generations."⁴

Their key findings were published in April 2021 in a report entitled *A Second Chance: How Team Australia Can Succeed in Asia*. Although not an official government report, *A Second Chance* was launched by Dan Tehan – Australia's Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment – indicating some degree of government support for the project.

The new agenda outlined in *A Second Chance* has five main elements. The first, "Adopt a 'Team Australia' approach", calls for greater collaboration between Australian business, government, and academia in the pursuit of greater economic engagement and business success in Asia. The second, "Playing to our strengths", advises that Australian policy-makers and corporate executives need to know Australian business' "capabilities and comparative advantages well and identify markets and sectors where [Australian business is] most likely to get ahead." The third, "Learn to navigate a more complex China", asserts that Australia needs to maintain the best possible economic relationship with China in the context of emerging tensions in the bilateral relationship due to geopolitical factors and fundamental differences over human rights and democracy. The fourth, "Reboot Asia literacy," posits that Australia needs a deeper understanding of Asian cultures, politics, societies, and economies, not just in general but particularly in corporate boardrooms where Asian expertise and experience is limited. New appointments to corporate boards are thus needed. The final element, "Champion our rich Asia talent" calls on Australian business to harness the market knowledge, networks, and language skills of Asian Australian communities and the Australian diaspora to gain better access to lucrative Asian markets.

This agenda thus represents an attempt to grapple not just with the difficulties for Australian business created by Australia's deteriorating relationship with China, but also with two other stark realities as well.

The first, which is acknowledged only implicitly in the report, is that Asian markets are in many cases characterised by government-business relations that are personalistic and political in nature and dominated by predatory and authoritarian elites.⁵ These characteristics make it difficult for Australian businesses to compete given legal obligations to avoid bribery and corruption and the fact that many Australian businesses find it difficult to develop the local relationships crucial to success. In earlier reports, PwC has argued that many Australian businesses have little idea how to do business in the region.⁶ The solution proposed in *A Second Chance* is to harness the networks and market knowledge of new corporate board members who have Asia expertise and experience as well as members of the Asian-Australian and Australian diaspora communities who are connected to the region through family, social, and business linkages.

The second reality is that foreign investors operating in Asia – particularly ones from other Asian countries – often work in close collaboration with, and have extensive support from, their home country governments. As *A Second Chance* points out, such a partnership-based approach "has served countries like Singapore and Japan well in securing major investment and other commercial opportunities in Asia."⁷ Operating without strong government support, Australian business has been at a competitive disadvantage. For Australian business to compete more effectively in Asia, *A Second Chance* contends, Australia needs to replicate this collaborative model.

The agenda outlined in *A Second Chance* is innovative in these important respects. This does not mean it will succeed, however. Its realisation depends on other key parties getting on board: the Australian government, corporate shareholders, academia, Asian-Australian communities, and the Australian

diaspora. In launching *A Second Chance*, Minister Tehan said that he looks forward to working with PwC and its collaborators on implementing the report's recommendations.⁸ But it remains to be seen whether the Australian government and other parties will ultimately play their part. Even if they do, the resulting assemblage may be insufficient to make up for decades of conservatism, disinterest, and laziness within the Australian business community and to address the stark realities of Asian markets noted above. It may be that the Asian economic opportunity will, as PwC has put it, simply pass Australian business by.⁹

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