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Knowing Asia and re-imagining the Australian self

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FEW AUSTRALIAN POLICIES have been more frequently touted as a matter of national priority than Asia literacy. In her foreword to the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (hereafter the White Paper), Julia Gillard (2012, p. iii) outlined a vision of “a more Asia-literate and Asia-capable nation”. Unfortunately, few national priorities have fared as poorly as this one. The 2009 Asia Education Foundation report found that “only a small minority of [Australian] students... undertake studies with content or focus on Asia” (Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009, p. ii; see also White Paper, 2012, p. 167). Since Ross Garnaut’s call for Asia literacy in 1989, the proportions of Australians studying Asian languages have actually fallen (Wesley, 2011, p. 131; Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, pp. 168, 170. See also FitzGerald, 1997, p. 12). Many blame this on limited access to resources and funding, sluggish student demands, lack of qualified teachers and the difficult nature of Asian languages (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Rudd, 1996). While these factors are important, they are more symptoms than causes.

Beneath these symptoms is Australia’s self-identity, which not only informs its relationship with Asia, but also constrains what it can know about Asia. With their enduring national self-image as an outpost of Western civilisation occupying a culturally, politically and economically enviable (though sometimes vulnerable) position vis-à-vis Asia, many Australians have proven hard-pressed to see any value in learning about their unfortunate neighbours. As Sir Frank Packer told a journalist who wanted to write more articles on Asia, “Nothing in it... Who wants to read about those places?” (Strahan, 1996, p. 5). If anything, Asia has figured in Australia’s colonial consciousness often as “a versatile nightmare” to wake up “a sleeping people towards nationhood” (Walker, 2009, p. 229).

Even though such overtly racist and narcissistic visions have subsided in recent years, a strong binary sense of Australianness vis-à-vis Asianness continues to linger (Ang, 2001). In 1993, Paul Keating insisted that “Australia is not and never can be an ‘Asian

nation’... and can only relate to our friends and neighbours as Australian” (quoted in Robison, 1996, p. xii). In 2005, John Howard argued that Australia did not have to choose between its geography (Asia) and its history (Europe and America). He was both unequivocal and unapologetic that Australia should identify historically with the West. This Western identity continues to resonate in the White Paper, though the West (or history) is disguised in notions such as “social foundations” consisting of “democratic institutions, social systems and social values” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 163). Consequently, Asia remains Australia’s implicit ‘other’. In the past, Australia’s Asia invoked images (and knowledge) of the yellow peril and Asian hordes. Today, Australia’s excitement about the Asian opportunity and its craze for Asia literacy belie its halting self-imagination of being part of the region geographically and economically, but not culturally and politically. Indeed, Australia continues to look to its great and powerful friends in Washington for security. On his first visit to China, Foreign Minister Bob Carr reminded his Chinese counterpart that “You’d understand Australian foreign policy, very largely, by reference to our history, our geographic circumstances; a large continent, a small population” (Carr, 2013).

In this context, even before Australians set out to know Asia, they already ‘know’ the place through their own self-knowledge. Thus, literacy is never independent of identity (Hamston, 1996; Lo Bianco, 1996). Where we are and who we think we are often determine the vista from which we view other things. That vista in turn can reflect or transform who we are. C.P. FitzGerald (1985, pp. 10–11) avoided learning German in his school years prior to the Great War as such knowledge would attract suspicion about his allegiance and identity. In another telling example, an American professor noted that Richard Nixon’s path-breaking visit to China in 1972 helped boost student numbers in his Chinese politics and foreign relations classes by about four times within a year (Baum, 2010, p. 242). In short, social knowledge

is closely bound up with identity politics and geo-politics. To the extent that identity involves emotion, love is integral to deep knowledge. When such emotional attachment to a place is lacking, it is doubtful that one could get to know it well.

