Have attitudes to Asia changed in 60 years? Not as much as you’d think

For all the hyperbole around the importance of the Asian century, how well does the West – and Australia – really know Asia? We can argue that knowledge of Asia over the past 50 years has increased dramatically, but knowing the region – a more intimate, subtle process – is another matter.

Public opinion of Asia quickly declines in the West at the first sign of difficulty, as surveys by the BBC World Service, Pew Global Research and the Lowy Institute recently confirmed. These 2013 surveys show signs that sentiments towards Japan and China are slipping to similar levels recorded in 1953.

‘World’ opinion in 1953

Shortly after the founding of UNESCO in 1946, the Tensions Affecting International Understanding Project was established. In 1948 it sought “world” opinion on how people in one country viewed those in another. 1000 respondents from nine countries – Australia, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Mexico and the United States (hardly representative of “the world”) – were asked six questions, two of which were:

Which people do you feel most/least friendly towards?
Published in 1953 as How Nations See Each Other, the survey found that:

The great majority of peoples, numerically, who occupy the largest part of the globe, appear infrequently on either the “most” or “least friendly” lists.

There is one mention of China, one of Argentina, one of “Asiatics”, and several hostile mentions of Japan; otherwise the natives of South and Central America, Africa, the Near East, the Far East, and Southeast Asia are entirely ignored.

Technology, economics, and threat of war may have linked the real world, but the mental world of the individual in these Western countries remains small and ethnocentred.

In the 1953 post-war/Cold War context, it’s unsurprising that China and Japan were cast as “least friendly” nations. The survey also revealed that “Asia” was deemed separate to “the world” and was narrowly perceived as China and Japan. The rest of the region was yet to fully emerge – psychologically at least – from Anglo-European colonialism.

Filtering images of the East

In the absence of direct contact with Asia or Asians in the immediate post-war era, Australians’ knowledge of the region was filtered through out-dated texts, stereotypes drawn from popular culture, and scientific methodologies such as psychiatry, psychology and anthropology.

Ruth Benedict’s 1947 book The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, for example, was the definitive word on Japanese customs and culture, despite the author never having visited the country.

Japan was of special interest at the time. At the height of the Pacific War in 1944, Time magazine asked “Why Are Japs Japs?”, reporting advice to the leaders of the allied forces that the secret to understanding the Japanese was through their traumatic experiences of infant toilet training, a theory developed by anthropologists Geoffrey Gorer and Weston LaBarre.

In the early to mid-1950s, China and Japan were cast as the ‘least friendly’ nations. Japanese magazine ‘Photograph Gazette’ May 1954 issue, published by the government of Japan.

To understand the “national character” of the Chinese, the West relied on Arthur H. Smith, an
American missionary, who published *Chinese Characteristics* in 1894. Pearl Buck’s 1931 novel *The Good Earth* established her as the new authority on China, although her characterisations of the Chinese were not far removed from those of Smith. The evil genius Dr Fu Manchu and the cheerful but clever detective Charlie Chan were also widely available stereotypes through popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s.

Asians were measured by distinctly Western concepts of culture and morality and they were most acceptable, and trustworthy, the closer they moved towards Western social and cultural standards.

**World opinion in 2013**

Sixty years after How Nations See Each Other, levels of trust in China and Japan appear to be sinking in the United States, Britain, Europe and Australia.

The BBC World Service Poll (May 2013) reported that "global views of China have plummeted". Just 37% of Britons and 27% of Americans view China favourably. Even worse, only 25% of French people and 13% of Spanish and Germans see China in a favourable light.

Views of Japan’s positive influence also “sharply declined”, especially in the European Union. Though Japan is viewed more positively than China, favourable ratings in Britain and France fell by 11 and 10 points, and by 26 and 30 points in Spain and Germany.

Pew Global Research and a Lowy Institute poll were focused upon comparative views of China and the United States. It similarly found European opinions of China were poor – only 28% of Italians and Germans viewed China positively, although more favourable responses were recorded in Britain and Spain (48%) and France (42%).

The survey also noted “rising tensions” between America and China, with only 37% of Americans holding a positive view of China in 2013 compared with 51% in 2010.

Although Australians generally appear more comfortably disposed towards Asia, the Lowy Institute’s Australia and the World Poll of June 2013 found that China had dropped to a cool 54° on its “feelings thermometer”. Japan was a warmer 65°.

This is despite the fact that China and Japan account for almost half (48.8% combined) of our export earnings and their importance - especially China’s - to Australia is
widely acknowledged. Deep suspicions remain about Chinese investment in Australia, even though in 2012 it accounts for a paltry 3% of total foreign direct investment in Australia.

Maps in our heads

The UNESCO report of 1953 began with an analysis of the stereotypes or “maps in our heads” that we carry around. Psychologist Otto Klineberg, who worked on the Tensions Affecting International Understanding Project, noted that these stereotypes remained “relatively stable and unresponsive to objective facts”, an observation that retains its currency today.

This becomes especially clear when studying these 1953 and 2013 public opinion surveys alongside each other. Despite massively increased human movement across the globe, sophisticated flows of information and communication facilitated by technology, and deepening economic inter-dependency, it seems the West still stumbles along the same psychological pathways.

Public opinion polling affirms that the West’s confidence in Asia remains delicately balanced. But indicators along undulating lines or shrinking wedges in pie charts provide scant insight as to why this is the case. The conclusion? In an “Asian century”, our challenge is not just to build knowledge of Asia, but to get to know Asia and, critically, nurture cross-cultural trust.

Few Europeans see China favourably. Image from shutterstock.com