Australia's Asia literacy problem can be understood precisely in such a context. Its dogged reluctance to identify with Asia may explain, for example, why Australian schools lack "a widely shared vision of the overall purpose" for the teaching of Asian languages (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p. 46), why there is generally a strong disposition for the inclusion of content on Europe rather than Asia (Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009, p. iii), and why many Australian teachers "see no compelling reason" for giving priority to Asian studies, which are seen as largely irrelevant (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002, p. 91).

The emergence of the Asia literacy and the Asian Century discourses may be a sign that an identity shift is in the air. Yet, not only does Asia literacy itself reflect a persistent 'us and them' Australia/Asia dichotomy, but the latest Asia fad exemplified by those discourses has yet to capture the wider national imagination, remaining confined to a relatively small group of political, business and intellectual elites. Lowy Institute polling shows that Australians continue feeling more warmly towards Western than Asian countries (Wesley, 2011). Overall, Australia's Asian engagement seems to be a virtue made out of necessity. In the words of the Asia Literacy Teachers' Association of Australia, "Australia's geographical location is not going to change" (www.asialiteracy.org.au), meaning there is no choice but to come to terms with the region. Moreover, this embrace of Asia is still firmly and openly anchored in economism, almost as "a branch of Australia's economic policies" (M.G. Singh, quoted in Lo Bianco, 1996, p. 56). Such is certainly the impression one gets from Gillard's foreword to the White Paper, where Asia's "economic" opportunities are mentioned profusely while the reference to "social and cultural benefits" looks like an afterthought (Gillard, 2012, pp. ii–iii). And this expedient attitude to Asia seems to be shared by many Australians. Even though Australians have been reminded of Asia's growing importance for decades (Wesley, 2011), most Australians have not paid much attention. After all why should they if all that matters about Asia is a supposed economic benefit (particularly when the good fortune of the 'lucky country' seems assured with or without knowing Asia)?

Many Australians complain their country simply will not be accepted by Asia. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's flat rejection of Australia in the 1990s comes readily to mind here. But if that was Malaysia's pay-back of sorts for Australia's long-standing exclusion of Asia (FitzGerald, 1997), such Asian rejection may best be seen as historically contingent and largely reactive, as Australia's subsequent inclusion in East Asia Summit can attest.

To identify with Asia, it is not enough for Australia to merely put itself on a geographical map of Asia, as Gareth Evans once did at an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting (Lewis & Wigen, 1997). Rather, Australia needs to redraw its mental map to allow for more empathy and respect for Asia, to recognise historically both the Asia within itself as well as the one nearby. This does not mean a total identification with Asia or the abandonment of 'Australianness'. Such is neither necessary nor possible, not the least because Asia itself is never a monolithic entity with sealed-off common features (Lewis & Wigen, 1997).

The White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 170) vows to increase "access to high-quality Asian language curriculums, assessment and reporting in priority Asian languages" and make Asia literacy "a core requirement through new school funding arrangements". While no doubt helpful, greater access is unlikely to be a game-changer. "Simply making content or focus on Asia available as an option in courses does not appear to be stimulating the study of Asia" (Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009, p. ii). This is not simply a matter of lack of access, but rather a lack of desire.

While education is not the sole source of the Asia literacy problem, it can contribute to the solution. This is especially true if it is defined more broadly, not just as classroom education, where Asia knowledge needs to be better taught, but as a self-reflective space where Australian identity and its relationship with Asia can be envisioned and questioned. Such questioning is sorely needed, for example, in the Australian media whose pre-existing Asia knowledge too often reflects and unwittingly perpetuates age-old stereotypes.

The White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 169) urges that "learning about Asia should be business-as-usual for every Australian school and every Australian student", but to date business-as-usual has effectively meant little change in the way Australia imagines itself in respect to Asia. Yet, when it comes to the issue of self-identity, which is

surely one of the “awkward questions that need to be asked of Asia-literacy” (Singh, 1996, p. 54), it should be anything but business-as-usual.

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